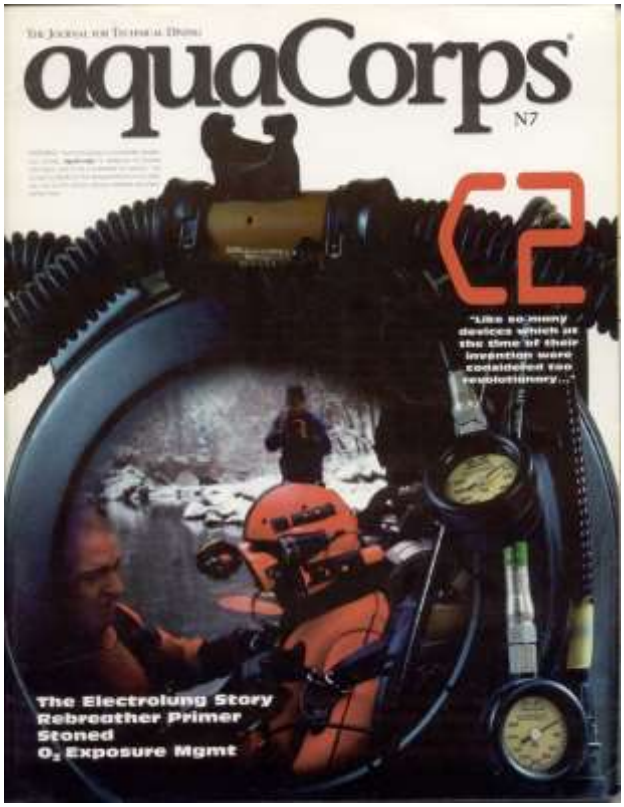

What defines a "Tech" Diver?

Jamie Obern

Just over two decades ago a Californian named Mike Menduno (often known simply as M2) launched a new magazine, '*aquaCorps: The Journal for Technical Diving'*. At the time Skin Diver magazine had labelled nitrox as 'The Voodoo Gas' and both deep diving and decompression diving were considered by most training agencies as completely taboo. M2's aim was to bring together the fledgling technical diving community, to share the latest knowledge and to organise industry wide standards in order to combat the skyrocketing accident rate. Although cave diving and wreck diving had been established for many years, M2 is the man most people credit with coining the phrase technical diving and bringing together the various activities commonly listed under the 'tech diving' umbrella.

In 1990 when aquaCorps was first published, the separation between 'rec' and 'tech' divers seemed pretty clear. The tiny group of divers we identified as 'tech divers' were tackling dives far beyond anything the 'rest of us' could achieve, but today this distinction is not so clear. It seems to me as I read the latest dive magazines, that the division between the recreational and technical worlds has become so blurred it is now just an argument in semantics. Twenty years ago tech divers were viewed by the mainstream as dangerous, demented or geeky, today they are the coolest kids on the block. Not surprisingly many divers and instructors are now jumping on the 'tech diving bandwagon', without in my opinion, ever having done a true technical dive. But does this really matter?

The first problem is that as soon as you start trying to define something very precisely, you lose the essence of what you are describing. For instance is tech diving about depth? A dive where you spend 30 minutes at 40m is clearly a technical dive, but what about a bounce dive to 50m on a single tank? OK so maybe it is about incurring a mandatory decompression stop – but is 5 minutes deco a technical dive? What about 6 minutes or 7 minutes? Maybe we should consider dives into an overhead environment, but is a trust-me / guided dive into Taravana Cave or a gentle tour through a purposely sunk wreck like the Canterbury really a tech dive? And it is definitely not about the kit you wear, as a dive to 6m in Lake Pupuke with double tanks or side-mount is hardly technically challenging. The point I am trying to make is that *any* dive can be called a 'technical dive' and unfortunately in order to sell classes *any* dive often is.

Which brings me back to my initial question – does it really matter? The answer is both yes and no.

If I am planning a dive with another diver I do not care whether they think of themselves as a technical diver or not, all I care about is what they are capable of underwater. Similarly if I am taking a class with an instructor I don't care how that instructor is described on their website – all I care about is what they can teach me. Sounds simple doesn't it? And it is simple once you are an experienced technical diver and have enough

knowledge to properly judge, but when you are just starting out you are entering a minefield. I find it a somewhat painful experience to watch other instructors high-fiving their students, praising them on having completed their 'first tech-dive', when all they have done is clipped a stage bottle to their BCD and swum around in 3m of water. Don't get me wrong, you have to start at the beginning and it is important to be enthusiastic and encouraging as the instructor – I just prefer a little less hype.

So at the risk of sounding grumpier and more cantankerous than usual, here is my list of what defines a real tech diver or tech instructor.

