



MY BUDDY

THE (MONOFIN) FINSWIMMER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

A swimmer waves gracefully like a mermaid propelled through the water by a monofin. Wow. During my 25 m swim to the other side of the pool, I decide that I should definitely try this. Free warns me that this will be difficult at first. No one has two equally powerful leg muscles and the brain is not used to correcting the difference in strength with the fin's blade.





When I discovered my next buddy's specialisation, I hesitated. I had to interpret the word "buddy" very broadly to fit this kind of dive-related experience to this series. After all, this branch of subaquatic activity is very competitive and individual. It's not an environment where you expect a buddy to dive with you and look over your shoulder. I am convinced that finswimmers are "lone wolves".

My alarm clock sounds off its call to awaken to the day and get ready for my next buddy encounter. I drive through thick fog towards the city of Hasselt where the only Flemish finswimming school 'Nautilus' has its home base. Today's appointment is with Free Duerinckx. I wasn't really looking forward to this experience because, even though I love water, I feel best under its surface rather than on it. Moving forward on the dividing line between water and air has never been my strong point. My bad swimming style is probably the result, or is it the cause of my love-hate relationship?

Today I will jump into the water without a buddy, because he will stay on the side watching over me. For the first part of our 'dive' we have a rendezvous an hour before my personal torture session. I find it interesting to observe how he teaches youths. This way I can get a good idea of what finswimming is all about and ask questions. During the interview, I discover that there are a lot of disciplines within finswimming, including one wherein swimming is done underwater and with a dive tank. I should try that once and write about it!

His pupils are enthusiastic swimmers and their motivation works because a little of it rubs off on me. Sixty minutes later, I'm eager to give it a try.

It turns out to be a "solo dive" as I'm assigned a lane just for myself. In hindsight, it was not a bad idea as I would certainly have slowed the others down or got in the way. While I demonstrate my best finning technique, my buddy evaluates my style from the side. Fortunately, I swim better with fins than I do without so his judgment is not so bad (or has he spared me?). Even after he tells me that I may use my arms, he seems happy with what he sees. His suggestions should improve both speed and endurance. The list of things that I must watch out for is growing steadily. I am convinced that when I focus on applying all his tips, I do a very good job at embarrassing myself. It seems I must relearn everything again. Unfortunately, the time spent in the water is too short to get all those improvements imprinted into my muscle memory.

I get to use a snorkel for the following exercises. Now, I feel like a real finswimmer. In order to evenly distribute the resistance of the snorkel, it is positioned in the middle of the face held in place with a headband. Suddenly I transform from an accomplished explorer of the underwater world, to a fully-fledged surface skimmer. The motivation to do well increases. My swimming style suddenly improves, or so I think.

When I look to the swimmers in the lane next to me, I'm yanked out of my daydream.

A swimmer waves gracefully like a mermaid propelled through the water by a monofin. Wow. During my 25 m swim to the other side, I decide that I should definitely try this. Sure enough, when I put my head above water on the instructor's side, Free suggests trying the monofin (can he read my mind?). He warns me however, that this will be difficult at first. No one has two equally powerful leg muscles and the brain is not used to correcting the difference in strength with the fin's blade.

As a doubting Thomas – *I will be able to do this because I have been diving for a very long time* – I start my first few metres with a monofin. I start out like superman. Three metres further, this fantastic feeling has given way to the sensation of a lobster wounded at the tail. I can hardly get the fin to move and when it does work, I end up spinning and rolling around. My first 25 metres of monofin is sufferable. It must have been awful to look at me. I certainly had nothing compared to the smooth and graceful movements of the lady in the lane next to me.

Free supports my perseverance to keep trying and advises me to start with a quick bend of the knees. I succeed little by little. I got a few metres at the start, then I got to a dozen metres, and I even managed a full length, but it required all of my concentration. My admiration for the graceful movements of the mermaid increases with every stroke. During the rare moments that my monofin and body are one, I feel the power that is waiting to break free. I feel that the propulsion generated by the whole body does not need extra arm



power: I sense it and then the wounded lobster syndrome kicks in again. It's very frustrating!

Five minutes before the end, I am not willing to give the monofin back. I have enough self-reliance to bite through and, even though I feel ridiculous, I ask to give it a try underwater. Prepared for a variant of the injured arthropod, I take in some air and start with a leg stroke. Although still a bit unstable, I feel in control of the fin. Am I really better underwater? It goes amazingly well. On the other side, I convince myself that a full length underwater must be attainable. I focus on my breathing and I relax completely. I feel the power in my strokes and in no time I am back up again. 25 metres further: After that, I enjoy a few extra lengths of apnea swimming after which I reluctantly step out of the water. That was fun.

The second part of our 'dive' takes place the following week. This time we meet at the lake, the 'Zilvermeer', for the Belgian finswimming championships. Now I can stay dry because it is Free's turn to wet his chest. He will participate in the 4 km open water race with a monofin.

The start is a bit like that of a sailboat race. The swimmers decide for themselves whether they are warmed up enough to get in the water. I feel the cold when I see their thin neoprene suits, but unlike divers, these athletes do make a physical effort. An official counts the minutes. When the last minute starts, all participants are in the water and move to their favourite starting position. The 30 second signal is the last one they hear. There is no

further countdown to prevent someone from falsifying the start by swimming underwater before the official start of the race. Suddenly the horn goes off signalling the start, and the group moves as one into motion. The water's surface changes into a wild foaming pool in no time. You must experience this to believe it.

After that I follow the race from a distance as a spectator. The finswimmers must follow markers indicated by moored buoys and that is more difficult than you might think. Every mistake in navigation is immediately punished by having to swim extra metres demanding extra efforts for correcting their course. After 4,000 metres, the participants finish one by one. Free is the first to touch the finishing line and wins the race. First or last, after my session in the pool, I admire every participant in this competition. Finswimming really is an underwater sport!

After the race, I have to revise my opinion on buddies for finswimming. Swimmers find a buddy in their opponents, in their training mates, in their supporters... If you look at it that way, then they have more buddies than we do as scuba divers.

Thank you Free for being my buddy and coach, for introducing me to the discipline of monofin swimming. As I left the 'Zilvermeer' area, I check this facet of diving off my list. What will my next buddy introduce me to? Do you know someone who dives in a particular way and wants me as his or her buddy? Or are you such a diver? You can contact me through patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be.



Finswimmer: Free Duerinckx
First Dive: 1988
Total Races: More than 100 outdoor competitions, including one world championship and 3 world cup masters.
Club: Nautilus, Belgium
Titles: Cup of Belgium (11 times), Belgian Champion (4 times), one gold and one bronze medal during the World Cup Matches for Masters, VI category.
Other Certifications: Life Guard
Special Equipment: A monofin, but for a finswimmer that is not so special.
Favourite Race Inland: Descent of the Ourthe (a Belgian wild river) when the water is at high tide.
Favourite Competition Abroad: The Dutch Championship in the Pieter van den Hoogenband swimming pool.
Preferred Type of Competition: Open and cold water.
Most Spectacular Race: Descent of the Ourthe because the current is very strong, so the speed is high (about 12 km/h or 3.33 m/s). It is like swimming in an amusement water park's slide for three quarters of an hour.