

Matt Bowles: My guest today is Jessea Lu. She has been ranked the number one on all around female free diver in the world for three consecutive years. Originally from China, she holds a PhD in clinical pharmacology and is now a digital nomad who has been to over 40 countries. And she has particular interest in spending time with wild animals around the world in their natural habitat. Jessea has broken one world record and 37 national records in freediving and has won 15 gold medals in continental and world championships. Jessea is able to hold her breath underwater for over eight minutes and dive down over 90 meters in one breath. She is also a free diving instructor as well as a scuba diving instructor and she is an ambassador for Best Dive wetsuits.

Jessie, welcome to the show.

Jessea Lu: Hi Matt, it's great to be here.

Matt Bowles: I am so excited to have you here. We need to start off just by setting the scene. You and I are in person. We are in Nairobi, Kenya and we have just opened a nice bottle of red wine that we're going to be drinking through throughout the episode. This is a Rioja Reserva. It's a 2016 from the Rioja region of Spain. So, we're going to be drinking through that throughout the episode.

You and I have been on the continent of Africa together for a full three months now. We have been in Cape Town for A month. We've been in Tanzania for a month. And we have now been in Kenya for a month. We are on the [Remote Year](#) program. This is their first ever all Africa itinerary. It's a four-month program. And let's just start off maybe with that. You have been doing tons of incredibly cool stuff here. You and I have been doing some stuff together. We've been doing some stuff separately. But maybe do you want to just share a little bit about where you just got back from today and what that experience was like?

Jessea Lu: Sure. Today I just flew back from Lamu island of Kenya. That is a very unique place. It's a UNESCO heritage site with an old town that does not have cars. I heard overall on the whole island there are currently only three cars. I did not see a single one when I was there. The main vehicle of transportation is the donkey or just walking. You can walk everywhere around town. Just very narrow alleys. All the buildings are constructed with coral limestones to keep the area cool enough. And buildings are back-to-back with alleys less than a meter wide at the narrowest part so that all the heat cannot penetrate. Otherwise, Island is scorching hot and the people there are super nice. It's one of those few places in Africa very safe. You can walk at night, pitch black with no light and feel very, very at home.

Matt Bowles: Amazing. Well, we met back in Cape Town. In the very first week in South Africa. And one of the things that I noticed immediately is that you started just independently seeking out super interesting things to do. And one of the things that you began in the very first week is you started foraging for mushrooms and then using those mushrooms to come back and cook amazing things. Can you share a little bit about that? I mean, I just want to give folks a sense of how you travel. And what some of your priorities and interests are when you travel. And I thought that would be a really cool place to start.

Jessea Lu: I love being in nature. I mean, mountains, ocean, river. I really like to go places where I get the most natural encounter with animals, hopefully. And I'm also really interested in different kinds of plants or harvesting the edible ones. I always find the joy and fulfillment of harvesting your own food. You know exactly where it came from, what it looked like before it was cooked or chopped up and even washed.

Sometimes things change color when you process them. Like marine animals. You know, they look completely different from the plates usually served in the restaurant versus how they actually appear in

the ocean. Like squids and octopus, they have all kinds of colors when they are alive. Still Right. So, I think it's just fascinating, the animal world, plants, the diversity, just mesmerizing. And I like to go hiking and just see what's up there. Different altitude, there's different species. Diving with my goggles on that I can see what's underwater.

Occasionally I go to learn something new, like mushroom hunting is one of those things that I didn't even know before. That's something you can learn. But now there are cities where there's a very professional local mushroom guide that they do this. They've been doing this for decades, and now they offer it as experience. And you can go hunting with them. They'll tell you all things about mushrooms. Which one is toxic, they can kill like four cows with a tiny little pig. Which one is very edible, delicious, very expensive, hard to find. You only get it in that season, or some of the ones cannot be farmed. You have to hunt it in the wild and then you cook them after you spend like a couple hours of harvesting. And you have literally from the forest to the plate in the forest on that same trip. There's just an amazing experience.

Matt Bowles: That's so awesome. Well, you are an incredible cook. I know this because you just cooked a wonderful Chinese dish for me the other day that you and I had together. Let me ask you this, though. I know this is your first time on the continent of Africa, and you've been here now for three months. You've been through three very different countries. What has been sort of your impression and maybe some of your highlights from your first experience on the continent?

Jesse Lu: My first location in Africa was Cape Town. My personal experience, as well as what I've heard from other African people, is that Cape Town is actually quite different from the rest of Africa. So, it can be caught like a bubble, especially in the waterfront area at the tip where it's very developed and very much like a modern European city mixed with more cultures from all over the world. I liked it for the convenience of living and the great weather and the animals there, the ocean as well as penguins, the birds. I love penguins. And I'm not sure if it represents my overall experience of Africa, but it was a very nice soft landing for me.

