

B L U E

WITH ONLY A MASK, A SNORKEL, A SPEAR GUN, AND A GOOD SET OF LUNGS, THESE

W A T E

EXTREMISTS PLUNGE DEEP BELOW THE WATER'S SURFACE IN SEARCH OF THE WORLD'S

R H U N

BIGGEST GAME FISH. STORY BY KEN McALPINE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY NORBERT WU

T E R S





Think you're extreme? Aboard the Blue Fin, Terry Maas (left and opposite page) and Greg Pickering (top left) prepare for the possibilities of being attacked by sharks, run over by boats, or towed a mile out to sea by giant fish. The best bluewater hunters can dive up to 100 feet and stay submerged for three minutes without artificial aids.

"When you've got a full chest of air and you're suspended in this blue void, sometimes you feel like you could stay down there forever." — Terry Maas

"Shark!" — Al Schnepershoff

There you have it, the two sides of bluewater hunting's coin: dreamy, gravity-free joy and short-lived, unholy terror. And one can dissolve into the other with the fanfare of a breeze entering a room.

Which did nothing to dim the enthusiasm aboard the *Blue Fin* as we whizzed across the morning-slick inshore waters of Catalina Island, twenty-two miles west of the urban smudge of Los Angeles. The *Blue Fin* is customized to hunt. The boat sports powerful twin 160-horsepower diesels, sophisticated satellite navigation, holders into which six-foot spear guns neatly snap, and a paucity of amenities, most notably a toilet. The *Blue Fin* belongs to Terry Maas, who is equally functional and without gloss; a lean, neat man who gives the impression of being infinitely capable, which he is.

Maas, fifty-one, has been freediving — diving free of the encumbrance of scuba gear — since he was fourteen. He can stay underwater for up to three minutes. With just the air in his lungs, he has descended to 100 feet.

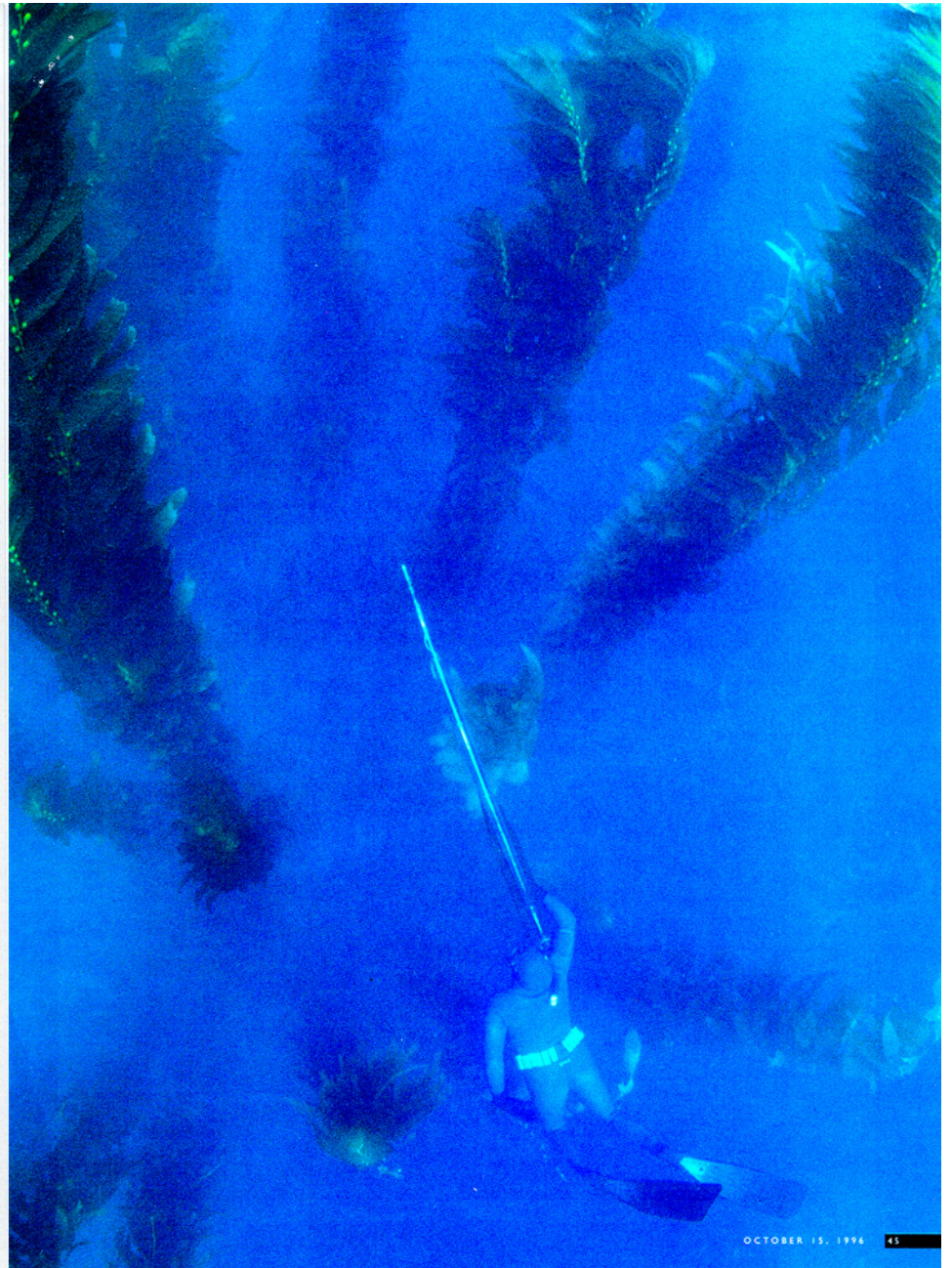
Throttling back the *Blue Fin*, Maas smiles.

