

Course Report: GUE Fundamentals, 10-18th October 2009

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GUE classes are some of the most standardised dive instruction currently available to students around the world. All GUE instructors have passed very rigorous training and examination criteria so you can expect them to teach exactly the same skills to exactly the same standards, in exactly the same gear configuration no matter what country you are in. But regardless of how standardised the classes, each one is always different because of the mix of personalities, aspirations and experience of the students. That is one of the reasons why I love teaching.

This course was also different because it was my first class with 4 students, as well as the first time I had run the class split over 2 weekends rather than 4 days back to back. It was also the first time that I would be teaching a student who had taken the class before and the first time I had some students doing the course in single tanks. For Tony it was also the first time he would be using a back-plate, apart from a couple of pool sessions the previous week. With this many firsts I was interested to see how things would work out.



However having said that all students are different, there are certain things that you can always expect at least one of the team to do. There is also a common emotional trend or rollercoaster that most teams have to work through. Let me explain:



Before the course starts there is usually some apprehension. This is a course that people do not always pass first time, a concept which is hard for some to accept. As well as some excellent information available on the internet there is also a lot that is inaccurate or intentionally trying to scare-monger. As an instructor I always expect at least some of the team to “have heard” that I am going rip off their mask whilst at the same time turning off their air supply and still expect them to maintain perfect buoyancy and trim. Putting students at ease and dispelling such myths always comes first. Amazingly, even having done the class previously, Astrid still had a dream the night before about me causing chaos with her equipment.

The next situation that always amuses me is when I show the skills videos during the morning of the first day. By this point in the class everyone has relaxed a bit and the divers on film make the skills look easy. Often I get comments like “Is that all we have to do?” or even better the students start picking up on all the tiny errors. This group of 4 was no different, pointing out such things as slightly lazy feet during the helicopter turn or a tiny difference in sequence during the valve drill. One of the class even asked “What’s hard about sharing gas as you ascend? Once you’re sharing gas how can it be stressful?” All I had to do was ask a couple of ‘difficult’ questions and I immediately created some stress - and that was just in a lecture! (If you’ve done the course before try to stop laughing.) As always I want my students to aim for perfection – but so far no one on any of my Fundies classes has ever managed to make their first skills demonstration look as smooth as the filmed divers. Even by the end of the class there is still a long way to go for most students before they look that comfortable.

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Day two started with the swim test, fin kicks on the surface, some dry runs of the skills and then the first proper water session. As expected the team found the seemingly easy skills hard to master, especially when maintaining their positions relative to the other team members. It seemed that every time one of them was ready to demonstrate a skill another team member would drift up or have crept forward so far that they needed to swim around in a big circle to get back in position. (Back kicks guys, back kicks!) Even with only a few skills to complete on each dive we were hard pressed to achieve everything within our gas limits.

After the dive the team's mood was very sombre. I see it every course. The stress at the start when they expect me to do my worst taniwha impression, followed by the relief when they see the videos and then the devastation when they realise that they have totally underestimated the skills shown by the video divers. On the way back to the classroom there was a definite lack of desire to watch the video debrief. They didn't say it, but the look in their eyes was unmistakable – 'I'm never going to pass this course.' On most courses I know that there is always at least one student seriously contemplating whether to even turn up the following day. Thankfully the video usually shows them doing better than they thought and the feedback is straightforward. In this case: Astrid get your head up. John stop positioning yourself 1m above the team. Peter work on your trim. Tony work on your buoyancy.

Having taught many courses before the other thing that I know is that despite the first water session usually being a disaster in the eyes of the students things do click into place on dive sessions 2 and 3. Skills that seemed impossible suddenly start to work. I was confident that the same pattern would emerge for this team as well.

The afternoon on the second day was more theory and discussion, although the mood was less light-hearted than the day before. Unsurprisingly as we concluded the course on this first weekend everyone was talking about diving mid-week in order to get some more practice. My recommendation was to work on team skills. Individually they were picking up the various kicks and manoeuvres, but when they had to do them as part of a team where everyone else was also moving – well lets just say it was fun to watch.

During the week Peter, John and Astrid had managed to arrange a practice session so when we reconvened for the second weekend everyone was feeling a bit more positive. We started with more dry runs and then the second water session. As always there was an improvement from the first water session, so my debrief becomes more focussed. I always run through TEAM, BOUYANCY, TRIM to start, but once these begin to fall into place I can point out the more critical steps of things like the valve drill and s-drill. Importantly team communication and positioning was improving so we were running through the skills at a faster pace.

The theory on day 3 – decompression and nitrox - can be a bit heavy after a long dive session, so I'm always on the lookout for glazed eyes. Having done Dive-Master classes with me before I intentionally gave Tony and Astrid most of the harder questions in order to keep them awake. I was pleased to see that they had remembered most of what I had taught them.

Sunday morning was our last water session and before the dive I laid out exactly what improvements I needed to see from each student. By this stage in the class I have already introduced all the skills so all we are doing is practicing and refining technique. Generally the progression that was shown between dive session 1 and 2 continues





into session 3 and this group did not disappoint. Whilst everyone still finished knowing that they had lots of stuff to work on, the mood is always brighter on the last day. There was even some laughter after the dive. Importantly everyone had improved and they knew it – they also knew that they wouldn't be criticising the divers on the video quite so quickly in future.

The class ended with the theory exam, which always provokes much discussion. Having survived the water sessions no one wanted to fail at this stage and I was pleased to see that I had managed to keep them awake through all of the theory sessions.

Congratulations: Astrid and John TEC PASSES; Tony and Peter REC PASSES.