Matt Bowles: Yeah. And it's so interesting, too, because in terms of the animals, South Africa is the only country in the world that has both lions and penguins in the same country. And so, you can have this incredibly diverse type of experience in terms of what you're actually able to see in South Africa. But the penguins are amazing. I remember the first time that I saw them, which was in 2015, my first time in Cape Town, I literally didn't even know that there were African penguins. Because I associate penguins so much with the cold weather. Cause that's all of the stuff that you see on TV, and you watch as kids and that's what the thing and penguins are associated with cold weather. And then you go to Cape Town and there's just all of these African penguins out on the beach and swimming around and they're just warm weather penguins. And so that for me was a really cool experience as well as my first time in Cape Town.

Jesse Lu: Yes. I had a really great time just observing the penguins. And there is a penguin rescue center called Sancob. And then they are basically a government funded or at least subsidized penguin hospital. So that the season there's not enough food in the ocean for the whole penguin colony. Then the moms that will abandon their eggs or their newborn chicks and then move the colony to another location. And then they would get 200 penguins in one month. And the hospital takes care of them raise them and rears all the chicks until they are healthy, full grown, with good feather conditions before they can be. Released into the wild. Right now, the African penguins are declining in population, which is kind of sad. I don't remember the exact number, but it seems to be less than 10% of what it used to be in the wild.

Then the noise that's happening in the harbor construction or these new, bigger, louder vehicles for transportation coming into the port. Seems to not be helping the penguin population over there. And that Sanncoob center is actually doing really good research on how those things are affecting these animals because they are, I guess, inhabitable area and then depend on the food of the sardines that come right. It's really limited in the temperature and everything. So, I'm actually planning on going back there to do a little bit of volunteering program next year and just to learn more about those birds.

Matt Bowles: And I know you are also planning an incredible trip for next summer to East Africa. You're going to come back. Can you share a little bit about that trip? Because I had never heard of this. You did this incredible amount of research because I know you really focus on having incredible experiences with animals and that's a really high priority for you when you travel. And so, you did this incredible amount of research, and can you share a little bit about just for other folks like me that have never heard of this opportunity, what you are planning to do in East Africa next summer?

Jesse Lu: I signed up for a horse-riding safari across Masai Mara in Kenya during the migration season, where millions of wilder bees and zebras are on their way migrating from Serengeti northward, crossing rivers to get into Masai Mara where they can graze, fresher, more abundant grass. Then they need to cross the Mara River where there are hundreds of hungry Nile crocs waiting at the riverbank for the herd to cross. And that's a buildup that takes weeks to happen.

And then a crowd of migrating animals just become so big that they have to cross. And that's an action that I saw on some documentary films a long time ago. It just completely took my breath away. Even though the trips that I sign up for, anyone who signs up for usually will say this kind of encounter is not a guarantee. It's just a matter of how many days you are spending in the park. And how often do you go there. People might have to go back a couple of times to really witness it. But still, just being in the vicinity. Of millions of those wild animals and knowing that they are moving on the. Go, it's going to be a very exciting experience and I'm really looking forward to that.

Matt Bowles: And you are going to be on horseback as opposed to in a jeep, which is the normal thing that I have done when I've gone on a safari ride. I'm in a jeep and you're driving around and they kind of take you up and you take [pictures](#) of the animals. You're actually going to be on horseback riding through with the animals basically, right?

Jesse Lu: Yes. I really wanted to do it on horseback. Before I came to Africa, I knew there were a lot of jeep tours or the safari van tours from my experience in the ocean, how I encounter marine animals. I was a scuba diver before and then I was a free diver. I could tell there's a huge difference. Between these two ways of entering the animal's environment. Anything that brings noise seems foreign. It's going to make animals a bit more alert, or for fish for that matter, they may just not like the noise of the bubbles, and they will keep their distance. They are not going to accept you in their home area. And I just intuitively think that's the same way between these different ways of doing safaris.

But humans can be prey for larger animals in those areas if people go in there walking, perhaps. Well, for one thing is you move too slowly. The second is really, how much stuff can you carry with you? I know people who have done polar tracking with manpower only and dragging the whole supply of their trip on a sled and still manage to get to the North Pole, South Pole, and for many, many days. But if you add these predator animals, hungry things in Africa, I don't think that would work very well for them. And horse riding is a way where you are kind of being with the animals and generally animals do respect other animals. To a

certain extent, you know, unless they are like extremely hungry. And then normally they would only go for the weaker ones or the young ones hunting. So, I was riding horses before with cows and sheep, and I think that being on the horse gives you a certain level of safety as well. But of course, we'll have professional guides with rifles and things just in case things go wrong.

