



Battle of the Sexes

Are men or women better suited to the underwater world?

BY SELENE YEAGER

IT'S AN ARGUMENT

as old as Adam and Eve: Are men or women better at [fill in the blank]: driving, cooking, quantum

physics? Diving is no exception. Eavesdrop on any internet forum chat, and you'll find a few women complaining about male divers being brash, air-sucking cowboys and a huddle of men kvetching that women are nervous, dive-aborting shark attractors. This month we decided to jump into the fray and ask the experts to help us

out with a Scuba Sex Scorecard. Get out your pencils and play along as we sort out the battle of the sexes once and for all.

SCHLEPPING AND SWIMMING

“For any given height, a woman has a smaller cardiovascular system than her male counterpart,” says Lewis Kohl, MD, chairman of emergency medicine at Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn, N.Y. In plain language that means, all things being equal, a five-foot-seven-inch female diver has a lower exercise capacity than a male diver of the same stature. She also has less upper body strength. That means dragging an aluminum 80 to the beach, climbing ladders or finning against fierce currents may be more difficult for women compared with men, says Kohl. “But there’s no evidence that these differences in exercise capacity seriously impair women divers. They may just have to work harder.”

It’s also important to remember that these gender differences are most pronounced when examining men and women with similar overall fitness levels, says Kohl. “If you compare a fit female with an overweight, out-of-shape guy, those differences can quickly disappear.”

● **Advantage: Men.**

BOTTOM TIME

The same relative lack of muscle mass that puts women at a disadvantage during the hard work of diving gives them a leg up in the general enjoyment of it, says dive doctor Alfred Bove, M.D., Ph.D., coauthor of *Diving Medicine*. “Oxygen consumption is dependent upon muscle tissue—the engine that uses oxygen as it burns fuel,” says Bove. “Generally speaking, men have an eight-cylinder engine and women run about a seven. So even if they’re both swimming the same speed at the same depth, a woman’s tank will last longer.”

Of course, ours being a “buddy sport,” having 20 minutes in your tank does you little good if your partner is running on

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h: 9.625

Your Body

fumes. But it can help give women a little peace of mind knowing they shouldn't run into the red during a garden-variety dive.

● **Advantage: Women.**

GETTING BENT

On average, women have about 10 percent more subcutaneous fat than men. Because fat tissue can hold about five times more nitrogen than blood can, it's long been proposed that women are at a higher risk for decompression sickness. Fact is, research just doesn't support those allegations.

"The data is very unclear," says Bove. "Some old research done in hyperbaric chambers suggested women were at higher risk, but more recent Navy research actually reported the opposite." Further muddying the waters is another recent study that found women taking the pill had a slightly elevated DCS risk if they dived during their period. But that study too was inconclusive. "We do know that women who take the pill and who also smoke have a significantly higher risk for blood clots," says Bove. The "sludgy" quality of their blood may interfere with nitrogen elimination from the body and could increase their risk for DCS, he says. "But it's really unwise for both men and women divers to smoke."

"Women do seem to get the skin bends more often than men, particularly in the fatty areas of the breasts, buttocks and thighs," notes Laurie Gowen, of DAN Medical Services. But again, the difference isn't earth-shattering.

● **Advantage: Men.**

BEARING THE ELEMENTS

Think women are wimps about cold water? Don't tell that to the Ama—literally "women of the sea" in Japan. Since about 500 AD, these women

have been diving for pearls, seaweed, abalone and other shellfish to depths of roughly eight to 10 meters without air, clocking about four hours of accumulated bottom time a day. In this Asian region, shellfish diving has always been considered women's work because as they say, "Men can't take the cold." What's more, military and private sector research has found no greater threat to women's core body temperature even when exposed to extremely cold circumstances.

"If you look at endurance swimming literature, most of the great English Channel swimmers are women," says Kohl. "Though there's a perception that women are less tolerant of the cold, it's possible they're actually better equipped to handle it."

● **Advantage: Women.**

FREAKING OUT

"Generally speaking, women are twice as likely to suffer from anxiety disorders than men," says dive panic researcher David Colvard, MD, of Raleigh, N.C. Though divers tend to be self-selected cooler cucumbers than the general population, surveys show that women who take the plunge are still significantly more likely to lose it below the surface than their male peers. A study from the University of Wisconsin found the incidence of panic was 64 percent for women compared to 50 percent for men—something Colvard says may be as much due to the reasons women get into diving as their predisposition to anxiety.

"One issue that comes up over and over is that women tend to be nudged into diving by their husbands or boyfriends. You don't hear that very often with men," he says. If you're not sure you want to be there, you're more likely to freak out when something goes awry—not something to be taken lightly considering the National

Underwater Accident Data Center attributes one-fifth of diver deaths to panic.

● **Advantage: Men.**

SURVIVING THE DIVE

Of the 89 scuba deaths reported to DAN in 2003, 65 were men and 24 were women. But it's hard to tell if more men die simply because there are more men in the sport (about 65 percent of divers are men), or because of other "male" factors like risk-taking and heart disease.

What is clear is that one of the largest underlying culprits behind scuba deaths is heart disease, which, at least in younger populations, still remains more prevalent among men. Over the age of 35, heart disease is a direct cause of death for about a quarter of divers; the mean age of diver death is about 45. "Because of estrogen, women's hearts are protected for about 10 years longer than men's," says Bove, a cardiologist. "After age 50, the risk begins to even out."

Though women may be more prone to panic, and therefore more prone to dangerous rapid ascents and other related life-threatening behavior, men are more prone to "doing dumb things," adds Colvard. "Most of the horror stories you read about people taking really crazy risks or just plain doing dumb things they should know better than to do have been men. It's pretty well-documented that they're the higher risk-taking sex."

● **Advantage: Women.**

AND THE WINNER IS ...

It's a tie! (C'mon, you knew it would be.) When all things are equal, all things between men and women are well, equal. Each has his or her strengths and weaknesses, but at the end of the day, both can dive safely and happily. And the general safety advice applies to both: Don't smoke. Stay in good physical shape. And use your head. If something doesn't feel right, stay dry and live to dive another day. **SD**

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