

The International Association of Handicapped Divers (IAHD) is a non-profit organization that organizes training programs for disabled divers. The organization offers a range of courses on different subjects very much like the PADI-system of diver education. You can read more about diving for disabled people at IAHD's international website:

www.iahd.org

Fraser Bathgate will be at the January 2005 Danish Dive Show in Copenhagen where IAHD will run a training program over the weekend. To register for the course, contact Flemming Thyges at: www.thygesdykker-center.dk

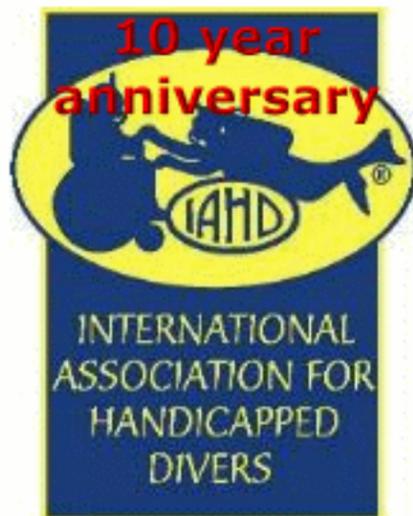


Fraser Bathgate

Interview by Gunild Pak Symes
Photographs courtesy of IAHD & Flemming Thyge

Fraser Bathgate, Vice President and Director of Training for the International Association of Handicapped Divers (IAHD), tells X-RAY MAG what drives him to dive off his wheelchair and into the depths of the underwater realm, why he wants to teach other disabled people how to dive and abled dive instructors how to use alternative approaches and teaching methods that encourage disabled individuals to take the plunge.

Tell us about yourself and the organization... The IAHD was set up to help train people in scuba diving that weren't able to go through the normal instructional methods with some of the major training agencies. We felt that was the wrong thing, so we wanted to introduce a method of teaching that would mean there was no



exclusion for a lot of people that are excluded anyway. It wasn't just people with spinal injuries in wheel chairs, but also people with cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, muscular dystrophy and spinal bifida... things like that which means that we get the freedom that everyone else experiences.

Also one of the benefits of water is that it is a great therapy anyway, and also leaving the wheel chair behind. It's the only sport where we can leave the wheel chair behind. The other great thing is it's also the only sport where we can go into a shop and buy straight out of the shop. We don't have

to have things custom made. The only thing that we do have to have custom made any-time is a wet suit because obviously body shapes are different. But everything else can be bought directly from the shop, so they're not being penalized for having a disability.



Fraser Bathgate

And how did you get involved with IAHD? I had obviously been, being in a wheelchair myself, interested in trying to give something back to the diving community which we felt was very, very important because a lot of times divers tend to take out, they don't actually give back. And I felt it was important to try to give something

back to the diving community as a whole.

Was your disability something that came later in life? Yes, I had a climbing accident. I was never a diver before, so I was the first person in the world in a wheelchair to qualify as an instructor. So that is unique.

And how did your teachers respond to you? It took me a long time to find someone who would be willing to teach me. When they did finally start to teach me, it was found that I could do just about as much as everyone else in the water. In fact, at certain points I could do things slightly better because my mobility came back when I was in the water, so it is like you are

able bodied again. It's good.

So, you felt happier down in the water? I felt a lot happier, a lot safer and a lot more comfortable in the water.

Do you have pain above water and then less under? I know that some people that we have worked with have had things where they have pain on the surface, but when we take them under the water, the pain reduces. We



Bathgate

use a specific program that all of our students can breath nitrox 36 which assists the breathing rates and keeps them warmer for longer.

How does IAHD help dive centers develop programs for disabled divers?

We run training programs to train instructors to work with people with disabilities because it not just being able to work with them but also really understanding the different types of disabilities, how to look after them under the water, how to get them to achieve as much as you possibly can. So what we do when we run a training program, we do not only look at just the instructors, we look at the training facilities. We look at the swimming pools, we look at their dive sites, and we look at if they want to take them away on holiday all these sorts of things. So it assists them in becoming more of accessible center.

So it is a very collaborative process?
Very much so.

Do you have doctors involved?

We got a medical board with people who advise us. If we have a problem, we can go to them and they will advise us on different disabilities. Also we have people that are involved in sort of a board of recommendation, which assists us in doing new ideas and new programs and things like that.

So you really have some strong guidelines and criteria?

Very much so. Also we are recognized by most of the major training agencies as well as carving a link with DAN (Divers Alert Network) where they recognize our programs. We are working with people with disabilities.

So, if an owner/director of a dive center like for instance, Flemming Thyges of Thyges Divecenter in Denmark, wants to

set up a program for disabled divers at his or her location, what do they have to do first?