Matt Bowles: Always good to have a backup plan. Jesse, I want to talk a little bit now about your back backstory and give folks a little sense of your journey and basically how you got to the place that you were today. And I would love to start all the way back, can you share a little bit about your experience growing up in China, where you grew up and some of the cultural context and what that experience was like?

Jesse Lu: I grew up in a mid-sized city in China. I say mid-size, but being China still has 3 million people.

Matt Bowles: Exactly.

Jesse Lu: Yeah. It was kind of like on the border of this city where my particular home is. It's about 30 minutes' bike ride if I need to go to the farmlands. And it's about 20 minutes bus ride into the city center. And I just remember a few of my favorite experiences when I was a kid was, my mom took me to the farmland and we brought a few strings, just simple clothing, sewing strings, nothing else. And then we went to the farmland. We had a plastic bag and then we just took off like a tree branch and caught it like a little frog or a snail from the river. And you just tie the string on that with the branch, then go to the watering duct where you can then start fishing for crawfish that live in the holes in the mud between the farm, the actual crop lands, and in the irrigation channels. We were just there and just fishing for these little red crawfish. They come out with a little clam and then they will hold onto the string, hold onto the food, and you can just lift them out of water and then catch them by hand, put them into the bag.

So, for two hours, we'll get a full bag of food, it's almost the basic version of seafood. It's more tasty than the shrimp. It's not as great and fascinating as lobsters, but it has a similar taste. We go home, wash them and then cook them. I just probably started these harvesting and nature related habits from that time on I already started having these joyful moments in life. Put a seed in me. And we also did insect stuff. There's like small like crickets you can catch. And then you can make the males fight in a jug and see who wins. And just you have to go out at night with a little flashlight and then go hear the cricket scene. And then you know where, which rock.

Underneath there is a cricket. Right. You have to distinguish the male scene versus the female scene. Once you've identified and located the male under which brick. And it's teamwork. So, one person flips over the rock and the other person with a flashlight and with a little perforated cup to capture them. And then you have these specific containers to then guide them and trick them to crawl through and keep them in the container. And then the hunt goes on at night. So those are my favorite childhood kind of nature related activities.

The city itself is kind of standard. Some of these African less developed cities actually, reminds me of my hometown in the last century. Some of these are very similar kind of experiences that I'm going through in the last two months. My elementary school teacher teaches us about the subject of the nature is very inspirational for me. And every class she would not talk about stuff on the textbook. She would just come into the school and start talking about trips she went on to the rural area. The things she talked about with the farmers there, the unique food they ate at this farm, you could not find it anywhere else. And she would mention another time she went out to the mountain and different plants she saw. Those were things

completely foreign to us as kids living in this neighborhood were day by day, year over year, maybe for the first 10 years, we have never really left this area, just as far as the bike can go for a day trip. And hearing about what existed outside of our familiar neighborhood was the reason I think I chose to study biology after my basic education. And I just did biological science for my college.

Matt Bowles: Can you talk about where you went to college? Because I know you did move to the big city, and you really got the large urban experience eventually. And I'm also curious because one of the things that you and I bonded over very early is that we both were very impacted and influenced by hip-hop culture. And I'm wondering if you can share with folks how you discovered hip hop in China and what that was like for you and what hip hop meant to you at that time in your life.

Jesse Lu: In China it's quite well known that the college entrance exam is extremely competitive. It's about one in 40 applicants in my province who can get into a decent college. And there's more secondary options, but they are considered maybe more technical, or you would become a teacher after. Not as wide of a selection of options or majors as the best colleges. And we studied all day during the three years of high school. Pretty much we had endless homeworks. To put it a simple way, I remember I was just doing homeworks in between my class breaks during lunch break. And just hoping that I would not take my homework home because when I'm home, I wanted to do something else.

I remember we had a lot of students staying overtime, keep doing more for night times and weekends too. So that was very robotic and repetitive. Three years and last years of college, my cousin actually went on a summer vacation trip with me. He turned out to be a hip hop dancer and then later on he learned to. Teach and he opened a hip-hop studio in my hometown. And it was that last year of high school when I suddenly saw something that's different from what we were doing every day in school with textbooks and exams. And I was like, wow, this is amazing. And he looked so cool. And I just became his fanboy and just like kind of like followed him around at night whenever I get a chance. Just look at where he's performing, what he's practicing on for just a few days.

