

MY BUDDY

THE CONSTANT WEIGHT DIVER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE** PHOTOGRAPHY **FILIP STAES**

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During the preparation of writing my article on freediving courses (see the June 2017 issue – ‘Free the Diver’) I met my buddy, Kevin Moonen. Over the past few years Kevin has been training for freediving courses through NELOS – the Flemish diving association – and now holds a 3 Star freediving certificate. Although he dives according to the various disciplines like most freedivers, he has a preference for reaching the depths on pure fin power and with a constant weight.

I consciously arrive at the meeting point a little earlier so I have the chance to prepare my equipment before Kevin arrives at the ‘Put van Ekeren’. After all, it is easier to interview and photograph someone if you are already good and ready. After welcoming Kevin and catching up, I take advantage of my extra time to take a peek at his dive gear. Of course there is not much to it, besides the snorkel, mask and fins, and a good wetsuit. A freediver does not need much more. What does stand out however, are the extremely long fins sticking out of his dive box. These fins give a good indication of the seriousness with which a freediver approaches his discipline, because they mean an investment and therefore require a positive decision to become a better freediver. As a beginner and still in doubt about freediving, I only have pool fins in my trunk as opposed to the expensive freediving pair.

As with every dive session, we start with the general briefing. The safety measures here are a little different from that for freediving in a

deep pool. Although the visibility is that of only a few metres and assessed by compressed-air divers as ‘excellent’, it is too limited to be able to visually follow a freediver during the dive. Clear agreements before the start of each dive – there are between 20 and 30 dives per open water session – ensures that the buddy knows what will happen to immediately detect when something may go wrong. With this kind of diving, the buddy takes up the role of a safety diver rather than that of a dive companion.

After setting our keys over to the side, we make our way towards the water via the pontoon between the masses of dive tanks. When I observe all the other divers fully equipped with tanks and weight belts, the true meaning of the word ‘free’ hits me. The only heavy thing we take to the water is the weight of our buoy. This buoy, to which our dive line is attached, will be our reference point for the next two hours.

Before we start diving, we check our weight. As we will begin with a few horizontal freedives in the shallow part of the lake, we need to make sure that we float when not swimming. The idea is that if something was to go wrong, we will naturally float up to the surface. This is unlikely, because we are diving well within our personal comfort zones, but safety first above all.

During the deep dive, we will go down with a lanyard attached to the line to easily navigate if we get a bit disorientated, but we start the first leg of shallow dives completely free.

Before each dive we tell the other one the direction and distance we plan to swim. Then you ask your buddy if he is ready after which you start your personal preparation. At the end of your preparation you slip into the silent world to fully enjoy your short presence. Unlike the noise that you bring with you as a scuba diver, a freedive is in complete harmony with the environment. Fish hardly react to your presence. The visual impressions penetrate deeper into your brain, while your subconscious mind is probing the state of your body.

While Kevin enjoys the fauna and flora below, I follow him along the surface with the buoy in the direction he has set forth. Although I know that he will not leave a trace of bubbles to show me where he is, I find myself automatically looking for them to surface. Luckily he appears in my field of view inside the briefed distance, after which I carefully monitor his recuperation protocol. I keep an eye on him until he gives me his OK sign and the mandatory observation time of one minute is passed. Then I can prepare myself for my turn.

During each of our relaxed freedives, we quietly explore the waters of the “Put van Ekeren”. Together – with one of us from the bottom, the other from the surface – we visit its underwater world and various statues in silence. The latter are not easy to find from the surface with only a rough idea of the reference points. Finding a statue is a combination of luck and good understanding.



With the sun low, we swim with our buoy to the deeper part of the lake. We let the package of lead drop on a spot where the bottom is 15 metres deep. When our line is in its place, I decide to put my thicker dive gloves on. 15 metres means that in each dive we will break through the thermocline and thus experience a big change in temperature. We look down for a brief moment and assess that we can barely see past 7 metres deep. The diving buddy will signal to the surface buddy through the line of his ascent to return to the surface as it will not be possible to visually verify this point as we did in the clear pool water.

Kevin first fastens his lanyard onto the drop line and tells me that he will start to dive in 'free immersion'. This discipline allows a great control of the descent speed and is therefore ideal to start a session of deep diving. I decide to use the same technique for my first vertical dive. The limited visibility and the darkness in the area surrounding the tennis ball – this ball marks the planned depth and thus my turning point – and the sudden change in temperature aren't as bad as anticipated. Luckily. After a few dives we conclude that everything has gone well and we switch to the 'constant weight' technique. The challenge is to now continuously clear our ears whilst keeping the descent speed under control. Once at the planned depth, we turn and give the clear signal, "I'm coming back up". The surface buddy is holding onto the dive line and as soon as he feels the double pull of the freediver, he knows his buddy is coming back up. It is also

the signal for him as the safety diver to start his dive to meet the freediver halfway. From that moment on he keeps an eye on his buddy till they both surface. Everything runs smoothly, disciplined and quietly. Above water we enjoy the calmness symbolised by the reflection of the setting sun on the water's surface.

At the agreed time, we collect the dive line with the weight and swim back to the pontoon. We hold a short debriefing and exchange our experiences. Thank you Kevin for being my buddy and safety diver, and for introducing me to freediving in open water. When I leave the parking lot, I mentally tick off one of the many facets of sports diving. I'm curious to what the next buddy experience will be.

Do you know someone with an interesting diving hobby, who would be willing to take me on as a buddy? Or are you such a diver? Please contact me via Email at: patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be



Photo by Patrick Van Hoenserlande



Diver: Kevin Moonen
First Dive: 2005 **First Freedive:** 2015
Total Dives: 500+ scuba dives
Club: Lagoon Divers
Certification: 3 Star CMAS Diver
Other Certifications:

- 3 Star Freediver
- Basic Nitrox Diver

Favourite Dive Site Local Waters: Gorishoek "De Blokken" & "Wissenkerke", two dive sites in the "Eastern Scheldt" (Dutch: Oosterschelde), a former estuary and the largest national park in the Netherlands, founded in 2002.
Preferred Type of Dive: A 'constant weight' dive.
Most Spectacular Dive: A freedive in South Africa (Indian Ocean, near the mouth of the "Groot Brakrivier") as part of a population study of sharks. "During this dive we first came across a full-grown moonfish (*Mola mola*) and later we had an encounter with three white sharks (*Carcharodon carcharias*) that kept circling around us".