

Spearo

I don't really know how it all started. All I can be sure of is that it took place while I was convalescing following a recent orthopedic surgical procedure. Perhaps it began as a quasi-pipedream from the lingering residual opiates floating around my brain following general anesthesia and heightened by the repeated ingestion of oxycodone tablets. As I lay in an opium daze, past memories of hunting, swimming, shooting, snorkeling, and fishing swirled together in my mind, a panoply of unbound, uncompartmentalized thoughts and images gently stirred around by the diaphanous hand of Morpheus as my mind's eye wandered about in the dreamy mists.

There must have been a subconscious Eureka moment, a serendipitous revelation that *something* in fact existed which combined all of those interests into a singular concept which had somehow previously escaped my active consciousness. Suddenly, with twinkling eye and furrowed brow I gave voice to my epiphany: "Spearfishing? ... yes . . . yes, *of course!*"

The next thing I knew I found myself scrolling through dozens of spearfishing videos on my phone. The insidious social media algorithms crashbox-clutched in their full glory, feeding me more and more content as I insatiably drank it all in, spiraling deeper and deeper into the seemingly endless new-to-me world of spearfishing.

I couldn't stop watching. It all blurred together. Videos of divers with absurdly long swim fins hovering inches off the bottom in camouflaged wetsuits on impossibly deep reefs ... ads for spearguns of all kinds and special low-volume masks, floats, flags, spearshafts and lines ... dancing figures suspended in featureless azure expanses of open ocean firing spears into huge tuna ... tutorials on breath-holding ... clips from a spearfishing school in Dubai pointing out how to properly execute a duck dive

This went on for days. Seemingly helpless to stop, in my quasi-delirium I felt like the character in *The Clockwork Orange* strapped to a chair with his eyes held open by metal braces facing a TV screen constantly displaying reprogramming images.

During this video watching phase it soon became apparent that this—sport? hobby? tradition?-- is most often conducted while "freediving"

rather than while using SCUBA gear. Freediving, which is basically holding one's breath and diving down to depths ranging from ten to even sixty feet or more to locate and spear one's finned quarry, is evidently much preferred within the discipline for several reasons--there are no bubbles to scare away fish, it's easier to maneuver unencumbered with tanks and hoses, and most of all it's considered a far more natural, traditional, and challenging method in which to conduct the activity. Within the spearfishing world the general regard for the differences between freediving spearfishers versus SCUBA spearfishers can be likened to that of gourmet sushi chefs versus McDonald's french fry cooks, or perhaps the Fremen versus the Harkonnen. One is steeped in history, tradition, culture and art, while the other is seen as a ham-handed boorish mockery, a dim, pathetic reflection of how one is supposed to properly conduct this worthy endeavor.

Deep science and Kung-Fu level self-discipline permeates all aspects of the freediving world. For example, there are breathing and breath-holding techniques that take months to master, methods of equalizing one's inner ears during deep descents without using one's hands, and methods of freeing one's mind to be immune from the tricks one's body employs to falsely convince it that it's running out of oxygen and that a breath must urgently be taken. It is said that the urge to take a breath is *not* due to low oxygen levels but solely due to increased CO2 levels; thus, it is said, one need only train the mind to ignore these urges and associated involuntary diaphragm spasms, as one really has plenty of oxygen left when these sensations occur, so nothing to worry about, it's all in the mind, they say.

Special super-long-blade swim fins are evidently a must for freediving as only this type allows oxygen-conserving efficient propulsion by using minimal, hip-driven (no knee bending) leg movements. Camouflage wetsuits are the norm, allowing one to blend in with the bottom, thus minimizing fish's suspicions. The guns themselves come in a bewildering array of makers, lengths, and materials, each ideally tailored to specific type of use, size of expected fish, and budget. After hours of research I had unconsciously settled on a narrow range of gear that seemed appropriate for my expected uses.

As with any discipline spearfishing has its own lexicon, with some terms harking back to their roots in mediterranean traditions. For example, "aspetto," Italian for "I wait," refers to the popular technique of silently waiting on the bottom in a hidden position for fish to pass by close enough

for a shot. The desirable practice of hitting a fish in the brain or spine rendering it instantly immobile is known as “stoning” it. And people who spearfish are referred to within the discipline as “spearos.”

Sharks ... a problem? There are plenty of videos of sharks taking fish off the ends of spears and otherwise being alarmingly curious, but evidently they are not a realistic problem for the spearo's activities, appearing to be more an occasional annoyance than anything else. (Caveat: anyone that has been eaten obviously does not end up posting videos or updates.) Ocean Ramsey, the tubular blonde nereid with dozens of videos showing her “redirecting” colossal Tiger sharks by hand and even swimming alongside schoolbus-sized Great White sharks provides at least a little reassurance that even huge man-eating-types are maybe not *always* the mindless rapacious flesh-devouring eating machines they might otherwise seem. However, it's apparent that they can only be “redirected” when you see them first and when you're in crystal clear water like in all those videos.

Once my body had mostly healed up and I was off the pain meds for a while, having figuratively clicked my heels together three times and awakening I looked around my house and noted with pleasant surprise that I had evidently acquired a speargun, freediving fins, a new low-volume mask and a freediving-style snorkel! Yee-haw! As soon as my doc clears me for swimming I can start testing out this new gear in a pool and getting in shape for trying this freediving spearfishing thing on some rocky areas off St. Marks. However, I may well start out with the boorish SCUBA option as I'm pretty sure it might take me a little time to convince my brain that oxygen is overrated and the sensation of needing to take a breath is a mere lie told by my body which can be ignored.

Last but not least, I wonder ... can spearfishing somehow be combined with windsurfing? Certainly worth a try. What could go wrong?

Stay tuned for updates, unless of course I end up being eaten.

- Ted Avellone