

The Ultimate Leap of Faith

Local diver Danny Higginbottom seeks higher glory in a 12-and-a-half-inch-deep pool of water.

By Constance Adler

The man falls from high places into shallow water. That's what he does. Why? Because he can. And because he has a calling to do this. Many of us might believe (or merely hope) that we have a special gift to offer, a specific reason to exist in this world. Very few of us, however, have distilled our avocation to such a degree of purity as Danny "Cosmo" Higginbottom — stuntman, high diver, Guinness World Record holder, Metairie resident — who has arrived at the clear knowledge that his purpose in life is to fall from high places into shallow water.

"Not being conceited? I am the only person in the world who can do this," says Danny. "I was born for this. I was put on this planet to break this record. I didn't know it when I was a kid. It's taken me this long to figure it out, but it is God's plan to have me do this." He is referring to his record-breaking dive from 29 feet into a pool of water 12 and a half inches deep. The Guinness World Record people filmed it in a Los Angeles studio last September. (The feat will be aired July 12 on Fox.) Then the Guinness branch office in Munich invited Danny to break his own record on German television in March of this year by diving from 29 feet and 1 inch into a 12-inch pool. So for the record, Danny has done this dive at this height only twice in his 37 years of life.

"This is by far the best thing I have done in my whole life," he says with the emphatic joy of a man who has found what he's always been looking for, even though he didn't know he was looking for it.

The first record for shallow-water diving was set on April 7, 1979, by Henri La Mothe, who dove 28 feet into 12 and three-eighths inches of water. He was 70 years old at the time. To this day, only two people have ever done it: La Mothe and Danny Higginbottom. Now Danny has sole claim to this stunt since "Henri passed away ... of natural causes!" La Mothe was a professional stuntman — he did his shallow dive off the Flat Iron Building in New York once — who set the standard for Danny to beat. He studied La Mothe's technique in order to perfect his own take-off. When Danny first started training to shallow-water dive more than a year ago, he had been jumping off the platform, which actually made the dive a lot more difficult. "Then I saw how old Henri did it," says Danny, thumping his knuckle to his temple in a gesture indicating a kind of

"eureka!" Old Henri had figured out that the best way is simply to fall off the platform.

Danny remembers first seeing La Mothe's stunt on TV as a 10-year-old and saying to himself, "That's pretty cool." But it took nearly 30 years for him to come back to this early inspiration. In the meantime, Danny showed a precocious talent

As he tells the story now, his father comforted him by saying, "Son, keep your chin up. One day there will be the right world record for you. Don't go do something stupid like eat 50 snails or a hundred worms to get into Guinness. Just wait for the world record that is your record."

Although his father died 17 years ago, Danny's voice still breaks with emotion when he describes how his father encouraged him to realize his dream of setting a world record. He also credits his dad with setting him on his career as a diver. It was his father who threw the 2-year-old Danny off a diving board and then turned to his mother and said, "He'll either swim or sink now." Danny swam. "And I've been swimming and diving ever since."

At a compact 5 feet 9 inches in height and 145 pounds, Danny has the ideal shape and wiry physicality for a diver. He made his professional debut as an Olympic-style show diver at the 1984 World's Fair in New Orleans, and then took his diving show on the road to fairs and festivals for 16 years. His career reached a high point in 1994 when he won a bronze medal at the World High Dive Championships. Then he made the transition to professional stunt man as Leonardo DiCaprio's stunt double on the set of *The Basketball Diaries*. For that, Danny dove 80 feet from a cliff over the Hudson River into the icy, polluted water. He did this twice. It was worth it, he says, because now he can work in film and television doing all kinds of stunts — not just diving. "I'm at my best in water," he says. "I can do anything in water. But I'm capable of being of being hit by a car. Or shot. Anything."

The only thing that worries Danny about setting this record is that the publicity around it will make it seem as though any ordinary person can do it. That's how the Guinness folks like to make it seem. Of course, it doesn't help Danny's professional appearance that on his segment of the Guinness program, he shares the bill with a woman who has pasted rhinestones over her entire body and a grown man who squirts chocolate milk out of his nose. "That's a world record?" says Danny with some disgust.

No one stops to emphasize that Danny has trained for diving all his life. And for the shallow-water stunt, he started to train in his back yard more than a year ago, beginning with falling into the pool from a height of one foot. He would videotape

each dive, then tromp into the house sopping wet, watch the tape, scrutinize his form for mistakes, and then go back outside to try it again. In this gradual way, he worked up to falling from 26 feet before calling Guinness World Records to tell them he could set a new record.

Danny also acknowledges that even with all this training, he still gets scared when he's standing up on the platform, and he'd be foolish not to. When he's afraid, he stands still and waits for some inner signal from his body to tell him that it's safe to dive. "If you let your ego take over, you'll try the craziest trick and something will go wrong. You'll get hurt," he says. "I let my body say when it's OK. I trust my body."

To stop anyone from trying this at home, it's important to point out that Danny does not in the technical sense "dive" into 12 inches of water, because what he does is actually a belly flop. Repeat: he does not go headfirst into 12 inches of water. The video of his stunt shows Danny scampering up the tower to his platform 29 feet above the ground. The cameras close in on his face, and he does look scared. The audience is hushed. He turns his back on the pool for a moment and closes his eyes. After concentrating for a bit, he turns around, kisses his fingers and raises them to the sky, a salute to his late father. Then Danny crouches at the edge of the tiny platform and looks three stories down to a blue-and-aqua, plastic, blow-up kiddie pool containing 387 gallons of water, which sounds like a lot but really only comes to a foot off the ground. After staring at the water for a few moments, Danny looks up, arches his neck and tips himself out into the open air.

