

## THE WORLD AS IT IS

### LINE DANCING AND THE BUDDY SYSTEM

Bob Halstead

#### Key Words

Buddies, diving safety, solo diving.

I recently saw a TV promotion for a country music festival. A special attraction was a horse that was shown line dancing in step with a family group all togged up in cowboy gear. I think viewers were meant to be astonished at how smart the horse was and rush off to see this phenomenal animal perform.

To me the horse looked quite ordinary, perhaps a bit bored. I wondered just how smart the line dancers were. We sometimes forget that, by definition, half the population have an IQ less than 100 but this does explain line dancing, TV soap operas and Queensland Workplace diving legislation.

Before you get too upset I have to say that divers are usually quite smart simply because they have to pass a sort of intelligence test in order to get certified. That is correct I think, isn't it PADI? . . . NAUI? . . . NASDS? . . . Hello, where are you?

Well I might as well go the full Monty and offend everyone. I do not know whether it is because I am 190 cm tall and so have a clearer view of the world, but I do tend to see things differently. The Jabiluka mine is just a big clean up operation as far as I am concerned, what would worry me is if they were putting nuclear material into the place instead of taking it out. I consider that pet dogs and cats are colonial vermin, we Australians should be going for walks with Skippy on a lead not Fido. I also think that all religions should be made to prefix their absolute pronouncements with the phrase "It is highly unlikely that this is true, and it is really quite whacko, but we believe ....."

The reason I am rambling on here is that a very silly diving practice has risen from the dead and is being touted again. This is the practice of buddying inexperienced divers with experienced divers. The argument is of course that inexperienced divers are vulnerable (true) and that they therefore will be much safer paired with experienced divers (doubtful). This ignores three things, one, how much less safe this makes the dive for the experienced diver, two, this is instruction NOT using an instructor, and three, it assumes human nature is different from what it actually is.

In other words, "They're Dreamin'!"

I know that the uneven buddy system does not work because I have tried it. The experienced diver either has to sacrifice a dive to care for the inexperienced diver, or leads a dive too advanced for the inexperienced diver. If you actually go diving regularly you know that each dive is incredibly valuable. Generally you have to expend a lot of time, effort and money to get to do a dive and even then nature can work against you with rough seas and poor visibility. The thought of finally successfully getting to the dive site and having to baby-sit a beginner, is an unnatural act. The theory assumes that people behave in good and unselfish ways, and like I said, "They're Dreamin'!"

We train Instructors and Dive Masters to teach, and look after, beginner divers. It is a job, a tough and skilful one at that, and people get paid to do it, as they jolly well should, this is no place for amateurs.

I am no great admirer of the buddy system. It is one of the great mistakes, along with no-decompression diving, that we made in the early days of diver training. We should have ditched it years ago and instead promoted self-sufficient diving and surface support. Alas, it is too late now, the legal risks are too great for instructor organisations and Governments to make the changes.

Nevertheless, if you are going to buddy, it is essential that the buddy be of equal standard and interest. In fact I first defined buddy diving many years ago as follows:-

*The buddy system is the situation which occurs when two divers of similar interest and equal experience and ability share a dive, continuously monitoring each other throughout the entry, the dive and the exit, and remaining within such distance that they could render immediate assistance to each other if required.*

I am flattered that several authors have since borrowed this definition. Many people seem to think that just by putting two divers together they create a buddy system, but a little thought will expose this for the stupidity it is.

After observing some near catastrophic so-called buddy dives, I put my own theory into practice and always tried to buddy inexperienced divers with other inexperienced divers. It worked a charm, the divers did not dive deep, they did not stray far from the boat, they did not have unrealistic expectations about their buddy's ability to rescue them, they surfaced from the dive proud of their own achievement and eager to learn and gain more experience.

I also allowed experienced divers to solo dive, although it must be said this does not mean diving alone

because we always provided excellent surface lookouts and rescue capability. Solo diving was, and is, extraordinarily popular with experienced divers, and particularly marine life underwater photographers, since it allows close experiences with many wild marine animals which would swim away when confronted with pairs or groups of divers. It is an interesting fact that ONLY solo divers ever had close contact with wild dugongs during all the time I was running our dive boats Solatai and Telita.

Mike Ball Dive Expeditions is the only Australian dive operator who can honestly say he caters for all styles of diving at his training facility in Townsville and on board his live aboard fleet, Paradise Sport in PNG, Spoil Sport and Water Sport out of Townsville and Super Sport out of Cairns. If you are a beginner you can get instruction from well qualified professional instructors. If you are qualified but inexperienced you can get a dive guide who is a qualified Dive Master or Instructor to take you diving and be your buddy. That is their job and they get paid for it, you will not be spoiling their dive. If you wish to buddy dive and have a suitable buddy, and the crews will help you meet with like minded divers on board if you came alone, you may do so. And if you are an experienced diver and have a redundant spare air supply such as a pony bottle with independent regulator, you may solo dive.

This is incredible service dedicated to giving divers the best possible experience commensurate with their ability and interest. It provides choice instead of treating every one at the lowest common denominator, and it promotes excellence rather than mediocrity. Mike Ball is a smart operator and I do not think you will ever find him line dancing, with or without a horse.

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*The above paper has been published to encourage debate about diving practices. Readers are encouraged to write to the Editor with their comments, not only on the buddy system but about all diving procedures.*

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