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AN INTERVIEW WITH A SOUTH AFRICAN FREEDIVING CHAMPION

Amber Fillary



44-year-old Capetonian Amber Fillary currently holds all three freediving pool discipline records throughout Africa. With her go-getter attitude and dedication to growing the diving scene in South Africa, she is an inspiration to all. We caught up with Amber about her amazing achievements thus far and what is in store for her future.

1. WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MEMORY OF BECOMING INTERESTED IN DIVING?

I have always liked water but I think the film *The Big Blue* was the thing that triggered my interest in freediving.

2. WHAT APPEALS TO YOU ABOUT FREEDIVING SPECIFICALLY?

I love the aspect of being free in water, the closest I can get to being like a dolphin or fish. I also adore the silence and peace you experience underwater.

3. DESCRIBE THE SENSATIONS (EMOTIONALLY AND PHYSICALLY) THAT YOU EXPERIENCE WHEN FREEDIVING.

I feel calmer – more peaceful; it really relaxes me and also helps when you feel a little depressed. Water has always made me feel safe and supported. Physically, the holding of your breath calms you; it makes you feel tired but in a really relaxed way.

4. DESCRIBE YOUR ACHIEVEMENTS THUS FAR.

My first major achievement was breaking the South African No

Fins record in 2013 in Dahab, Egypt. Then in 2015 I broke that record as well as the Mono Fin record and Static record. So, I currently hold all three pool discipline records in South Africa. I learnt earlier this year that these are the standing records for the whole of Africa too.

5. WHAT ARE YOUR SHORT- AND LONG-TERM GOALS IN FREEDIVING?

I am hoping to do a dynamic swim under the ice in Finland in March of this year. I am trying to get some funding as I will have to train in Europe. I have done a lot of cold water swimming so this I know I can do but holding your breath in water temperatures of 1-2° is something I am going to have to practise. If I manage to do it well I will maybe try to break the world record. If there is possibility of this, I will wear my South African flag bikini for the attempt, to go with my “freediving to freedom” theme that I am expressing through my blog.

After this I would like to find a place I can settle, train and earn a little money. I have just returned from London where I discovered that a pool I worked at as a lifeguard a long time ago, would be perfect for training. I am now hoping I can find a place

to stay in London so I can train there. This all costs money so I am hoping to get some funding. I would then like to break all the records I dream of breaking and slowly work on equalising my ears so I can attempt some freediving with depth.

6. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE CURRENT FREEDIVING SCENE IN SA? WHERE DO YOU SEE IT IN A FEW YEARS?

The freediving scene in South Africa is still small but it is growing. Local achievements such as my getting my South African colours with a little media coverage is great for the sport. I hope it keeps growing; it would be so great to get a team together for the pool or depth world competitions soon.

7. DESCRIBE YOUR SUPPORT SYSTEM AND ANY SPONSORS OR PEOPLE WHO HAVE HELPED YOU COME THIS FAR.

I have not had any sponsors thus far and would be so appreciative if I could manage to get a few. My friends in the freediving community of Cape Town have really helped me a lot, especially Sophia van Coller, who has taught me so much. She's been a great training partner who understands my mind and the way I work very well. She was my coach when I set the six-minute Static record. Plus she also took the pictures of me in my South African flag bikini before I left South Africa.

The Port Elizabeth freedivers have also been fantastic; they set up the federation that allowed me to get my South African colours and they have been really encouraging and supportive of me. Janet Mangold has been an amazing friend; so encouraging and always believing in me and my ability. She has done a lot of media for sponsorship promotion and she was a key player in the process of my getting my South African colours. She has guided me so much with my interaction with the media – something that I was rather nervous about. When I was in Port Elizabeth to receive my South African colours this year, Gletwyn Rubidge graciously allowed me to stay at his home. He built me two tools he uses for training and showed me good stretching and exercises to do. His wife, Chevonne Bishop, did so much work setting up the Freedive federation that has enabled me to get my colours and opened things up for all South African freedivers.

8. HAVE YOU EVER EXPERIENCED ANY APATHY FROM THE FREEDIVING WORLD DUE TO YOUR GENDER?

No, as a woman I do not feel I am treated differently in any way. Generally, the men are able to dive deeper and longer in the pool but I feel included and supported by men and women alike.

9. HOW DO YOU THINK THIS COUNTRY CAN GROW ITS DIVING COMMUNITY, ESPECIALLY ITS FREEDIVING COMMUNITY?

I think that the international diving community primarily values South Africa as a destination for diving with sharks. As it is

something special we can offer, I feel we should promote this as much as possible to grow the sport in our country. As for freediving, I think greater achievements and media attention will help to get the word out – I am hoping this article will help promote the sport! The publicity I received from getting my South African colours on the news led to many hopefuls reaching out to me – especially women, which I thought was fantastic. Freediving can completely change your life and I encourage anyone, male or female, to explore its possibilities.

10. DO YOU HAVE ANY MESSAGE FOR READERS WHO MAY BE INTERESTED IN TRYING FREEDIVING?

Freediving requires you to focus inward, similarly to yoga or Tai Chi. This helps calm your mind and the inner peace will radiate out to your everyday life. Freediving helps you to become more conscious of your breathing and your body, leading to a heightened self-awareness. I met a young lady at a yoga class in Cape Town who had done a starter freediving course and it had helped her overcome her fear of water. I have met so many other people for whom freediving has had a life-changing effect; it has helped them overcome addictions, depression and the trials of life in general. Personally, it has been a major factor in helping me deal with these issues. Also, the people who do the sport are amazing!

11. WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT SAFETY LESSON YOU HAVE LEARNT WHILE FREEDIVING?

The most important safety tip in freediving is never to do it on your own; this is crucial because if you black out you will die if there is no one there to rescue you.

12. DESCRIBE YOUR EXERCISE AND FITNESS ROUTINES WHEN YOU ARE IN TRAINING.

When I was training for worlds in Egypt I would do an hour's hard breathhold session with my coach daily. I would also do some weights, squats, core work and arm work. I also did lots of yoga as this really helps. A typical day's routine would begin with breathing work and stretching followed by a training session in the pool. Then later in the day some weights and more stretching and breathing work. I think everyone works differently and there is not a set rule; I like to do max attempts often but other people do not. I find it helps me with my focus as with a lot of sport the mental concentration is probably the most important thing.

13. WHERE ARE YOUR FAVOURITE PLACES TO DIVE AND WHY?

This is a difficult question to answer as, for freediving, not everywhere is suitable because you need both depth and water clarity. I have loved being in Egypt for freediving but hear that the Philippines is good as well, though I have not been there yet. There are so many places I would still like to go to; I still want to freedive with a whale shark, and swim with dolphins and rays. **SM**