"You ever see what you look like at 100 feet?" he says.

He sucks in his cheeks and pulls back on his face.

"You look like a cadaver down there."

His impressions are worth a note, but Maas, who lives in Ventura, California, is a legend among bluewater hunters for another reason. In September 1982, off Guadalupe Island, a lonely rock in the Pacific Ocean off Baja California, Maas plopped overboard with nothing but his wits and a mask, snorkel, and spear gun, and speared a 398-pound northern bluefin tuna. The previous spearfishing record was fifty-seven pounds. The enormous fish bolted for the bottom, surfaced suddenly, and charged Maas, expiring seconds before potential impact.





The winners' haul at the Catalina Bluewater Meet was impressive (right), but no one came close to Maas' record open-water spear of a 398-pound bluefin tuna. None of which will keep Pickering (left) — Maas' friend and rival — from giving up trying anytime soon.



When Maas told me this story, his take on the tuna's odd behavior was characteristically practical. "No one had ever been attacked by a tuna," he said. "But no one had ever shot one that big, either."

Off the backside of Catalina Island, Maas cuts the engine near a kelp bed and Greg Pickering immediately begins to sidle toward the front of the boat. An affable Aussie with a Huck Finn look, Pickering, thirty-eight, lives on the west coast of Australia outside Perth and earns his living by registering bone-wearying fourteen-hour days as a commercial abalone diver. His occupation, though, hasn't dimmed his enthusiasm for his hobby. Pickering describes himself as "the keenest bluewater hunter in Australia," though others will simply tell you he's the best. In baseball terms, these men are the Ted Williams and Ken Griffey Jr. of their sport. These dignified positions don't stop them from trampling each other to get to the front of the boat.

Maas and Pickering peer into the water spiraling down between the thick stalks of kelp, greenish-blue elevator shafts in which spears of sunlight revolve slowly, like floodlights on opening night.

"God," says Maas. "Look at this. It's beautiful. This was a spot Al liked to dive a lot."

Among bluewater hunters, this patch of kelp is known as Al's Funky Kelp Bed.

But Al Schnepershoff is not around to enjoy it, thanks to the arrival of the great white shark that took his life twenty-four years ago, which was signaled by his nine-year-old son on a boat nearby: *Something is wrong with Dad.*

Drifting in several thousand feet of water, waiting for god knows what to emerge from the hazy blue fringe isn't for everybody. But, as Elizabeth Taylor's matrimonial record proves, one man's willies are another's juicy edge.

By Maas' estimates, there are between 5,000 and 10,000 bluewater hunters on the planet, with a core of 1,000 devoted practitioners. This is not an overly large number for a simple reason. There are tens of thousands of scuba divers, and freediving without scuba tanks is also practiced by thousands of divers and spearfishermen in shallow waters. But Maas, Pickering, and their bluewater brethren have taken things farther, pushing away from the reefs, out past the precipice where the bottom falls away, into ► PAGE 116