

From zero to 100 in two seconds



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With twelve world titles to his name, Columbian Orlando Duque is the figurehead of cliff diving. In our interview, he talks about absolute control, the power of visualization and his ambitious goal.

Eva Bolhoefer (interview)

Audi Magazine: Mr. Duque, what makes cliff diving so thrilling?

Orlando Duque: More than anything else it's the feeling of free fall—that tremendous acceleration from zero to 100 kilometers per hour in just two seconds. Then you break the water surface and, within three meters and less than a second, you slow down to a complete stop. Controlling such incredibly powerful forces gives me a kick. I have perfect mastery over my body the whole time and I know exactly what I'm doing. Although a mere two seconds separate the tension before taking the leap and the feeling of elation after landing safely, it feels like an eternity to me. When I'm in mid-air, I feel the wind on my face, the water rushes toward me but my head is completely clear. Hitting the water is painful but you're pumped so full of adrenaline, it's bearable.

Accelerating from zero to as much as 100 kilometers per hour in two seconds is faster than most sports car. Is it really possible to talk about control under those conditions?

I've gained it through an intensely disciplined training regime. Mastering that kind of body control is a very long and complex process. It's not as if my record dive from a 34-meter-high cliff came out of nowhere. You gradually raise the bar. Like me, many of my fellow competitors were professional platform and springboard divers for years. We use those sports' methods and techniques to prepare us for cliff diving. Over time, this training allows us to gain the experience and self-confidence needed to maintain control in the extreme form of the sport. The sequence of movements performed in cliff diving is the same as in platform diving—the difference between the two lies primarily in the height of the jumping-off point. Compared to the maximum height of ten meters in platform diving, cliff diving is done from 27 meters.

What exactly are your training methods?

Secured with a rope held by the coach, we start out practicing somersaults, twists and rotations on a trampoline. That way, you gradually get a feeling for executing the movements in the air. And, of course, we don't just train in the gym but also in the pool. When you're trying out new dives during training sessions and enter the water awkwardly, it can be pretty painful. To cushion those kinds

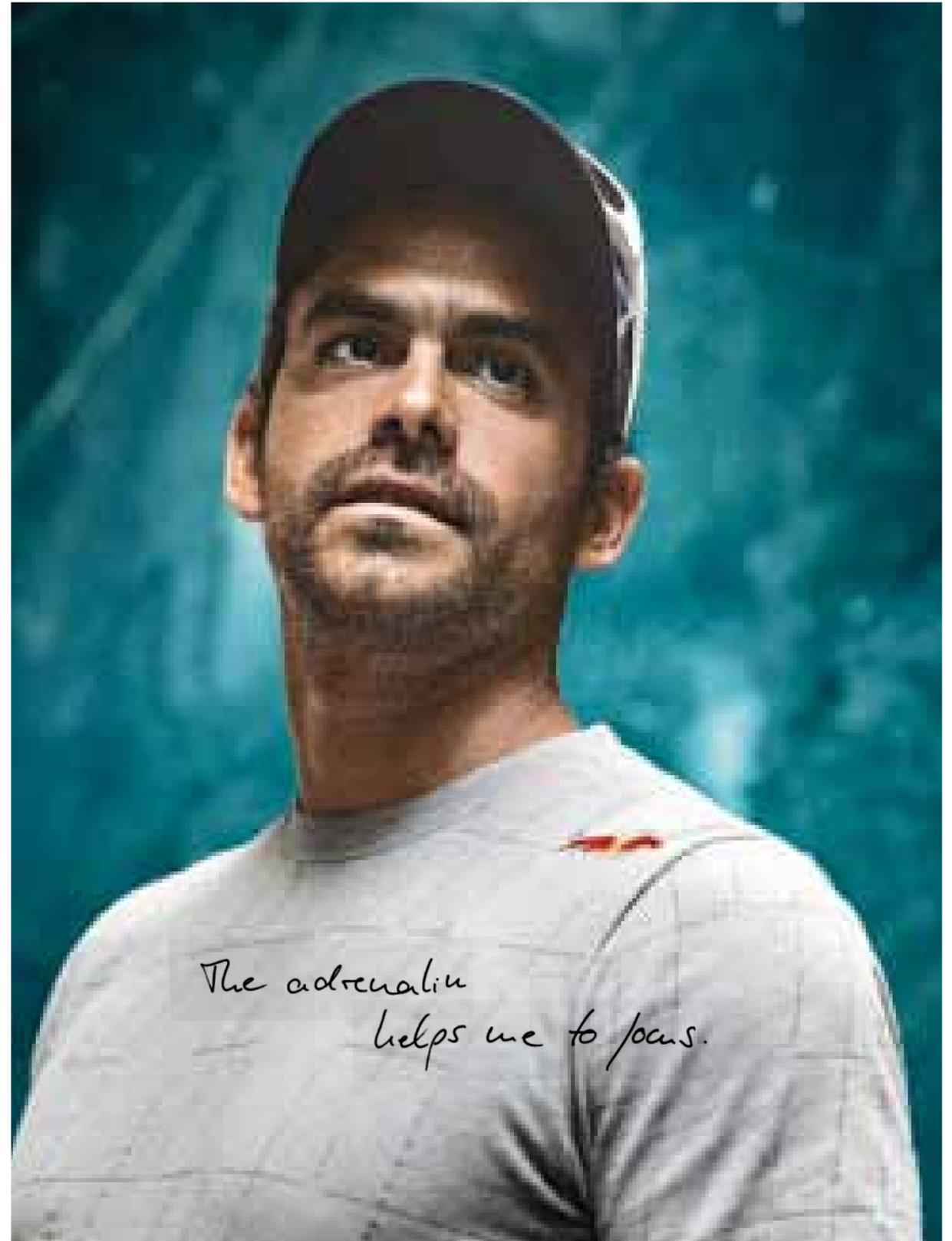
of hard landings, a compressor creates air bubbles in the water that act like an airbag. On impact, you're actually hitting more air than water.

