

Fundies for rebreather divers – 17-21st January 2013

Jamie Obern

Clubs, cliques, clans, tribes – call them what you will, but divers like to be part of a group. And all groups share a common identity. This may be due to the type of diving you enjoy e.g. wreck diving or photography; it may be due to geographical location, shop affiliation, training agency or even equipment configuration. Certainly GUE divers are known to seek out the company of fellow GUE divers and rebreather divers are no different. Here in New Zealand ‘The Brethren’ are easily identifiable with their red hats and ‘Yellow-Boxes-of-Death’; oops managed to let some open circuit biases show through there – sorry. Of course my own clique of divers is also very easily identifiable through the entirely sensible and commonly adopted practice of wearing our masks backwards on our heads when not in use. (For some reason, this seems to drive a few others a bit nuts – even my lovely wife!) However, the important thing to remember is that despite our differences we are all divers, with a love of the underwater world – and this should bring us together.



As hinted at above there is plenty of banter between different groups of divers and amongst technical divers here in Auckland the gentle (ish) ribbing between open circuit and rebreather divers is a common staple of boat journeys and evenings in the pub. The open circuit guys snigger about missed dives due to ‘O₂ sensor issues’ and the rebreather guys laugh at the noisy bubble blowers burning through helium as though there wasn’t a world shortage. However, for my latest Fundies class these differences were put aside and a group of Inspiration rebreather divers returned to open circuit for 5 days of ‘basic’ training.

On the surface this possibly seems a counter-intuitive step – why does an accomplished diver who has moved onto diving with a rebreather need to come back to do a seemingly very basic open circuit class, focussing on buoyancy, trim, finning techniques and various other skills all covered in basic training? Over the last few years plenty of people have asked me this question and generally I give the same answer - I suggest you ask anyone who has completed the class – to them the answer is blindingly obvious.



The difference with Fundies is the level of precision, the amount of concentration required, the immense focus on teamwork and the attention to detail. Yes many other classes require you to perform the same skills, but the key is to do them whilst neutrally buoyant, in trim and whilst maintaining position relative to your other team-members. But is an open circuit class really applicable for rebreather divers? I know it is – but if you are still in doubt here are a few examples from this latest class which show why Fundies is perfect for everyone.

Pre-dive planning: Before we got into the water each dive was discussed; a team captain was nominated, a dive plan was formulated, signals were reviewed and a talk through of the dive was done – including how divers would position themselves to make each skill as smooth as possible. As the course progressed the team got better and better at planning and their performance underwater improved as a result; communication was clearer and less time was wasted with divers out of position.

Diving as a team: Diving with a buddy is not the same as team diving. Diving as a team means making sure you are contributing to the team and trying to make everyone's life easier. At the start of this class everyone adopted their preferred dive positions, the most obvious culprit being Marty, who likes to hover above everyone else. The problem with this position is that it makes communication difficult if the other team members are close to the bottom and in trim – they cannot easily look up to exchange hand or light signals.



Equally if team members shine their lights around wildly by continually using their hands for positioning (no names mentioned), always position themselves in the blind spot behind other divers or keep losing concentration and start forgetting about the team – each of these things leads to frustration in other team members and diminished team performance. The best example of team breakdown was our very first descent in open water – instead of using the line as a reference everyone sunk at different rates, without any effort to maintain formation – the result, several minutes of chaos on the bottom before I thumbed the dive and suggested we start again.

A good team formation is a beautiful thing

Specific skills: Regardless of whether a diver is using an open circuit configuration or a rebreather certain skills are common. Maintaining buoyancy, trim and balance, propulsion techniques to minimise silting, positioning techniques (back-kicks & helicopter turns), light communications and managing the canister light cord, precise control of depth during ascents and descent, deploying an smb – there are many more but you get the picture. During the class we practised all of these things plus the other more open circuit specific skills such as s-drills and valve drills.

Again I know some people will point out that all of the examples above can be found in other classes; yes they can, but not throughout the entire class. During Fundies classes there is no tea-break time underwater, no pause whilst you do nothing and watch others doing skills. From the moment you enter the water, even beforehand really, you are working on team and personal skills – and in the beginning, before these skills become natural, it is hard. As Peter said after one particular dive, “I can't believe how tired I am after only 60 minutes in the water. I can do 3 hours on the breather, but the concentration required for these dives is just so intense.....”

In the end however, no matter much effort I put into a class as the instructor, the results depend mainly on the attitudes and motivations of the students and I have to admit to being more than a little nervous before starting this class. The class is always tough on everyone and I was worried that when one or more of the group had their ‘bad’ dive (it happens on all classes) I would start to hear excuses such as “well this isn't really applicable to me”, or “we'd never do this normally”. But I need not have worried. This was a very attentive, very motivated class, without excuses and with lots of questions. Yes we talked about how certain skills might change slightly with rebreathers, but for every skill everyone put in the maximum of effort. As an instructor I can ask for no more. In fact I'm looking forward to me next GUE Fundies (rebreather) class.