

# Team Diving

Text and photos by Mark Powell

—Technical diving instructor, Mark Powell, discusses the idea of team diving and explains why good buddy divers make good team divers.

Recreational diver training agencies have always encouraged divers to adopt the buddy system and always dive in buddy pairs. Diving in a group made up of more than two people has been described as undesirable, while most agencies explicitly ban solo diving. The 2005 BSAC incident report explicitly raises the risks of diving in a trio, and one of its four main conclusions is that “fatal incidents associated with solo and trio diving continue to feature”.

This view must be balanced against the teachings of the technical diver training agencies who encourage divers to dive as a team and often cite three as the optimum team size. Technical divers carry out a large number of challenging dives to depths well in excess of the recreational limit in this team format with obvious success. What makes them choose this style of diving if the recreational industry is so set against it?

There are a number of reasons for the apparent contradiction between recreational and technical training agencies. By examining these reasons we may be able to adopt some of the best practices from

Good lights make communication between team members easier



A team of technical divers discuss their dive plan



One diver in front of the other works well when swimming through a wreck



be teamed up with whom, and there is no preparation, planning or practice. In this case, we end up with a haphazard trio, which is certainly going to cause more problems than a traditional buddy pair. If an incident occurs, then the third person adds confusion to the situation rather than helping to resolve it, and there have been a number of cases where two divers become involved in a situation and subsequently become separated from the third. In these cases, the divers are not following a team diving approach but are simply jumping in as a trio.

The buddy system also has its disadvantages. It can lead to buddy dependence where we always assume our buddy is there to get us out of trouble. This is not always the case. In the case of a problem, underwater buddies are often too far apart to be able to help each other or do not pay sufficient attention to their

team diving for use in recreational diving. We will also see that many of the concepts of good buddy diving are the same as those of good team diving.

### Pros and cons

Team diving has a number of disadvantages if you are not familiar with diving in this way. Most recreational divers have little experience of this type of diving and usually express a dislike of diving in a three. This is not surprising as all recreational training focuses on diving in buddy pairs, and for most divers, their subsequent diving has all been focused on buddy pairs. So, it's no wonder that diving in a trio is uncomfortable, as you have never been trained to or practiced diving in this way.

In the recreational world, a trio is often put together at the last minute due to odd numbers. Very little thought is put into who should



Preparing for a decompression dive

buddy to notice that they have got tangled up in fishing line or have experienced some other problem.

The buddy system is often followed in name only with so-called "same ocean buddies" who jump in together and will spend time somewhere in the vicinity of each other without really expecting to stay together. These divers are effectively solo diving but without the equipment, training and experience to deal with a problem on their own.

Poor buddy skills often go unnoticed on recreational dives, but for technical dives or on dives with three divers, these buddy or team skills become much more important. It is possible to get away with poor buddy skills when there are only two divers, but this becomes less feasible as the number of divers increases or the complexity of the dive increases. In this

case, additional techniques and training are required to ensure things go to plan.

### Team style

Effective team diving clearly involves more than just diving with more than two divers. Team diving involves a style of diving where diving in a trio or larger group is a conscious decision, which is planned in advance and where adequate training, practice and preparation has already been carried out.

In a buddy pair you only have one other person to keep track of, this makes things fairly straightforward. When diving in a trio you now have two others to keep track of, and so you spend more time looking for the third person. As you are unfamiliar with diving in a trio, all three of you are likely to be moving around and looking for the other two,





Diving in a team can be a very safe and enjoyable way to dive

# Team Diving

which makes the task even more difficult.

If you are diving in a four, then you now have three other divers to look for, and now you spend more time looking for the other divers than looking at the wreck. It's no surprise that your first experience of diving in a four is likely to put you off ever doing it again.

