

# Diver on top down below

Led Zeppelin's 1971 classic rock ballad *Stairway to Heaven* lasts a little over eight minutes in duration. That's about 60 seconds longer than Vancouver's William Winram can hold his breath.

Not impressed? Well try this little test. Plug your nose and close your mouth and see how long you can go before your face turns as red as a cherry and veins start popping out of your forehead and neck. Chances are you lasted maybe a minute, 90 seconds tops.

I've timed myself periodically since talking to Winram a few days ago, and my best is 58 seconds.

While athletes are forever testing the limits of human strength, speed and courage, few would ever go to the lengths — or depths — of the "40-something" Winram. A competitive freediver, Winram travels the globe to challenge himself and push his body to its limits in an environment that is unnatural to humans — the deep blue.

For the uninitiated, freediving refers to aquatic activities that involve descending below the water's surface to reach incredible depths or being submerged for prolonged periods of time on a single breath.

Divided into two categories — pool and open water — it's an extreme, eccentric sport, which evolved partly from the exploits of Greek sponge divers. While it has a considerable following in Europe, it's yet to catch on in the North American extreme sports scene — despite the fact Vancouver played host to the World Freediving Championships in 2004.

Even Winram didn't know much about the sport before he jumped in with both feet about 18 months ago.

"It was totally by chance. I was helping a friend build a house in Hawaii and I took up spearfishing in my downtime," says Winram, who took the overall title at the Okinawa Freedive Invitational in Japan last weekend. (He logged dives of 80 metres in constant weight with fin and 66 metres in constant weight without fin, the third deepest dive in that discipline in the history of the sport.)

"I wanted to improve my bottom time so I could fish longer, so I took a half-day training with American freedive champ Daron Verbeck and really liked it."

Within seven months, the 6-2, 175-pound Winram had qualified to compete at the international level, where he was runner-up last season for rookie of the year. Now, in just his second year, he's ranked first in the world in free immersion (74 metres); second in the world in constant weight no fins (66 m); fourth in the world in constant weight with fins (80 m); ninth in the world in static



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apnea (seven minutes and four seconds) and 14th in the world in dynamic apnea (159 m).

He's even moved to Geneva, Switzerland, to make travelling easier.

"There's nothing quite like diving a couple hundred feet into the ocean," says Winram, who will represent Canada at the World Championships in Egypt in December. "One of the greatest things in life is slipping silently into the water and sitting on the bottom without the noise or bubbles from scuba gear to scare off the fish. It's very calming."

Winram's training routine involves both breathing and non-breathing exercises, which may have more in common with transcendental meditation than diving. Yoga, tai chi and martial arts are all part of his rigorous regimen.

As for the inherent danger, Winram scoffs at the notion. He's only blacked out once during training and contends the sport's perfectly safe if done properly. Still, he offers this caveat: "Do not try this at home. And never do it without a partner who has the proper training."

For more information on freediving, check out the Canadian Association of Freedive Apnea's website at [www.freedivecanada.com](http://www.freedivecanada.com) or drop by the UBC Aquatic Centre this weekend for the CAFA's Western Regional Competition. The static apnea goes Saturday from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., while the dynamic apnea is scheduled for Monday from 1 p.m. to 3:30 p.m.

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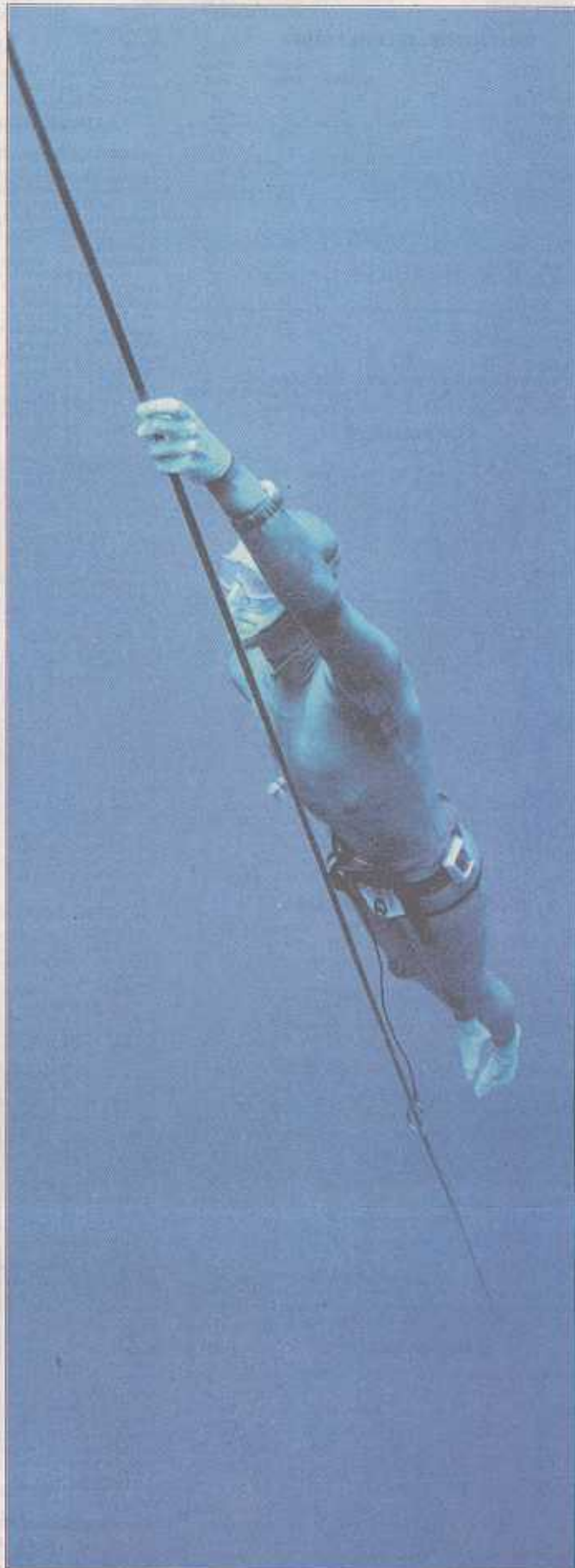
## Primary disciplines

■ **Constant weight (with and without fins):** diver swims to a declared maximum depth and back without the assistance of the rope or extra weight;

■ **Static apnea:** diver holds breath for as long as possible while floating face-down in a swimming pool;

■ **Dynamic apnea (with and without fins):** diver swims as long as possible underwater in a swimming pool;

■ **Free immersion:** diver uses a rope on descent, but ascends purely by own weight and power.



Vancouver's William Winram is among the world's top-ranked freedivers despite taking up the sport only 18 months ago.