



A team
of divers
work-
ing well
together

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and Chris Sterritt

One of the most contentious issues amongst technical divers is the difference between the self-sufficiency and team diving approaches to diving. Like a number of other issues in technical diving, it seems to polarise opinions, often along agency boundaries. This often leads to exaggerated positions that can take on a similarity to religious fundamentalism.

The self-sufficiency mindset is where the diver is fully self-sufficient and approaches the dive with the view that they can perform the dive on their own and would be fully able to complete the dive without a buddy. The approach is summed up by the mindset that if you can't do the dive on your own then you should not be doing the dive at all.

The other approach is team diving where strong team work and cooperation are the focus of the

dive, and you plan to dive with a team of divers, and the team works as a well coordinated whole.

These two approaches seem to have a very different emphasis, and many divers think that they are contradictory. That is, you have to decide whether you have a self-sufficient approach or a team-based approach and that it is a choice of one or the other. Both approaches have their extremists who will go to great lengths to explain why their approach is right and the other approach is wrong.

In some areas, technical diving in the United Kingdom has evolved into a culture of solo diving where many experienced technical divers dive solo. All equipment choices are made on the basis that you will be diving alone or that your buddy will be

of no use. Gas planning is based on the principle that it is impossible or unlikely that your buddy will be any use in an emergency and so all procedures are based on individual action.

The team diving approach also has its extremists who focus on teamwork as the primary goal and consider self-sufficiency to be a sign of weak teamwork. These

divers will only dive with divers who follow the exact same team procedures.

In reality, these two extreme positions are not very realistic, and when taken to extreme, counteract the very point of the principles. This can cause significant problems, as the advocates of self-sufficiency can refuse to see some of the benefits of team

diving, whereas the advocates of team diving refuse to see any benefit in self-sufficiency.

Self-sufficiency vs solo diving

In particular, the principle of self-sufficiency does not mean the same thing as solo diving. For example, pioneering technical diving instructor Kevin Gurr

What are the differences between the self-sufficiency and team diving approaches to technical diving?



One for all or all for one?

says, "Assume all dives are solo dives; do not get into the water if you feel you can't do it without someone else to rely on." This is a clear endorsement of the self-sufficient approach, and many people have taken this to be a recommendation for diving solo. However, Gurr then goes on to say, "This does not mean you should not dive in a team;



You may have to finish a dive without your buddy



you should. Be prepared to be separated and to have to look after yourself." Similarly, those who advocate team diving do not mean that you should not be able to deal with situations on your own or need to rely on your team.

Two sides of a coin

So despite initial impressions, the self-sufficient and team diving approaches are not as contradictory as they might at first seem. In fact, they are just two sides of the same coin.

The best technical divers obviously have to have good individual skills. Building on your own level of buoyancy control, familiarity with kit and ability to deal with dif-

icult situations are fundamental for anyone wanting to progress in technical diving. No diver who has thought about this question for more than a millisecond would ever suggest anything less.

Team sports such as football, rugby or cricket are a perfect example of the team approach, but players still ensure that they work on their individual skills. Players with weak individual skills would never make it into the team in the first place.

Diving with someone who is not self-sufficient is not team diving. If one of the team cannot deal with an emergency situation, then they are going to weaken the overall team rather than strengthen it. This means that self-

sufficiency is clearly a prerequisite for team diving.

The self-sufficiency extremists however go further than this. They claim that all divers should be self-sufficient because you can never rely on a buddy to provide any assistance in an emergency. They will often cite examples of where an individual buddy has not been able or willing to provide assistance in an emergency, and from this conclude that no buddy will ever be able to provide assistance. Furthermore, they argue that a poor buddy might cause an incident that would not have happened had you been on your own. As such, their argument is that it's better to be completely solo and never have a buddy

than to have a poor buddy.

In some ways, this argument has some merits in recreational diving, as there are a whole range of abilities. Inexperienced or out-of-practice divers can certainly fit this description, and many instructors and dive guides will tell you that they feel safer on their own.