And then I left on my hometown to Beijing University in Beijing for college. Then there are hip-hop clubs, the student associations. So, I hung out with them for my four years in college. And I go to the most kind of like international style nightclubs that plays hip hop music in China because there's. All kinds of music and all kinds of nightclubs in China, right? Some of them seem to be mostly mid-age. The Chinese people who would go like after work. And then I felt very disconnected from them.

There is this club not far from my college campus. It's about 10 minutes by taxi. It was all international students in that area from different colleges. There are international school departments, I guess. And all the international students who loved hip-hop music would come into this bar and people just dance all night. I would go there almost every Thursday for like a year and a half. That was the best time that I had during my college years, even though like that did not help with my study.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. So, what eventually made you decide to leave China to travel outside of China? What was sort of the inspiration or the impetus to do that?

Jesse Lu: I was not quite sure if I wanted to leave China. I think my family had a really strong emphasis on me about education, how important it is that you should go to the best college. So, I did that. Then there was no guidance from my family. It's almost like that was the holy grail from my grandparents. If you did that, life is over, you're fine, nothing else you need to worry about. So, I'm sure I was goofing around in

college. But with that said, my school was very, very competitive still. And if we fail two major courses in our curriculum, we will be sent back home. So that was going to be very humiliating. So, I was still pulling lots of all nights just to make sure my grades are still good enough. I didn't know what I wanted to do until the third year, second semester. And I did some internship in the graduate school situation in China. I went there, checked it out, what it is like, I did not like it. And then I was like, oops, I don't know what I'm going to work on. I have no options. How about applying for a scholarship and going to America?

Matt Bowles: And you did, and you got there, and you did your PhD in the United States.

Jesse Lu: Yes, I did, yeah. Honestly, I was definitely not well prepared for that trip or for that whole education, to be honest. I had probably just two months to get ready for my application, get my TOEFL GRE test by the time I didn't even speak English. I could manage some written exams, just get some decent score, but I couldn't talk, and I didn't know where I was applying to. I just checked the historical record which school accepted most Chinese students from my college and didn't have extremely high entry bar level. I just applied and I got four scholarships offer. I was like, okay, taking it, I'm going. And then happily I go. And with two suitcases, \$200 landed in Indianapolis. And then I tried to orientate myself. I just remember from my dorm, if I walked 15 minutes in every direction, make a circle with that radius, I could only reach one subway, one McDonald and that's it.

And I don't know how to drive a car. I don't have money for a car, to be honest. And it was the coming into a winter season, right. So that took a whole lot of adjusting to from being in the capital city in China.

Matt Bowles: Wow. And then you were there for a number of years obviously because you did your Ph.D. and that was your base. But you also started to travel from Indianapolis. Can you talk a little bit about those travel experiences and how you initially discovered scuba diving.

Jesse Lu: In graduate school, you already could tell from my tone that I did not like Indianapolis that much. So, I made a deal with my advisor. I mean first I worked hard first year. I thought I need to correct some mistakes I have already made. Now I have to take some responsibility for my life. So, I applied for a grant for graduate school. So, I did get funding from Department of Defense for breast cancer research. Now that in the second year going forward from my graduate school, I was self-funded. So that way I know my position at the university as a graduate student is secure.

So, I then made a deal with my advisor. I wanted to save as much time as I could so that I could travel away. I said I'm not going to take my weekends off, so I'll keep coming to the lab Saturday and Sunday. And in the morning when I get to the campus, I cannot find a place to park my car. There are so many people in the parking lot. I spend a lot of time finding a spot or during the experiment if I needed to use the instrument. There's a long waiting list of people and I need to find time to schedule my turn. I thought I could come at night, that would save time, and I could do a lot of work. A lot more with the same amount of time.

And then please let me travel every month away for the last week. I will just go somewhere, either be a conference or just learning or I will just go have vacation or see friends. I didn't have a lot of money at the time, but just somewhere I can explore. And that worked out really well for me. And I mean I didn't see many of my colleagues in graduate school. I was coming in when everybody's leaving and I was driving home at midnight, usually like 3am or 5am, whatever time it takes for the experiment to finish. And I was

able to go at least a different city every month throughout the year for the next three years. And then that's how I got a chance to do my scuba certification in Hawaii.

And before that I didn't even know what is scuba. I just thought I like marine animals. I tried to see if there's any kind of work opportunity that would allow me to hang out with marine animals. But every place says you must have at least a scuba certification. That's how I started looking into it. What is this scuba? And Indianapolis has some swimming pools and classrooms I can do in the dive shop. But obviously the open water session in a cold quarry or water lake is not going to be ideal. So, I just took the chance to Hawaii during a conference trip. I made my certification there in Kona, a big island of Hawaii, which I absolutely just fell in love with that island. I also fell in love with scuba diving at the same time. And just then the diving just kept going on and never stopped.