Well, Flemming has fortunately done one of the training programs with us and that's really good. What it means is that now he looks at the rehabilitation centers that are in Copenhagen. We made links the last time I was across there, at one of the centers, and they want to introduce it to their people as well. To get it going, I am coming back to do the Danish Dive Show and we are going to take some people in the tank at the dive show so we can get them in the water.

And also we will have this new propulsion vehicle that we have been working with the manufacturers of, so we will be able to showcase that. Because we work with a lot of the manufacturers as well in making the equipment that is more user friendly.

And what does this propulsion vehicle do for disabled divers?

It straps to the tank and it's got an on-off button, so it can just push them through the water, so they don't have to worry about swimming as well.

So it just opens up a whole new world for disabled individuals?

You've got a three dimensional world that give you a freedom that you don't have on land. And you can do all the things that used to be able to do but you can't do on land anymore.

I guess you've got a lot of happy divers coming out of your programs?

Oh, yes a whole lot of happy divers! This is one of the only things that keeps you going, you know, because even when things are very difficult, you just do one of these sessions and it makes it all worthwhile.





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Do you meet a lot of resistance?

From people that don't understand what we are doing – those who say, "You shouldn't have to be doing this." And we say, "Well if we don't do this, are YOU going to take them in the water?" And they don't look at that idea. So, you know it's making sure we get the word

Fraser Bathgate is the guest instructor of the specialty courses offered at Thyge's Dive Center in Copenhagen, Denmark

profile

out to as many people as possible and take as many people as we know diving.

Do you work with governments or ministries? Yes, we have in the past because we have been invited to work with various countries especially in the developing world, as well as the Cayman tourist authorities like the Maltese tourist authority, the Seychelles, working with the Key Largo chamber of commerce in Florida. Setting people up like Flemming in Denmark to promote it because he is very enthusiastic and doing a lot. He will become our representative in Scandinavia, so anybody in Scandinavia who wants to work with us can contact him.

When did you start your with IAHD? I came in its second year. It's been going on now for 11 years. When I came on, I started developing different things and then, when a new CEO came on board, we were able to expand the programs that were available to everyone a lot faster. So, we have things like surface support specialists, nitrox program, two new pirate fish diver and recon diver. The Pirate fish diver is for people with a mental age of 12. And they collect six pieces on a treasure map and complete skills to get to the treasure chest.

That's a wonderful idea. So, you work with three different sectors: the government, business sector and the health community. Which one has been the most helpful to your organization so far?

They are all very much the same... because initially there was a lot of resistance from all of them but now that they understand what we are trying to do, that makes it all a lot easier for us to promote it and be a lot faster and promote it a lot faster.

Bathgate

How about the handicapped community themselves? The handicapped community themselves were very wary, a little bit at first. They didn't believe that it could be done; they didn't believe that we could work with these people, but now that we have proved that you can do it, then it's a lot better now.

And now they are much more excited to try it. Yes, especially when we can get people into the water, then it's a lot easier for us to promote it. It makes it a lot easier to work with and a lot more people will become involved with the program especially in the states. We are hooked up with the Miami project. We are hooked up with people up in University of Washington in St. Louis, Missouri. We are hoping to expand into Boston and places like that.

Do you get parents involved with their kids? We try to but sometimes the parents can be a bit of drawback. So this is why we developed this program, surface support program, so we can use them to assist rather than get in the way all the time.

So, if I am a disabled child or teenager who want to learn how to dive, what do I do first? You'll want to get in touch with us. Go onto our website and click under "Instructors" and it will tell you where the instructors are and you can contact them directly. And if you can't find one to contact directly, then you can contact the head office and we can see if we can organize something and get an instructor as close to you as possible.

Where do you want to be in 5 to 10 years? Retired would be nice. (Laugh) In 5 to 10 years, I would like to see that we have a large instructor base that is willing to work along side us and sup-



Instructors learn teaching methods for individuals with disabilities who want to learn to dive

port what we do and actually help out in testing some of the new stuff we are working on. Get the scientists involved and the medical community to help promote us.

We are getting into a lot more developing of programs to assist people and give them more of a challenge. Because it is student-led and not instructor-led, you keep on presenting things for the divers to try, it gives them a hunger to try more new things. Maybe not just diving, but perhaps trying another sport that they had never thought about. And hopefully it will open up the whole of the market. Also the community in which they live in will become a lot more open as well.

How do you do this financially?

We are looking for support. Right now, it's just a lot of good will on our behalf. Because we are non-for-profit organization, no one is being paid to do this. We are trying to develop programs to be better for everyone.

Have there been any documentaries made or media coverage done on your programs? Yes, actually a documentary film has been made about me and how I got to where I am. And we are hoping the media will come out to meet us and cover our programs at the show. It's my first Danish Dive Show and I am really looking forward to it. ■



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