Certain recreational training agencies even support the concept of solo diving in the recreational area and provide training courses on self-sufficiency and solo diving.

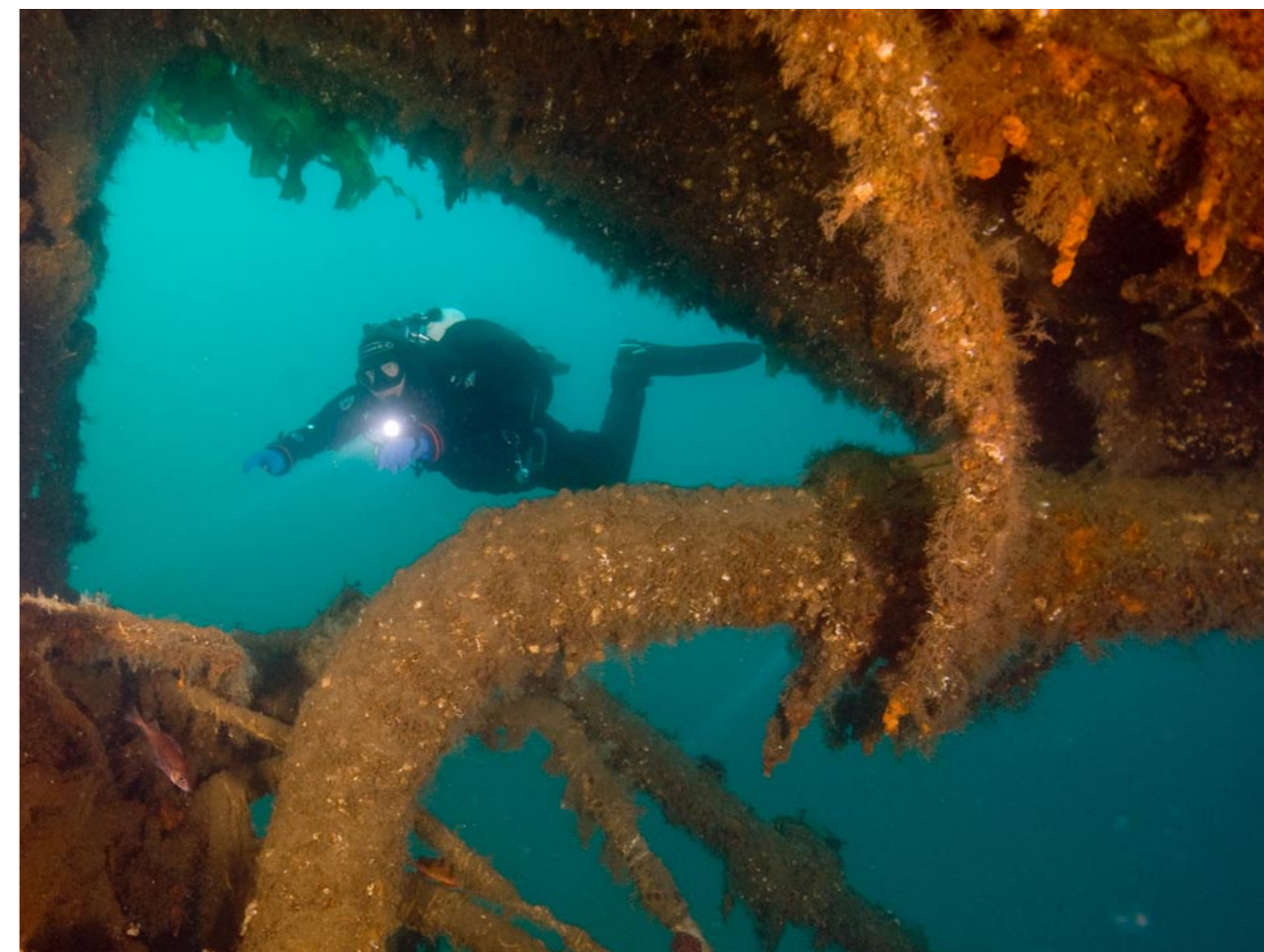
However, this argument breaks down for technical diving. At this level, any divers undertaking these types of dives require a higher level of skill and abilities. Divers who are unable to help their buddy are clearly operating at the limits of their own ability and so do not have enough self-sufficiency to undertake that dive, whether they are alone or with a buddy.