What's the key to learning new dives?

I include an extra somersault, twist or rotation and change position in mid-air. I'm continually upping my speed and strength so that I can increase the complexity of my dives. The alternative is naturally to jump off a higher cliff to gain a couple of extra hundredths of a second. But at 27 meters—the height set for international competition—we've reached a point where going any higher is just too risky. On top of the platform diving techniques I practice, I also do weight training to strengthen my stomach and back muscles. This is essential to being able to steel your muscles for impact. Powerful legs are also vital to producing a good liftoff from the platform. In addition to my endurance training, I do a lot of running and cycling.

And how do you prepare mentally for a dive?

Above all, I use my imagination to repeatedly run through the sequence of movements in my head. This type of visualization is a tried-and-trusted technique in sports psychology and helps me to improve my motor skills. What happens is I view myself from outside my body—in other words, I'm both spectator and protagonist in my own mental movie. When I see in my mind's eye how calmly and safely I perform a cliff dive over and over again, it boosts my confidence in myself and my abilities so that fear loosens its grip on me. The advantage of this is that I can do it anywhere, any time. Every thought, every sensation and every behavioral pattern can be mentally rehearsed until it comes naturally. Then, when I find myself in the same situation in reality, I can rely on my cognitive training. What's more, I also do a couple of breathing exercises that I use before a dive. When I'm nervous and start feeling afraid on top of that, the exercises help to relax me and lower my pulse slightly. Yet I still need the butterflies and the adrenaline—that nervous energy is part of the process. It's what helps me to focus. After all, overcoming your fear and learning to trust in your abilities is what makes this sport so thrilling. >>



The adrenaline helps me to focus.

We are disciplined athletes who train incredibly hard to deal with risks responsibly.



Orlando Duque has also performed dives in urban environments. At the 2014 Red Bull Cliff Diving World Series in Bilbao, his backdrop was the famous Guggenheim Museum as he leapt off a 27-meter-high platform on the La Salve Bridge.

Aside from mental and physical strength, what characteristics do you need to become a good cliff diver?

