

MY BUDDY

THE HAND-FIN DIVER

FEATURE **PATRICK VAN HOESERLANDE**

As a diver, I am not accustomed to enjoying my sport with a buddy with disabilities. For a long time, I was convinced that you had to be in an almost perfect physical and mental condition to practice our underwater sport safely.







Diving with my buddy today means that I must step out of my comfort zone. And no, I am not talking about my dive capabilities. Although I cannot imagine how the dive will look, I am confident that the underwater activities will be well within my diving skills. The challenge stands on an emotional level. Outside diving, I rarely come into contact with people with physical disabilities. If the situation does arise, I do not know how to behave. Do I need to help them overcome their difficulties? Does that not emphasise on being 'different'? How do I best help? Or should I pretend to be with someone without a disability?

As a diver, I am not accustomed to enjoying my sport with a buddy with disabilities. For a long time, I was convinced that you had to be in an almost perfect physical and mental condition to practice our underwater sport safely. When I first read about diving with a disability, I was struck with amazement followed by incredible admiration. During my time as a youth dive school manager, we often dived at the same place as the Antwerp Wet Wheels, a dive school for divers with disabilities. We had a verbal agreement on the coordination of the use of the stairs as easy access to the water. As a result, youth and Wet Wheel-divers could enjoy their sport with mutual respect and understanding. An extra, not unimportant lesson for my youthful underwater enthusiasts.

I myself however, had not yet logged a dive with a buddy with a disability. Today that will change. Frankly, I do not feel comfortable.

The dive site is not unknown to me, but I have to familiarise myself around the grounds to find the Dive+ dive school members from Ostend. Maybe my discomfort with the impending confrontation has something to do with this? After a short telephone conversation, I walk over to the place of rendezvous. I immediately see that I am in the correct spot: a wheelchair not far from the waterfront undoubtedly indicates that this is the place to be. Jan Decrock, the general dive manager, comes towards me and introduces the entire team. After the introduction, we go to find my dive buddy of the day, Frank Devriese.

Frank has paraplegia due to a motorbike accident. When I shake his hand, he is sat on the floor next to his wheelchair. He is already preparing for our dive, while I still have to unload my equipment. He reassures me not to rush as he needs hours to prepare for a 45 minute dive. Jan and Frank make it immediately clear that I do not need to help him. He knows what to do by himself. With over 21 years of experience in this sport, he has developed a routine for getting ready to dive without help. While he methodically works his way through his mental checklist, the other divers and supporters have a good time. I do notice, however, that they keep an eye on Frank and involve him in the conversations.

Before the dive, I go over to talk to my buddy. I do not find any fins amongst his dive equipment. Of course not, he cannot do anything with those. Frank notices that I

am looking for something and hands me his dive gloves. I immediately see that these are no ordinary gloves. There are membranes between the fingers. These gloves are his fins. This is how he manoeuvres underwater. I have always learnt to not use my hands to swim while diving. This rule does not apply to him. Subconsciously, I wonder how he will operate his equipment when he needs his hands for propulsion. How will he manipulate a lamp, compass, BCD... and dive at the same time? Am I supposed to be the dive leader?

We also talk about his paraplegia. After the accident, he went through a dark period. Diving gave him a hobby, which allowed him to be active again and to get in touch with others. He was no longer confined to his wheelchair which gradually led to his mental recovery.

It is time to unload my equipment and prepare for our dive. It is a hot day and my body temperature is rising from putting my wetsuit on. Frank must feel a lot warmer. He has been in his wetsuit since I arrived. Fully equipped, I walk over to ask Jan if there is anything important I must know about diving with Frank, or if anything is expected of me. He answers that there is nothing special. It will be a normal dive. I am not convinced.

I tell my buddy to take it easy. I have time. He asks me who of us will be the dive leader. I'm not sure I hid my surprise from hearing his question. From the perspective of this article he is the preferred dive leader, but it is no



problem if he wants me to take the lead. Frank is happy to take the lead.

With the luxury of full mobility, I tell my buddy that I will wait for him in the cool water. I feel a little guilty for taking advantage of my agility and try to ease my mind by telling myself that a frog perspective will give me a better view of what is happening.

When Frank says that he is ready, the other members of the dive school take action. Some of them are kitted to dive too. Others have come here to help and to enjoy the sun. Three of them pick Frank up, while others carry his material over. They carefully put Frank in the water and help him to strap everything on. Once fully equipped, Frank gives his dive briefing while sitting on a rock. To my surprise, this is a quasi-standard dive briefing. Nothing special for me as a buddy and last diver of our small group. Just to make sure, I ask if there is anything special I need to do. Do I indicate the direction? Take care of the light during the dive? No, none of that is necessary.

The other divers put Frank on his back in the water. He just floats while he checks his equipment. When everything is working properly, he gives me the OK sign. I reply with my OK. He turns and starts the dive, and I follow.

Underwater, I see another Frank. His paraplegia does not bother him at all anymore. I admire his skill to swim with his hands; to manipulate a compass; to regulate his buoyancy; to use his

dive light; to communicate with me, his buddy, while in the meantime enjoying the dive and the underwater environment. All of this, as if it is the most normal thing in the world. As time goes by, I feel more comfortable. I become convinced that this is indeed a 'normal' dive.

After forty minutes, Frank indicates that the dive is over. We ascend together. On the surface, he turns onto his back. His club members help him to remove his equipment and carry him to the side. Frank starts his long return to the wheelchair. While he is doing that, we debrief from this surprising dive and log our experience.

Satisfied, I say goodbye to this jolly gang. To dive with only the use of your hands? Frank is certainly an expert at it. Despite his efforts and patience, he cannot dive without the help of a well-oiled team on the waterfront. This dive with 'my buddy' made a deep impression on me. Thank you, Frank.

I leave the dive site with great admiration for any diver with a disability and the many helping hands that make it possible. Moments like these give a sweet taste to the efforts of going on the road to meet people for this series. I'm so glad I could paint a picture of this little-known dive speciality and allow people like Frank to share their experience and love for diving.

If you know of a diver who should also appear in this series, please send an email over to patrick.vanhoeserlande@nelos.be.



ABOUT MY BUDDY

- Diver:** Frank Devriese
- Year Started to Dive:** January 1997
- Number of Dives:** 879
- Dive Club:** Dive+, Ostend, Belgium.
- Certification:** A rating (for the layman among us, this certification means he has the skills of an efficient dive buddy).
- Other Certifications:** Advanced Open Water, Nitrox, Deep Dive Speciality.
- Special Equipment:** Dive gloves with fins between the fingers.
- Favourite Local Dive Site:** Put van Ekeren.
- Favourite Dive Abroad:** Difficult choice between Egypt, Asia, and the Caribbean.
- Preferred Type of Dive:** Cave and wreck diving because of the diversity of fauna.
- Most Spectacular Dive:** A night dive on the Thistlegorm wreck, Egypt.