Matt Bowles: I know you relocated to Hawaii eventually. And you had that as a base, and you were doing a lot of trips out of Hawaii. Can you talk about when you first started going on liveboard trips? And for people that don't even know what that term means, what was that like and what were some of your highlights from those early scuba experiences?

Jesse Lu: So being in the Midwest, I could only really travel to get some good diving, So, and then I started looking for alternative locations where I can dive and see different ocean landscapes, so different species. So, I went to Florida to do more sorts of training. I did an advanced course at West Palm Beach. So, I saw different animals and I knew there's more diving around Miami area. So right after I graduated, I took an internship at the University of Miami. I did some diving locally. I joined their local diving club. And one day I heard about this long-distance trip.

I already started having like a taste of the more isolated location you dive, the better things you're going to see. And I heard about this trip that's going to sail from Miami port out to the sea for seven days before it comes back. And it's going to go around like Bimini Islands and different islands in Bahamas. I definitely was intrigued and very excited. So, I just saved up money. And just planned for one vacation week. I did that probably around May. And that's the first experience in my life where I was away from any Internet cell phone signals. We were on a sailboat that's very quiet when it's not having the engine on. And with about a group of 10 divers, couple of boat crew members, we hung out like a small little family. And everything we talk about is diving.

So, we eat, sleep and dive, watch the sunset, watch stars away from the land. It's pitch black at night. You don't need to face the west to see the sunset view of the ocean when you're away from land. The same golden light red color, the shade behind clouds is 360 degrees all around you. Every direction you look, it's so pretty. And I just thought, okay, I have to do at least one trip like this, away from the noise and civilization, all these messaging at least once a year. So that I actually did more live aboard trips after that.

Matt Bowles: That's amazing. And I know you eventually became a scuba dive instructor, and it became a huge part of your life. And then when you relocated to Hawaii and that was your base. Can you talk about how free diving came into the picture? Because you were already a scuba diver, how did you eventually get into freediving?

Jesse Lu: I was in Hawaii, which the reason I decided to move there is because I wanted to do more diving on a weekly basis. And in Hawaii, the locals there use spearfishing as a means of harvesting fish and feeding their families. There's much longer history before it became something that can be taught and

before sport even kind of existed on the international stage. Then, as a scuba diver, I get to stay on the water for a longer time, watch everything, but I cannot really move in any direction I wanted to. You cannot ascend too fast. You have to do the slow ascent. You have to decompress. You cannot really move fast because the scuba gear has a lot of drag. And when I saw the spear fishermen they were flying through underwater, just cruising the reef like sharks. Well, I feel I'm quite a turtle. And just really slow and clumsy.

And I thought, that's so cool. I figured; that's a human. I'm a human. If they can do that, I can probably do it. And that's when I thought about it, I'm going to give it a try. But I didn't actually sign up for a proper paid professional course until one day I was the dive master on one of these dive operation trips. And then there was some tourists ask about, oh, if you snorkel, can you duck, dive down and just hold your breath? And could touch the sand. It was maybe only 5 meters. It's not deep. As a scuba diver, I can equalize. I thought it would be not hard.

And then the other instructor says, yeah why don't you just, you know, watch? Let her demonstrate how to do it. And I was struggling, not going anywhere. I was just fluttering my things and just using my arms, like all kinds of ways and just not going down. Not leaving the surface. I felt that was quite embarrassing as a professional. So at least I needed to learn how to do it properly with the proper technique. So as a child, when I first learned how to swim, just by accident. I was already doing freediving. I didn't even know what I was doing was just exhaling, right? Just completely empty your lungs, and then you would sink, and then you would go to the bottom of the pool. For a little while and you come up. So that is already a form of freediving.

So, in the ocean, I could do that too. But that's not safe. So, you're going down without the air that carries oxygen to last to support your energy. And then there's no buoyancy, and you are heavy. You will naturally sink. You have to fight against gravity to come back to the surface. And then I just knew whatever I was doing was incorrect. So, I just started searching for a course and signed up for a freediving class through the University of Hawaii in their scientific diving program. Yeah, that's how I started to do the freediving sport.

Matt Bowles: And then what was your process from that class where you learned the basics and you learned the basic techniques and you were able to do the basic stuff along with the other people that were in your class? From there, what was your trajectory to competing in international competitions and taking the sport really seriously?

