House of Cards: Are you missing any of your foundational diving skills?

Having good foundational diving skills is essential for divers to be comfortable and have fun in the water, and more importantly to be safe for themselves, their dive buddies and for the underwater environment. All of the training agencies seek to address and instill these skills in students through their courses in various ways and to varying degrees. Yet in practice, it's fair to say there is still a considerable margin for improvement of these foundational skills in the sport diving community as a whole. Now in this first article, veteran technical and cave diving instructor, and underwater photographer extraordinaire Audrey Cudel introduces her new five part series, "House of Cards," which explores these foundational skills and their importance in diving with the help of several well-respected explorers and educators from the international diving community. Are you missing any of your foundational skills? Find out.

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Alert Diver editorial team

Most difficulties encountered in diving are due to poor foundational skills. Often not enough attention is paid to these skills during one's initial recreational training; they require a commitment from both the instructor and student to spend the time and effort to build proper awareness and practice. Students often assume that learning to dive is as fast and simple as jumping in the water and enjoying the feeling of floating in the blue. Some divers encounter these skills again at a later stage when they enrol in technical diving training and struggle to unlearn the wrong way or bad habits, when learning the right way to conduct the skill from the beginning would have made their journey much more enjoyable. As the proverb says: "Don't try to run before you can walk."

At first, the mastery of these fundamentals might seem hard work, intimidating and potentially require an additional financial investment. However, building a solid foundation from the beginning actually empowers divers to analyse, understand and take charge of what is happening during each immersion and build solid experience. From that point they can better consider their future training objectives. The desired outcome is the definition of what a "good diver" is all about — being prepared, in control, and safe for themselves, for their team and for the environment they intend to explore.

The challenge and achievement to master diving, is a matter of mastering each foundational skill. If one is unable to easily perform one or more of these skills, your "House of Cards," will collapse, and in this case unlike your certification cards, none of the cards are made of plastic! So how do divers create a solid foundation and structure for this House of Cards? Though all of these foundational skills work together synergistically, there is an order or importance, which form a kind of pyramid with one building on the others. These foundational skills are:

- Breathing and Buoyancy Control
- Trim
- Efficient Propulsion Techniques
- Team Awareness and Positioning
- Situational Awareness



Mastering each, but most importantly synchronising these skills is the path to safe diving, and building a solid foundation that one can rely on, so that they can begin to focus on other tasks at hand.

There is nothing as difficult as getting rid of bad habits, particularly if one doesn't realise they are often the source of the problem. Whether through pressure or ego concerns, simply rushing to get more certification cards when the basics are not in place, only makes advancement more hazardous and difficult to achieve. As mentioned above, these foundational skills are often ignored during one's initial recreational training. The subsequent discomfort experienced by divers often leads them to take specialty courses to address their deficiencies, when those skills should have been addressed as a core component of their very first diving course.

There is a saying, "Keep It Simple and Safe rather than Stupid!" Safety is the ultimate sophistication. It is not reached when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away. Being consumers in a gear-intensive sport, divers also tend to want to collect "toys" i.e. equipment, as if this will make them better divers, and this inclination can sometimes be reinforced by some instructors wanting to sell more gear. However, personal equipment and configuration choices should be the outcome of mastering the fundamentals and not the opposite. Only then can more planning parameters such as gas, navigation, and the ascent plan be fully appreciated to prepare for a safe and controlled dive.

Is buoyancy a matter of control or comfort? Is wrapping a heavy, ill-fitting weight belt around a diver's waist smart? To what extent can this reduce diver safety? Does a diver's trim really matter, and how does it correlate to buoyancy? Why is it that so many divers discover appropriate propulsion techniques like back kicks or helicopter kicks only after they get interested in technical diving, even though these techniques are appropriate and most efficient for recreational diving as well? Is there a magic pair of fins that is better than all the rest? What is really involved in diving as a team, and why is it that a group of divers in the water is not necessarily a team? Why does individual mastery of buoyancy, trim, propulsion

techniques make a team perform better and more safely? Finally, is situational awareness about weather or sea conditions… seriously?

In this “House of Cards” series we aim to address and answer each of these questions with common sense, illustrations, and experience rather than treat them as an academic exercise. In doing so, we will review each of them in detail, discuss what they are all about, how they interact with one another, and how they will benefit your diving.

About the Author

Audrey Cudel is a cave explorer and technical diving instructor specializing in sidemount and cave diving training in Europe and Mexico.

She is also renowned in the industry for her underwater photography portraying deep technical divers and cave divers. Her work has appeared in various magazines such as *Wetnotes, Octopus, Plongeur International, Perfect Diver, Times of Malta*, and SDI/TDI and DAN (Divers Alert Network) publications.