Self-sufficiency in a team environment

The best approach then is to aim for self-sufficiency within a team environment. Each diver should have enough capacity to resolve any problems they may have and have enough spare capacity to be able to offer assistance to the

other members of their team. If their buddies also have enough capacity to resolve their own problems and have enough spare capacity to be able to offer assistance to the other divers, then you have a very strong team.

The strongest teams usually consist of experienced individual



It is essential to be self-sufficient



tech talk

Some agencies allow solo diving for recreational diving



divers with good self-sufficiency and self-awareness skills that have practiced working together in a team. Training and practice are essential in order for team diving to work successfully. Each member of the team should have similar views, so they are following the same general approach.

In addition, good teamwork only comes with practice. You can see this with national sports teams. Each player is amongst the best player in the country yet, unless they train together as a team, they will not be able to perform well as an effective team.

When team diving is carried out by experienced, trained divers then it is a very safe way of diving. In the case of a problem, you have more options available to help out; more

gas available, more chance of spotting the problem and more ideas on how to solve it.

In the case of an incident, one member of the team can be initiating a rescue while the other sends up a delayed SMB and another provides a visual reference to ensure the rest of the team can maintain depth.

It is when problems occur that the benefits of diving in a team

become apparent.

Of course, this is very easy to say. Of course, this raises the question that if self-sufficiency within a team environment is the goal, how come it is not that common? The reason for this is that it's not easy to develop these two aspects.

Time and effort

The time and effort required to master your own skills to the point where you are truly self-sufficient and then the additional time and effort required to maintain those skills is more than most people can commit to. We all have jobs, families, other hobbies and commitments, which are all competing for our time.

It is entirely feasible to be a recreational diver and just dive a few times a year on holiday or

go quietly, amid the noise and haste...

[3 hours @ 20m - no deco]




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A buddy can be very useful in an emergency

Image by Ray van Eeden of Prodivers, Kuredu, Maldives

You need to invest time and effort to develop your skills

on a couple of dive club trips. However, this is not the case for technical diving. If you are involved in decompression diving, trimix or rebreathers, then it is essential to ensure that you put in sufficient practice to build up and maintain your skills.