Jesse Lu: I did six minutes breath hold in my first class, and that surprised me. I did not think that was possible, and I did not think that would be as hard as I thought. And that just rang a bell in my mind. What else am I thinking that I couldn't do? But that thought is actually the limit. Not the physical body. And when that triggered, I just thought I needed to at least give it a try. I needed to see what my body is capable of. And then I later on found out free diving is really 80% of a mental sport at the beginning for everything that you can achieve. You don't really need athletic bodies or very strong cardio or any kind of complicated technical training. You can achieve a lot by just changing your mindset. If you think that's easy, if you think you can do it, you can do it.

And that was almost like discovering some kind of superpower that I didn't know I had. And then I just got very excited about more training, more practice, and seeing where it will lead me to. I had no set goals or specifics competitions or results I need to achieve. I was just curious about what is possible with the body that I have. And for quite a long time I kept telling people, I was like, I just felt I learned something about me

that is more than any teacher in my previous 20 years of school has taught me about me. And that was very powerful. And I think this sport is a way where it's kind of like a little simulator. Just a couple minutes, you can test yourself. Change your mindset, just test yourself, observe the result, and then you'll have the result of how did that mindset serve you in just a couple of minutes?

Whereas I think in life we don't often see the result of how you put your mindset, if you were consistent until quite a long time after, right. Could be weeks, could be months, could be years. And I was just amazed by that little sort of like mindset simulation experiment. But then in freediving, the best measure is time or depth or distance. So, we can compete on how long you can hold your breath, how far you can go on one breath horizontally into a swimming pool, or how deep you can go in the ocean vertically with one breath.

And in the ocean, there's a bit more technique related to equalizing the ear pressure, direction wise and all of that too. But if you practice and you have the right mindset and you will just feel it's a breeze to improve to achieve the next level, it doesn't feel like it is more intense, harder work. It's almost contrary to the other sports. Where the more relaxed you are, the more in tune you are with your mind and body, the better you will go. So that's a very special thing about freediving.

Matt Bowles: You are now a freediving instructor. And so, when students come into your class, how do you teach them what you're describing here to sort of connect with that superpower within each person that maybe they don't know that they have. How do you teach that to a class of new prospective free divers? What are some of the exercises, whether they're mental or otherwise, that you lead people through to try to get in touch with that and tap into things that they don't even know they're capable of?

Jesse Lu: I get different kinds of students. It really depends on what they are coming in for initially. But then I can guide them to where I see values in freediving as well, right? So very common. I have different types of students. One is they are spear fishermen already. They're already in ocean hunting and they just wanted to dive deeper, stay longer. They have some techniques, but we can help them to get better streamlining and some technique for safety. It's just better to have proper safety practice so that there's no accident, prevent it, at least minimize the risk.

And then there are students who are interested in seeing animals and relax in the water and just enjoy, have a good time. And students who want pictures, they really feel like this flowy. And then the kind of marine environment gives that very graceful sense in the photo only, I would say really rarely students coming to the class thinking about what mental benefits or anything beyond just a experience there maybe to discover. It's the same reason I went into the class, so I didn't go into the class thinking, oh, I'm going to learn something so powerful about me. I just wanted to be able to dive with proficient skills and know where the safety limit is, at what point I need to turn around to the surface.

But I've had students who message me on Christmas saying like, hey, Jesse, since the freediving class, I've quit smoking, quit drinking. I no longer go out at night, hang out for long hours. I just find it's more peaceful to do breathe work, stretching, and I've got. A yoga mat in my office now. And he felt like it was a lifestyle change. I really appreciate that. I'm not saying, like, everybody who practices freediving needs to like quit smoking or drinking, which that's not a direct consequence of that practice. It's just making someone more aware of what they are feeling in the body and what they can do with their body. It's really about being the owner of your lifestyle, and they can actually change how you feel about certain things.

A simple example, holding breath naturally, you'll feel suffocating, right? Naturally it doesn't feel good. But if you relax into it, if you mentally just take a backseat and be an observer and suddenly what you thought was uncomfortable is no longer uncomfortable and just feels pleasant and familiar sometimes and easy. And therefore, a lot of the things we find hard in life may not be actually hard, except for the thoughts. Actually, you put it on yourself. So, it kind of links to the other from breath hold practice, links to the other lifestyle things as well. And I really like to teach students on individual levels. So, I used to do these group classes where it was more like a standard curriculum. And you do skills A, B, C, D, E, F, G and you finish this quiz and then we give you a certification card.

