You Can’t Teach an Old Dog New Tricks?

During a divemaster course I taught many years ago, one candidate listened attentively to my rant about being a good role model and paying particular attention to the rules of diving, especially when assuming the role of dive leader. Finally the candidate asked, “Jeff, who is your dive buddy when you’re conducting training dives?”

Not thinking anything of the question, I said I was lucky because all my students were, in fact, my dive buddies. I added that I had lots of people looking after me if I had a problem underwater.

“But would any of those students actually be able to help you?” she fired back.

I was taken aback at this seemingly innocent question. I had to admit that she might be right in her implication: I may actually be on my own in that situation. I do hope that the many years of training and experience would lead me to a positive outcome. This level of confidence is healthy, but I’m also careful about becoming overconfident in my ability to handle all situations that might arise underwater.

Diving is safe, but the water can be an unforgiving environment. While divers of all experience and training levels should be confident in their abilities, they must also be wary of becoming overconfident; the adage “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” should never enter a diver’s lexicon.

A Budding Relationship

One of the greatest things about scuba diving is the social aspect, whether sharing the actual dive or simply swapping stories of what you saw on the dive when you’re back on the boat. The social context of the sport is often the primary reason people learn to dive in the first place. An engaged couple looks forward to enjoying scuba diving on their honeymoon; parents want to share an exciting holiday with their children; two high school buddies want to share the adventure diving has to offer.

The social aspect of diving with a buddy adds a safety net: it’s another set of eyes to watch out for you.

What’s Your Dive Philosophy?

All too often, though, buddy contact results in one of two scenarios: either you follow the “same ocean, same dive ”philosophy” (i.e., you pursue your ventures independent of another), or you fall into the “I’ll be so close to my buddy that you’ll think we’re the same person” trap. Neither offers the most productive underwater experience.

The first buddy technique is obviously flawed, because if you’re not close to your buddy when that person needs something, you can’t be helpful in an emergency. So much for the extra safety net.

For any particular dive you make, choose a buddy with a common objective. This assures that you share the same vision of your adventure, leading to better buddy contact during the dive. For instance, choosing a buddy who shares your interest in underwater photography is great. But what if one diver wants to take macro shots while the other envisions wide-angle pictures? They may not make the best buddy team. One may want drift around a small area of the reef looking for little critters to pop out, while the other may prefer to swim around a wide expanse of the dive site looking for the big pelagics.

The second technique, based on proximity, isn’t much better. When they’re too close, divers can become entangled, perhaps escalating other miscues: you accidentally kick your buddy’s mask off; he becomes positively buoyant as he struggles to replace his mask; he takes a few gulps of water, and panic starts to

cloud his thoughts. Rather than providing the extra measure of safety diving with a buddy affords, you've become the genesis of a problem.

Buddies should agree on techniques to stay close, but not so close that each becomes a hazard for one another. Consider agreeing on who will lead the dive and who will follow, and possibly the proximate position in the water each will try to maintain: the trailing diver will remain just off the left shoulder and a little behind the lead diver, for instance. This way, the lead diver knows to look to the left initially when checking on the trailing buddy or when getting the trailing diver's attention.

To Thine Own Self Be True

Don't assume your buddy will always be there for you. Practice self-rescue skills, and hone them in the controlled setting of a refresher program, a continuing education course or practice them regularly in a pool. This may not only help you avoid a minor inconvenience; it may help you pre-empt a fullblown emergency.

Practice mask-clearing skills. This is often considered the most difficult skill to master during scuba training, starting with partial flooding and moving through to full flood to removing the mask and replacing it. Even if your mask is never removed from your face, the chances are good that a small amount of water will leak in during any given dive. Performing this skill comfortably will surely come in handy.

Consider how you might handle sudden changes to your buoyancy, for instance, if your automatic inflator gets stuck in the inflate position. Simply disconnecting the mechanism should stop a continuous inflation of your buoyancy compensation device, but doing so will require you to then deal with the inability to inflate automatically. Practice disconnecting your inflator and then orally inflate your BCD while underwater. Keep in mind that although this is not in itself necessarily a life-threatening situation, it could easily be the catalyst to other problems.

If such a scenario presents itself, then, you should immediately abort the dive and slowly make your way to the surface, following all normal ascent procedures, including making a safety stop.

Practice Skills

In self-rescue, you may have to deal with an occasional leg cramp, not an unusual event. With stretching and rubbing the area, you should be able to work through the discomfort. You'll also need to pay attention to your buoyancy as you work through the cramp. In your haste to recover from the cramp you could unknowingly find yourself descending or ascending too quickly or even uncontrollably.

Practice stretching your leg while maintaining your relative position in the water. If practicing in a pool, pick out a spot on the side and focus on this while you work on the cramp. At the same time, concentrate on maintaining a consistent breathing rate, as this can be helpful in buoyancy control.

Practicing rescue skills with your favorite buddy is also important to better prepare both of you to respond efficiently and appropriately to any emergencies that may happen when you're diving together.
Review skills with your buddy periodically. You learn to master skills such as air-sharing during entrylevel training, but the maxim "if you don't use it, you lose it" comes to mind. Performing these skills during training allows you to get focused instruction on the proper techniques, but with the passing of time, your skills will get rusty.

The circumstance that requires you to share air – someone has run out of air – increases your stress level. Performing this skill in the heat of the moment is much different than during practice sessions in a

controlled setting. By spending some time refreshing your skills with your buddy you'll increase both competence and confidence to perform them.

The DAN Report on Decompression Illness, Diving Fatalities and Project Dive Exploration reports that "the average injured diver was not newly certified." While 46 percent of injured divers had five or fewer years experience since certification, 20 percent had five to 10 years' experience since certification, and 34 percent had more than 10 years' experience since being certified. This may lead one to believe that on average those represented in this injury data were experienced based in part on the total years since certification. When you consider recent diving experience, however, the data may point to those who were a little rusty in their skills. The report also indicates that 40 percent of the men injured and 50 percent of the women injured had made fewer than 20 dives in the previous 12 months.

No diver really enjoys practicing removing and replacing the mask, especially in cold water, but this is exactly what divers should practice before it happens without warning. While dive professionals are charged with the responsibility of looking after other divers, dive buddies have a responsibility to each other. In both instances, having the ability and confidence to respond to another and to oneself will better assure the dive will begin and end on a good note.

Even dive professionals should practice the very skills they teach others how to perform. That includes remembering to dive with a buddy.