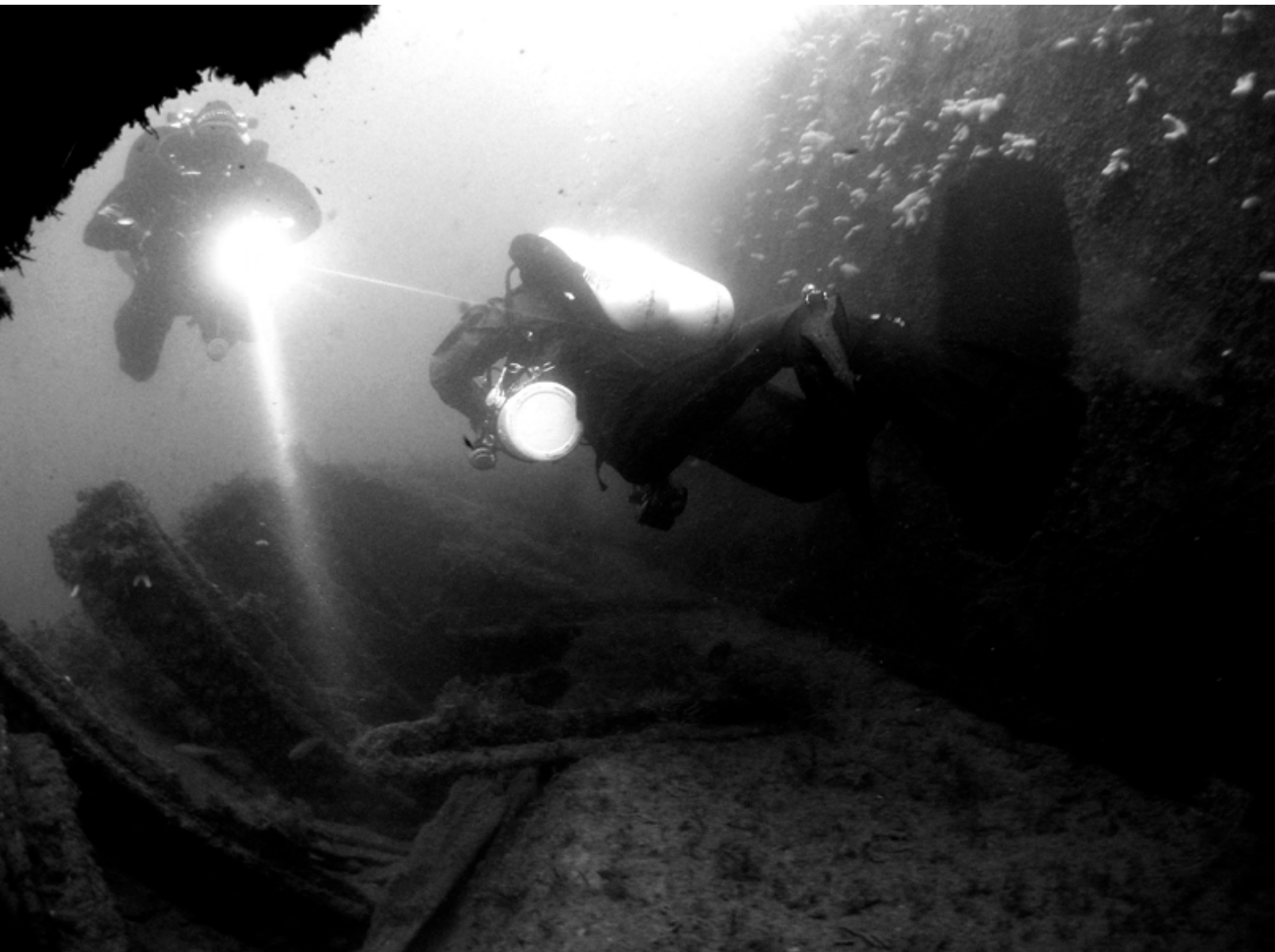
## Positioning

This problem occurs because divers don't usually know where to look for the other divers, especially in a trio or more. One of the key principles of team diving is having agreed positions. This simplifies things immensely as, if you know exactly where the other two divers should be, it's very easy to confirm that they are indeed

in the spot you expected without having to look 360 degrees around and then above and below to find them.

Common positions when diving in a three are to dive in a line, either one in front of the other or side by side, or alternatively in an arrow head position.