1. You need to go diving

If you want to be considered a technical diver by other technical divers then you need to do actual technical dives. Taking a stage bottle when it isn't necessary, doing a few stops during an ascent, bouncing to a maximum depth and then spending the rest of your dive much shallower, or having a handheld dive with a far more experienced diver are not technical dives in my opinion. The technical divers I respect are all doing very challenging dives – either very deep, or very long, or involving complicated penetrations into the overhead environment.

2. Equipment

All the best technical divers I know own their own equipment, know how it works inside and out and generally how to fix it, or at least make it work for longer enough to do the dive and get back to shore. They usually have garages full of discarded gear and tool boxes containing dental pics, christolube and a multitude of O-rings. You don't have to be a complete gear-nerd, but as tech diving is a very equipment intensive sport it is almost impossible to become an experienced tech diver without picking up a lot of knowledge along the way.

3. Theory knowledge

Good technical divers understand far more about decompression theory, physics and human physiology than a typical recreational diver. You don't need to be able to design your own gas blending software or decompression spreadsheet, but concepts such as oxygen toxicity, hypercapnia and gradient factors should be familiar. Good technical divers don't just do a class and then promptly forget everything – they keep their knowledge current.

4. In-water skills

Competent technical divers also have skill levels beyond the typical recreational diver. Buoyancy, trim, finning techniques, gas-switches, SMB deployment, line work and many more – a good technical diver is committed to maintaining and improving their in-water skill set. As a tech instructor I am interested in what you can achieve safely, time after time after time – not what you might have done once when everything just happened to go ok.

5. Limitations and abilities

A responsible tech diver knows their limitations and understands how far they can push a dive and when to pull back. A successful tech diver trains and builds experience, so the range of dives they can tackle expands. You can't expect all dives to go perfectly, but a smart tech diver will analyse where things went wrong and work out how to do things better next time.

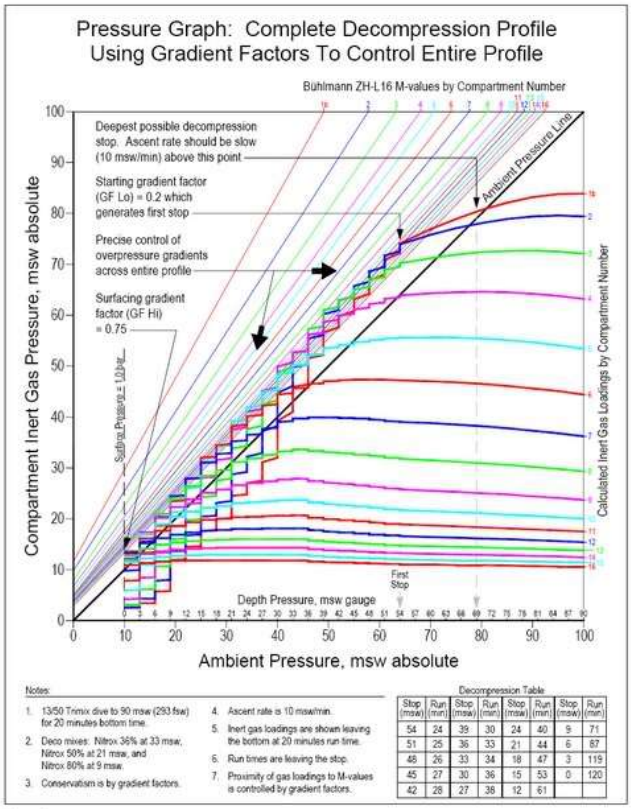

Figure 3

6. Goals and achievements

All of the technical divers and instructors I most respect have a list of goals and achievements. Clearly it takes time to build an impressive list of achievements, but having some goals when you first set out goes a long way to keeping you on track. And I'm not talking about wishes and fairy-tales, or the ephemeral bucket list of 100's of 'I'd love to do that'. A real goal is something you are committed to, have a plan for achieving and one which you are actually working towards.

7. You STILL need to go diving

Yes I'm repeating myself, but only because this point is so important. You can have the greatest theory knowledge, the largest amount of equipment, demonstration quality skills and a wonderful fairy-tale list of dives 'you are definitely going to do…', but if you don't get out there and do some real, challenging, exciting, difficult, well planned and executed technical dives then you are not a tech diver!

In the end it all comes down to respect. Adoration by the masses is nice and might be helpful to a fledgling dive business in the short-term, but respect from your peers counts for far more and lasts far longer. And when all is said and done, the bottom line is whether you have self-respect. If you really want to know whether you are a tech-diver or not, then simply look critically at yourself in the mirror.