"At that point, I am in the Lord's hands," says Danny. As he flings himself off the platform, Danny does assume a position in which he seems to offer his body to unseen help. He flies spread-eagled; his arms and lower legs bend back as his chest, torso and thighs make a flat plane. His face remains fixed upward. Danny can't look down at the destination of his fall, for if he does he will turn his body out of its flat plane position at impact, and he'll be injured. When high-diving from 90 feet into a 7-foot pool, Danny can always spot the water, which gives him some measure of control. He also has time when dropping from 90 feet to make adjustments in his dive position on the way down if something goes wrong. But in order to land safely with shallow-water diving, Danny has to land completely flat and has no time for adjustments. And in order to land flat, he can't look down to see where he's going. The shallow-pool stunt requires that Danny fall blind and know without seeing that the water will be there to cradle his body when he gets to the end. Considering this requirement, it does appear that a divine arrangement has brought Danny to this particular stunt, for it is the ultimate leap of faith.

Indeed, if we could freeze time in mid-fall, Danny would appear as an angel, resting in the benevolent hands of some supreme being. As it is though, Danny is actually plunging toward the water at the rate of 28.4 miles per hour in a posture of utter vulnerability. And yet, in those three seconds of flight from the moment he leaves the safety of the platform, his face wears an expression of peace and trust. ☼

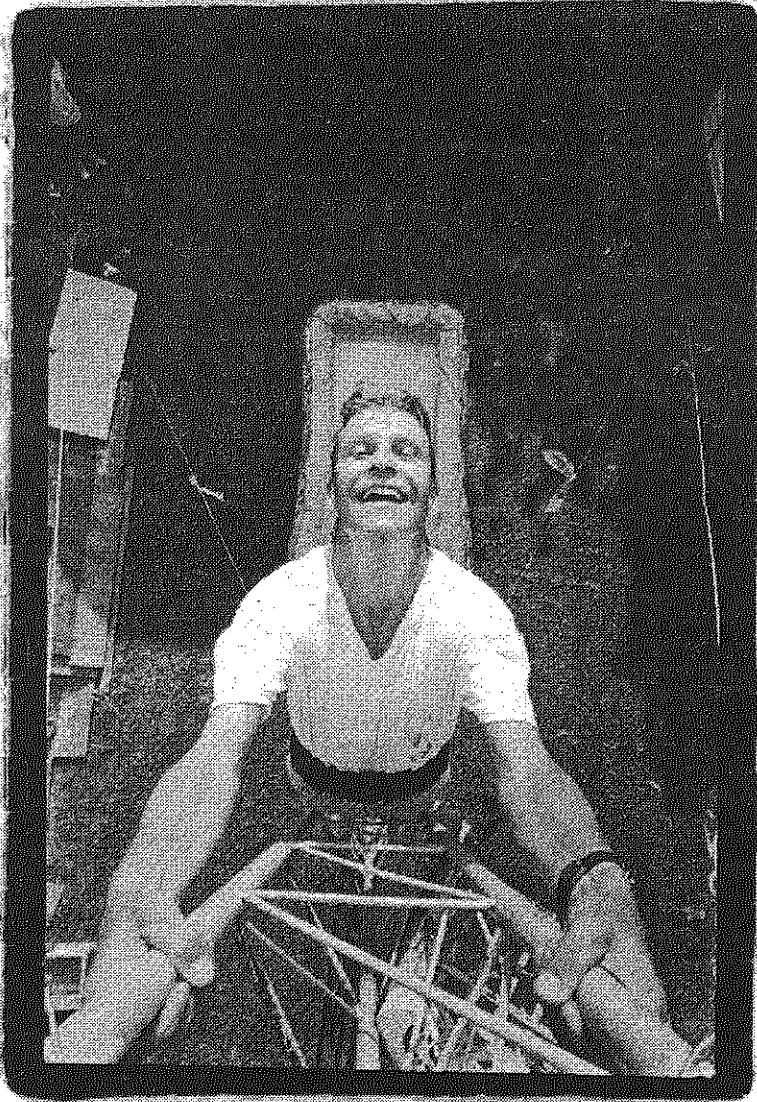


Photo by Traele Morris/Dann Young Studio

'I am the only person in the world who can do this. I was put on this planet to break this record.' — Danny 'Cosmo' Higginbottom

for stunts. At age 15, he and two friends raised money for muscular dystrophy by doing trampoline flips for three days straight on the roof of Kirschman's furniture store. By this time, Danny also had made one serious attempt to get himself into the *Guinness Book of World Records* by doing the most consecutive flips on a trampoline — 1,163 to be exact. It had been a lifelong dream of his to set a Guinness World Record. So he had written to the authors of the book and requested their verification guidelines, which the Guinness people gladly supplied. Danny secured an independent judge and started flipping. But then when he sent his documentation to Guinness, the world record keepers wrote back and said they didn't have a category for most consecutive flips on a trampoline. Danny was devastated.