Swimming side by side works well for drift dives or well broken



up wrecks where you are swimming over the top of the wreckage. In this case, the person on the left only has to keep track of the person in the middle—no different to a buddy pair. The person in the middle has to keep an eye on the person to their left and right but equally has two people keeping an eye on them. The person on the right just has to keep an eye on the person in the middle.

On the other hand, one in front of the other works well for swimming along the side of wrecks, reefs, through restricted areas or on wall dives. In this case, the person in front only has to keep track of the person immediately behind them—again no different to a buddy pair. The person in the middle has to keep an eye on the person in front and the person behind. This is more work, but again, they have two people keeping an eye on them.

The person at the back just has to keep an eye on the person in the middle, however, this is the most exposed position, as there is no one looking at them unless the person in the middle looks back to monitor them. Of course, this is no worse than a buddy pair where one buddy is in front of the other.

An arrow head position can work in a number of situations. In this case one person is in front at the tip of the arrow head and the other two are side by side behind the lead diver. This is more like a buddy pair with one person in front and so may be more comfortable for divers used to buddy diving. This is preferable to the single person being behind the other two as in this case it is all too easy for the two in front to concentrate on each other and forget about the diver behind.

If diving in a four then diving in a line easily scales up to four or

more divers. The first person still only has to keep an eye on the person behind and the similarly the last person also only has to keep an eye on the person in front. The divers in the middle again have to keep an eye on two divers but they also have two divers watching them. The alternative is to have two pairs diving in a box formation. Again this may be more familiar to divers used to diving in a buddy pair.

In each case, it is essential that each diver is monitoring the relevant member(s) of the team closely enough to stay in contact and to be close enough to assist should they get into trouble. A high level of awareness is required in order to achieve this. If this awareness is present then the team can easily become separated leading to many of the problems associated with trios. The use of powerful torches for signaling can make keeping track of

Team diving requires good buddy awareness





other members of the team much easier. If you can see the torch beam of the diver behind then you don't need to turn around in order to check that they are still there. In addition the diver behind can use their torch to signal the diver in front if they need to get their attention.

### Practice makes perfect

The strongest teams usually consist of experienced individual divers with good self sufficiency and self awareness skills that have practiced working together in a team. Training and practice are essential in order for team diving to work successfully. Each member of the team should have similar views, so they are following the same general approach. In addition, good teamwork only comes with practice. You can see this with national sports teams. Each player is amongst the best player in the country, yet unless they train together as a team, they will not be able to perform well as an effective team.

When team diving is carried out by experienced, trained divers, then it is a very safe way of diving. In the case of a problem, you have more options available to help out, more gas available, more chance of spotting the problem and more ideas on how to solve it.

In the case of an incident, one member of the team can be initiating a rescue while the other sends up a delayed SMB and another provides a visual reference to ensure the rest of



the team can maintain depth. It is when problems occur that the benefits of diving in a team become apparent.

### Standardisation

Diving in a team becomes much easier if each member of the team standardises certain aspects of their diving practice. Communication is much easier if all signals are standardised, and it is common to expand the standard signals to include others that may be relevant to the type of diving you are doing.

Standardising gases is also common, if one of you is on air and the other is on nitrox then no stop times are going to vary. The diver using nitrox will be unable to take advantage of extended no-stop times, as they have to take into

account the other members of the team.

At a very minimum each member of the team should be on the same gas mixture, and many teams standardise on set gas mixes for pre-defined depth ranges. Some teams even go so far as to completely standardise all of their equipment. Even if you don't go for identical kit, then it is still worth standardising on certain aspects, such as low pressure inflator fittings so that spares can be shared.

The idea of team diving can be further extended to all the divers on the boat so that all dive teams work together in terms of dive planning and surface support. For this type of diving, the boat skipper and crew would also become an integral part of the team.

The lead diver knows can keep track of his buddy if he can see his torch beam

## Team Diving

### Skill set

The skills required to be a good buddy are the same as those required to be a good team diver and vice-versa. By adopting some of the team diving methods used by technical divers we can become better buddies even if we are carrying out a recreational dive no-stop dive.