I did that for about two and a half years. And I just realized I don't get as good of a thrill out of seeing the change in my student other than they get certified. And I feel more connected with students on an individual level to know what they need. So then, now I pretty much only do one to one private coaching class. And right now, I have a student who is very special to my heart. And he read about my teaching philosophy, and he reached out to me, he called me, and he said, I'm 82 years old, I have terminal cancer. Don't worry about that. But I just really enjoy freediving and I'm not very good at it. I can't hold my breath very long, but the best sensation I ever felt in my life is when I'm underwater holding my breath. And being weightless and I just wanted to be able to experience more of that in my life. Could you help me with that?

And ever since I've just been doing weekly, weekly or monthly touch base with him whenever I have time and he's feeling good. And then we would do some exercise online. And then I met up with him in Hawaii as well. We did some ocean training together, got some better gear, fixed some details in the wetsuit, and got him best dive wetsuit as well. And we're still in conversation. He is getting better and having better results. And I've taught students also at different age groups, probably like between 12 and 70s, right. But he is the most senior student I have so far. But he is looking for exactly what I really want to teach. That's why I feel there's a special connection there.

Matt Bowles: That's so amazing. Well, I also want to ask you for your reflections on peak performance. Because it's one thing to be the best in your class or to be better than a number of your contemporaries, but to be the best in the world is an entirely different thing. To be breaking world records and winning 15 gold medals and being ranked the number one female all around free diver is an entirely another level of an accomplishment. And I want to ask, when you think back about that journey to getting to that level of excellence in your chosen sport, your chosen area, what reflections or tips do you have about achieving peak performance?

Jesse Lu: I would say sometimes doing less is more. I never completely quit my job and became a full time freediver. I did try the different balances when I first started off. I competed for the first time in 2015. I was kind of like a new diver to the scene, to my first competition. I just took a vacation from my work. And when the result came back, I was still progressing and doing better than I thought. I put more time in it. So, I gradually shifted my work hours to less work and more freediving. But over this duration, from 15 to 19, where in 2019 was when I had maybe only 20% of my usual work amount and the rest of it for freediving.

But during this time, between 15 and 2019, after I discovered freediving and even a little bit before that when I was still scuba diving, I just realized that I couldn't do everything. I just needed to be more selective with how I spend my time. I was not good at a particular hobby before that, I never had a unique skill that I can showcase in front of my friends or my classmates. And I just realized, okay, I would really like to try. If I committed to one thing, one hobby, and if I just streamline my efforts and my time and energy, what would happen?

So that I think just landed on diving and coincidentally freediving came into my world. And coincidentally I started doing competitions before most people from my country were actually competing. There were a few, but not a lot. So that's how everything kind of just linked together. I remember that my lifestyle was very simple, but so smooth and peaceful. I would just do my work and I would do my day of stretching routine and do my training and think about diving, talk to friends about diving. And I felt very good during those times. I did not have other social obligations or other things on the plate. Even though I'm still interested in many other things which I'm starting to pick back up and learn other skills. I just really enjoyed that focus those years of just being very focused and committed.

Even though I wasn't training very hard like a professional athlete. Because I had almost full-time job when I started, I was always needed to balance my work and I was living alone in Hawaii, so I did not have a support system. So, I was managing my day-to-day living situation. Everything involves survival on island as well. Then even with that I felt like I was just like a part time freediver. I was able to achieve these results. Because I think I wasn't distracted. I was paying attention to all these details. But towards maybe more at the peak performance level, stress is a huge factor. And before you really deal with it first time, you actually don't recognize or don't even know that you are currently being affected by stress for that peak performance, right? It's just the goal in your mind that is actually holding you back.

And it's almost like you don't know what you don't know, but once you've experienced it then you recognize all these signs, and you know when to take a step back and not over train or overwork. As I said, freediving is a huge mental sport. If your mindset is not in the right place, then the performance will not be good. So, it is a very, very interesting experiment on that spectrum of mind to go through these elite competitions and see how you feel and what your result will be and then adjust after that. I think sometimes it's hard to be theoretical about it and learn the upfront and try to avoid all the mistakes.

It's almost like you have to just do it and then make the mistake. And then hopefully don't hurt yourself and just do it in a proper way and have proper safety and progressively do it. And then you know what to do next time and do it better.

Matt Bowles: Jessea, you have some of the most extraordinary underwater photographs that I have ever seen in my life. And you have been able to use your freediving skills, and you're really extended breath hold ability and everything else to do some incredible underwater things. The first thing I want to ask you about is some of these underwater modeling [pictures](#) where you are wearing these gorgeous, extraordinary, elegant, flowing dresses and you're under the water on the bottom and you're being photographed modeling these dresses underwater. I mean, this is some of the most incredible stuff I've ever seen. I'm definitely going to put a link in [the show notes](#) because I want folks to go and look at these [pictures](#) because they are absolutely extraordinary. But can you start by talking about some of those experiences and what that was all about?