A well-developed sense of responsibility is important. Part of that is the ability to analyze an unfamiliar environment before a dive. The conditions are always different at a new site and I have to keep adapting to my natural surroundings. The first thing I do is to duck underwater to look for obstacles and ensure that the water is at least five meters deep. Next, I survey the cliffs for a good jumping-off point. It needs to provide sufficient fall-back options in case I lose concentration during the dive and something goes wrong. For official competitions, there is, of course, a platform that juts out far enough over the cliffs. The sport adheres to rigorous safety standards. For instance, we have rescue divers on standby at the site in case of an emergency.

The clavdivistas, the Acapulco cliff divers who pioneered the extreme sport, plunge fearlessly into the sea without those kinds of safety measures. Even today, scores of tourists watch their death-defying dives at La Quebrada on the Mexican coast.

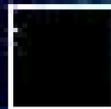
The tradition of cliff diving there dates back 80 years. I respect that. Of course, what the clavdivistas do is not only unbelievably risky but completely insane! They throw themselves head first off a precipice as much as 30 meters above the ocean. That's crazy! I told you before how I mentally rehearse the sequence of movements in a dive—well, those dives are inconceivable for me. Especially as I know how difficult it is to pull something like that off. There are cliff diving families in Acapulco who pass the tradition on

to their children. I'm friends with a number of clavdivistas and we compare notes. Although there aren't really any safety measures to speak of at La Quebrada and there's lots we don't see eye to eye on, things have nevertheless improved. Now some of the clavdivistas actually undergo training at an indoor pool like we do. We've also managed to convince some of them not to dive head first, which is a crucial first step.

You are not only regarded as an innovator and trailblazer in cliff diving but also as someone who is helping the sport to gain international recognition. What are the biggest challenges in that regard?

The biggest hurdle is establishing cliff diving as a serious sport. In the past, we had to overcome preconceived ideas that painted us as crazies with a death wish. The reality is that we are highly disciplined athletes who train incredibly hard and deal with risks responsibly. The sport is performed to very high standards. Through intensive training, more and more ambitious dives are being executed. Luckily, attitudes to the sport are currently changing. People have realized that this is a serious sport. Even FINA, the international governing body for swimming sports, has recognized cliff diving as an official sport.

Two years ago, the discipline was included in the World Aquatics Championships in Barcelona for the first time. The sport is growing and attracting more and more attention, all of which makes us very happy. But our biggest dream is to participate in the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo. >>



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I saw places where no human had ever been before. That isolation, so far removed from any major city, made an indelible impression on me.



Orlando Duque plunges from a volcanic rock monolith a kilometer off the coast of São Miguel, the biggest island in the Azores archipelago.

How can you go about achieving that?

In addition to increasing the sport's popularity and maintaining standards of athletic performance, there are, of course, numerous administrative challenges. That's where we turn to the international sporting associations for support. We have to present our case to the Olympic Committee and that is a very long, drawn-out process. I'm a member of the FINA Technical High Diving Commission and establishing cliff diving as an Olympic discipline tops our agenda.

To showcase the sport's many facets, you travel to spectacular locations around the world. Is there a defining moment in your career that you'll never forget?

Last year, we spent two weeks traveling through the Amazon region to dive from 28-meter-tall ceiba trees. We reached the tree crowns by climbing up rope ladders. Considering how remote the area was—and how far from any medical facilities—we played it safe and stuck to simple dives. Getting to share in the indigenous peoples' way of life and traditions as well as to learn from them was an incomparable experience. We saw places where no human had ever been before. That isolation, so far removed from any major city, made an indelible impression on me. I have done lots of dives in urban environments—such as in front of the Statue of Liberty in New York and against the backdrop of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, to name just two. Sure, that has its attractions, but you just can't beat diving in a pristine natural setting. This summer, for example, I'm going to Greenland to dive off the icebergs. And next year we hope to repeat the experience in Antarctica. That's what I love about my job—connecting with nature.

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More information:

Born in the Columbian town of Cali in 1974, Orlando Duque gave up football training at the age of ten to focus on springboard and platform diving. He trained for up to six hours a day and qualified for the 1992 Olympic Games in Barcelona. Due to the Columbian diving federation's lack of funds, he was, however, unable to participate. Orlando Duque, who speaks English fluently, lives with his wife and children in Hawaii. www.redbullcliffdiving.com

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