Recreational dives with three divers can be made easier by adopting a fixed position and using torches for signalling. The other aspects of team diving can

still be adopted even if diving in a traditional buddy pair. Each buddy should be self sufficient but at the same time fully aware of their buddy and ready to help out should it be needed.

Effective communication between buddies will help them stay together and avoid any potential problems. In this way, we can take some of the aspects of team diving and increase our safety on all of our dives.

*Next Month: Mark looks at the risks of nitrogen narcosis and how technical divers avoid this dangerous condition. ■*



Buddy skills should be practiced regularly





# Improve your personal diving at TEKCamp 2011

Text: Rosemary "Roz" Lunn  
Photo: Jason Brown

**Sponsored by Fourth Element, the inaugural TEKCamp will be held 25-29 July 2011. Join ten of the United Kingdom's top technical diving instructors for five days of solid diving, lectures, presentations and of course fun at Vobster Quay, Somerset, United Kingdom.**

"Time and again when a diver is considering going down the technical route, they always ask the same question, 'who should I train with?'" said Martin Stanton, owner of Vobster Quay. "The consistent, sensible answer given is that it's not a specific training agency but down to the quality and ethos of the individual instructor."

Until now it was a bit of a catch-22 situation. The only way to find out if a specific instructor's teaching style was for you was to physically book into and take a course. At Vobster, we therefore decided that an opportunity to 'speed date' some of the United Kingdom's foremost tech instructors from the leading agencies would be the way forward, with the emphasis focused on a week's personal improvement diving.

Every TEKCamp student gets to take part in a daily in-water workshop with three of their TEKCamp peers covering everything from





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or further their technical diving training. And it helps them decide if this type of diving and certain teaching styles are appropriate for them. Some divers benefit from a more military approach adopted by some instructors, whereas others respond to a more pragmatic, down-to-earth instructor.

We are delighted to say that for TekCamp 2011, we've secured the services of the very *crème de la crème* of U.K. technical diver education—ten really experienced instructors from the four top training agencies. We'll be announcing the full dream team shortly, although we're proud to announce that names already signed up include Phillip Short (IANTD UK Training Director), Rich Walker (GUE UK Training Director), Martin Robson (IANTD, NSS-CDS and NACD) and Richard Stevenson (TDI & IANTD) — luminary figures not only involved in teaching but also known for diving at the very cutting edge of expedition-level tech.

Whether you're a recreational diver looking to take on a whole new challenge or an experienced technical diver looking to broaden your diving horizons, this is an unique opportunity to learn from and dive with some of the biggest

names in technical diving.

Rich Walker of GUE UK said, “The opportunity to work alongside the UK's best tech instructors was too good to miss. The way in which the event is structured will allow divers interested in moving to tech diving to get a real picture of the different approaches and styles of teaching available. I can't wait!”

During the week, TEKCampees will also benefit from a five day guest pass to Vobster Quay including unlimited day diving, two half hour lectures every lunchtime (each Instructor will deliver one lecture), a guest speaker every evening, the ability to dive equipment from key manufactures, six days onsite camping, and a BBQ every evening where divers can spend time and chat with the instructors informally. TekCamp 2011 will culminate in a celebratory Hog Roast on the Friday night.

Places are limited at TekCamp 2011. To book your place simply log onto [www.tekcamp.co.uk](http://www.tekcamp.co.uk). Divers should have, at minimum, a Sport Diver or Rescue Diver certification with 50 logged dives, preferably with a Nitrox Qualification. For those who are not nitrox certified, Vobster will run a special course on Sunday, July 24. ■

go quietly, amid the noise and haste...



[ 3 hours @ 20m - no deco ]



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### You're invited to the PADI Tec Xplor Day event!

On Monday, 28 March, PADI Americas will host a TecRec Xplor Day at the Secaucus Recreation Center the day after the Beneath the Sea consumer show. The day's events will include presentations from some of the biggest names in the tec industry as well as demonstrations from different equipment manufacturers. You will also have the opportunity to jump in the pool and try the equipment out first hand.

To register for the event, visit <http://tecexplordaysecaucus-tecrecblog.eventbrite.com>



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