Jessea Lu: I would say underwater modeling with dresses is probably harder than competitive freediving. Some of these photo shoots are incredibly terrifying. I remember there's one shoot with a designer outfit that's equivalent of two queen size sheets of fabric. And I was being planted on a sandy patch amongst all the coral heads with heavily weighted belts so that I'm not floating up. I had to display the dress and not be able to use my arms to move or swim or even to balance and not see anything because I didn't have a mask. And I was only being fed by another support, scuba diversity, secondary regulator.

So, the only thing I could do was just nod my head. If I was feeling okay, I nod my head. If I was not feeling okay, I nodded my head. If I need oxygen, I nod my head. If I don't want oxygen anymore, I nod my head.

Matt Bowles: This picture though, is absolutely unbelievable. And they know that you can hold. Your breath for up to eight minutes. And so, they know that you can model the dress and stay there. But you're saying that when you do it like that and you don't have any goggles on and you don't have a mask or anything else, you can't even see, you lose your sensory perception about what's around you when you're actually in that moment.

Jesse Lu: Yeah, the eyes cannot focus being naked in the water. You can see shapes. In that shoot, there were about 20, 30 reef sharks surrounding me all the time. I can see shapes moving. I cannot see any person or any gesture or anybody's face and I just pretty much see blur. And then they want to make sure they were putting someone in that position that that person's not going to panic on the water. And it was a completely very vulnerable position of loss of total control, right. So, everything is totally dependent on the people around me. I think that's harder than competitive freediving.

Matt Bowles: Yeah, it's unbelievable. I mean, this is one of the most extraordinary [pictures](#) I've ever seen because you have sharks swimming around you, and you are in this enormous, flowing, elegant dress. And you appear to be just standing there at the bottom of the ocean wearing this amazing dress with sharks swimming around you. But you're saying sort of behind the scenes, you obviously have no oxygen, so you can't breathe, you're holding your breath, and you can't see, and you have no sensory sort of experience. And so, you're just standing there. So that is absolutely remarkable. But people have to see this picture. So, we are going to put a link up in [the show notes](#) to this. But you've done some other ones as well. There was one where you were underneath the water on the bottom of the ocean as well, and you're playing an instrument and you're in a different dress. Can you explain what that one was?

Jesse Lu: That was a photo shoot I did with my good friend, underwater photographer, videographer Ping. We wanted to showcase some Chinese element in the photo shoot. At the time in 2016, when we did that shoot, there were only Western dresses, wedding dresses, things like that on the water. And we thought it would be fun to do stage a Chinese background with something unique. So, we shipped a string instrument called zheng from China and then the traditional Chinese woman's dress. We were in Rainbow River in Florida with some currents so that the dress. And my hair would flow. There's just the two of us. We were thinking about how could we make it look nice and beautiful. It was so difficult to actually make the instrument and me in the right position at the same time because the current was strong pushing everything. So, we had to brainstorm. And we found some fishing line and we tied weights on the bottom of the fishing line.

So, we were letting this instrument float mid water, stationary, while I swam up current and go underwater and then drift. With the current across the bottom with a riverbed that's like a big grassy field. And then as I'm drifting over this instrument, I've got one and a half second to pose this shoot in that position before I'm drifting away from the instrument. And then we did that just multiple times until we got it right.

Matt Bowles: That is unbelievable. These [pictures](#) are completely insane. I've literally never seen anything like this.

All right, we are going to pause here and call that the end of part one. And by the way folks, if you're interested in learning more about the [Remote Year](#) program that Jesse and I are currently traveling on, I'm

going to put a link in [the show notes](#). And if you've been listening to recent Maverick Show episodes, you know [Dr. Aprile Andelle](#), you know [Alondo Brewington](#), you know [Tammer Abiyu](#), and they're all traveling together with me and Jessea on this [Remote Year](#) program. None of us knew each other before the trip. We all know each other very well now. And that's what [Remote Year](#) does. They put together itineraries that are either 4 months or 12 months and then they bring a community together. We've got about 25 location independent professionals in our community. And then you travel the world together. You live in a different city each month. And so, if that sounds interesting to you, I'm going to put a link in [the show notes](#) that will give you a \$100 credit towards your first [Remote Year](#) program if you use the link in [the show notes](#) that is going to be there, as well as links to everything else that we have discussed and mentioned in this episode, it'll all be at one place. Just go to [themaverickshow.com](#) and go to the show notes for this episode. And please remember to subscribe to the podcast and tune in next week to hear the conclusion of my interview with Jessea Lu. Good night, everybody.