



## **Course Report: GUE Fundamentals, 7-10<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

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'But the boys will be too boy-like, they'll be far too serious'. As an instructor how do you respond to that? Technical diving needs to be taken a bit more seriously, doesn't it? When Kathryn and Ali first approached me and I agreed to run this course, I knew that it would be a first for GUE in New Zealand – an all female technical diving course. What I wasn't sure about was how well I was going to cope as the instructor. I want all my students to have fun and enjoy their courses, but the skill requirement and the pass mark are always the same regardless of the students – so what exactly did this group expect from their course?

As usual we started with the introductions and then went onto introducing GUE as an organisation. This was followed by discussions on buoyancy and trim and videos of all the skills that we would be doing. So far so good – just like any other course. Next it was onto the kit configuration and the reasons for standardisation, with the day ending with a run through of everyone's kit in preparation for diving the next day. Everything was running like clockwork – why had I ever been concerned?

Day two started at the pool and it was at this point that the first difference became clear. Introducing the backwards frog kick is always an amusing part of the course, with students performing a wide variety of strange and bizarre undulations before finding the rhythm. This group was no different with legs heading in all directions, but suddenly Kathryn had it nailed. She was motoring backwards looking as though she had been doing it for years. Inadvertently I had provided the solution by counting out a 1,2,3,4 beat for the required movement. As a qualified dance instructor Kathryn had just turned the beat into a dance move – suddenly it was easy. (As an instructor I'll be using that analogy again.)

The next obvious difference was in the teamwork. Maybe it's because the heavier kit is a bit easier for boys to manage, but right from that start the girls were helping each other out. Normally it takes a while to get the team functioning properly and with Lizzie and Ali being sisters I had expected Kathryn to be the odd one out at the beginning, but it never happened. Right from the start they were acting as a team of three. Of course once under water the kit is almost weightless, so at that point differences between the sexes are minimised, with everything coming down to individual skill levels and practice. And with the video camera recording the session we had plenty to discuss during the debrief. I think this is where the laughing started.

The day ended with a theory session and I think that the girls decided that as I had been trying to push them out of their comfort zone all morning in the pool they would get their own back. I may have a lot of diving experience, but when it comes to the mechanics of she-wees it was definitely time for me to run away and make the tea. More laughing followed me as I retreated. Not one to let me escape so easily, Ali was even kind enough to email me some pictures overnight – lovely....

Day three started at our open water site, where we would be running through all the skills from the pool, plus introducing a few new ones. Lizzie was team captain for the first dive and again the teamwork was well in evidence - this is always a key element in how well the skills are performed. Just to explain for those of you who haven't done the course (yet!): Buoyancy is always easier when you have a visual reference. Once into mid water without a reference most people rely on their computer to indicate whether they are going up or down. So what happens when you can't look at your computer because you are doing something else? That's where good team members are crucial – they become your reference point.



Day three ended with another theory session: nitrox, dive planning and situation awareness. When I give these lectures I always have to be a bit careful not to go on about cave diving too much – difficult when it is one of your passions – but as Lizzie had already done some cave diving in Australia I had an interested audience which was great. As expected there was also more laughing. The girls had clearly been discussing their next ‘let’s make Jamie uncomfortable topic’, the highlight of which was whether decompression is impacted by the menstrual cycle. Thankfully on this day I had my trusty cameraman Tom sitting in on the lectures as well, as it’s always good to have backup when you are outnumbered.

Our final day started in the water again and we had a perfect example of how the video camera improves the education process. The team had all deployed SMBs and were congratulating themselves on how well they had maintained their buoyancy and trim. Somewhat of a surprise to them I was less than forthcoming with my praise, causing a few discontented mutters. However, when I played back the video it was abundantly clear that although the final outcome was successful, they had come within millimetres of disaster without even realising it. A stray loop of line had floated around Kathryn’s reg and it was sheer luck that it came free as the buoy ascended.

So how seriously did they really take this course? The answer is no differently to any other technical course I have run. The pass mark is high, the skills are difficult and whilst I am always trying to ensure you have fun, much of the stress or laughing is generated by the students themselves. Aside from it taking a bit longer to get ready, because of the weight of the equipment, Kathryn, Ali and Lizzie did all of the same skills as a boys only course and were expected to achieve the same level of proficiency. I have always wanted to see more female technical divers and based on the high level of skills demonstrated during this course I can see no good reason why there won’t be soon.

And now having run both boys and girls only courses, how do they compare? Which is more fun? Let’s just say that the other divers who were sharing the dive site on the final day did comment on how much laughter was coming from our group. That’s good - diving should be fun. I definitely had fun and will certainly be running more girls only courses (although girls, now that I’m prepared, you’ll have to try harder for the uncomfortable theory discussions.....)