

Debi Diver
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Her name is Debie, and she's just like you and I - at least she was just like you and I until a car wreck put her into a wheelchair for the rest of her life! Before the accident, Debie used to run, swim, dance and dream about the future just like the rest of us; but Debie can't do these things any more, or can she?

I met Debie two years ago at the medical clinic I run. From the moment we met, I sensed her determination to live and adapt to her paraplegia. It seemed almost natural to invite her to enrol in my next scuba course. I guess I wasn't surprised when she said she would love to learn to dive.

After I considered the problems I was letting myself into by offering to teach a paraplegic to dive, I began to look for reasons to back out of my offer. To put it another way, I became somewhat prejudiced. But, Debie was persistent, and her enthusiasm was infectious. Today, I thank Debie for her persistence.

The first problem I anticipated was medical approval; but to my surprise, Debie's physician indicated that just because her legs were paralyzed didn't mean that Debie's health was compromised. She was given unconditional medical approval.

Next I had to evaluate Debie's watermanship. Swimming had been an integral part of her physical therapy after the accident. Without the use of her legs, Debie's arms became the supporting limbs of her body, and swimming helped develop her arms. As a result, she passed her swim test with flying colours.

Now began the real meat of the courses - the pool training. I was fortunate to have a fantastic pool staff who were as enthused as I was about teaching scuba to our handicapped student. Mike Wright, a PADI instructor, and Bussie Melnick, owner of Albuquerque Diver's Den, had enough faith to back me in both the teaching of a handicapped student as well as the choice of this particular student herself. The three of us tossed around ideas on how to adapt Debie to the underwater environment.

Our first pool session taught us a number of lessons about the trim of a paraplegic diver. Debie's legs, which were useless to her, would tend to float anywhere they pleased, upsetting their trim. By the second pool session, we came up with a solution to this problem by creating a set of thigh weights fashioned out of neoprene, velcro, and two pounds of lead shot. When attached to Debie's mid-thigh, her legs stayed just about where they should have been.

After one problem was solved, it seemed another would crop up. Debie's next problem was with the scuba equipment itself. We found that by using a conventional horse collar BC and tank system, Debie would tend to roll over on her back. Mike, Bussie, Debie and I put our heads together again. (It's interesting to note that by this time Debie was the leading authority on the problems she was encountering while adapting to the underwater world). The answer we came up with was a back flotation system.

Within a week, Debie's tank mounted BC was delivered to the Diver's Den. The next water session proved that our idea worked. The tank mounted BC system allowed Debie full freedom of movement underwater. Debie was delighted with the equipment and, from that point on, progressed to her final pool skill without any major difficulty.

From my point of view, Debie had progressed as well as any non-handicapped student. Of course there were some special adaptations that her classmates as well as the instructional staff had to make; such as, helping Debie into the pool from her chair and allowing a little extra time for her to suit up. But all in all, everyone was more than willing to help. I think Debie's participation in the class formed a bond between the students and staff which we will all long remember.

Debie has completed all necessary open water work for her certification. She acknowledges that because of her handicap, there are practical limitations to her diving experiences. She knows that certain procedures have been developed for her, and that in order to safely practice her sport, she must follow these procedures. I have listed below some ideas we developed during Debie's course that PADI instructors who accept the challenge of training handicapped students might use to help develop their own programs.

1. High-top tennis shoes will protect the foot and ankle from injury of rough pool sides and bottoms. I have found that wet suit boots protect the same areas; however, they are all but impossible to put on the student's foot without an elaborate zipper system.
2. Paraplegic students are more susceptible than non-handicapped students to hypothermia because of the nature of their handicap. Therefore, a full wet suit is essential in all water training. Also, a zip-on type suit for the paraplegic diver.
3. As I already indicated, thigh weights help keep the legs down in a simulated swimming position. Weights can be attached using velcro or can be inserted into pockets sewn directly on the wet suit.
4. Back flotation devices tend to work well both on the surface and underwater. The stabilizing vest by Seatec is an excellent system for use by paraplegics.
5. Ping-pong paddles with lanyards attached to the handles and secured around the diver's wrists make excellent "hand fins". When not in use, these "fins" trail from the diver's wrists; and when in use, the diver grabs the handles and used the paddles to propel herself through the water. In addition to the paddles, I have found that a lanyard attached to a buddy's tank allows the handicapped diver to hand on for a ride in certain situations.

I think that every Instructor should give some thought to offering handicapped individuals scuba training. The most important thought to keep in one's mind, however, is the need to instil the principle of diving within the student's own limitations. We as PADI instructors ensure that our non-handicapped students understand this principle, so, why not stress the same principle to a handicapped student? As long as the handicapped student can meet the certification requirements, there should be no reason not to instruct that student. I think that I can safely say from my personal experience, the only difference between training a handicapped and non-handicapped student is the Instructor's attitude towards the student and not the handicap. I urge you to at least consider a training program for the handicapped - I'll guarantee you won't be sorry you did.