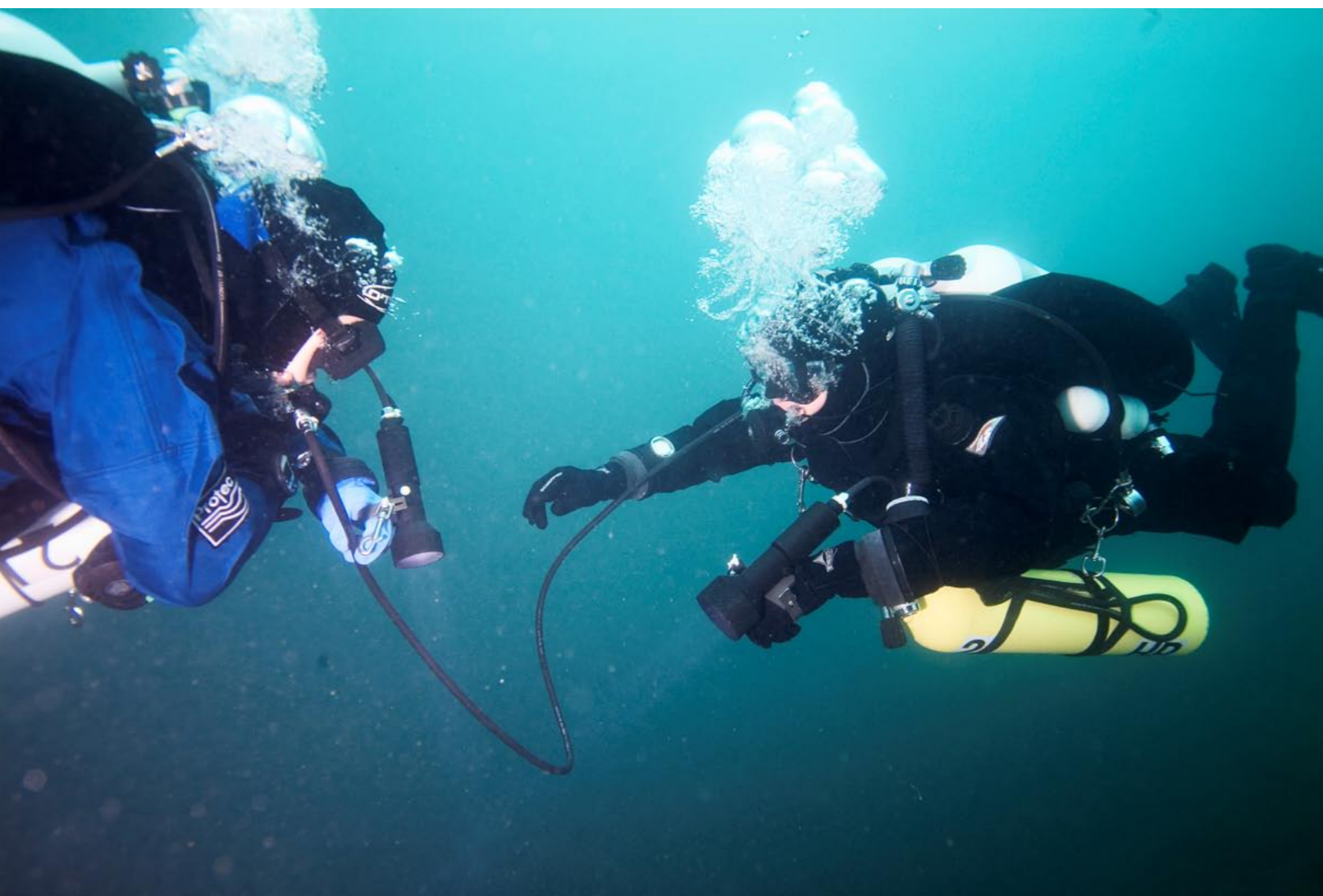
Some people may take to diving more easily than others, but no one is born with all the skills

and knowledge they need to become a technical diver. There are some people that may have more innate cricketing skills than others, but if you want to play for one of the premier league teams, you will need to put in a huge amount of practice in order to refine your skills and reach the level required. Once you have reached that level, you then need to put in

even more effort to maintain those skills.

The development of a strong team also requires time and effort. If it is difficult to ensure that a single person can dedicate the time and effort, it is even more difficult to gather a group or team to practice together.

The individual commitments of each team member and the



Strong individual divers in a strong team is the safest option



logistics of getting them together can be difficult. However, the same principle applies. If you want to become a true technical diver, then it requires a certain commitment in terms of time and effort. Irrespective of how good a cricket player is and how much time they spend working on their individual skills, they spend more time in team training.

Alternative approaches

It is because developing strong self-sufficiency skills and teamwork require such a commitment that alternative approaches have sprung up. If individual divers and their buddies do not have the individual or team skills required, they take alternative approaches to try to overcome these problems.

Teamwork is made more prescriptive, so that it removes the

emphasis on the individual diver. Alternatively, teamwork is ignored all together and divers adopt a solo diving mentality. Each of these approaches might seem easier in the short term and more appealing to those who cannot commit the time and effort to develop their individual and team skills, but it is a poor solution to the problem.

In the case of emergencies, the lack of personal skills and self-sufficiency can cause problems for you and any buddies you are loosely teamed up with. Equally, the lack of team skills may cause confusion and often makes the situation worse. So even though those alternatives might seem more attractive in the short term, and maybe acceptable for the majority of divers where nothing goes wrong, they are a poor long term solution, as they can fall

apart in times of emergency.

There is no getting away from the fact that for technical diving there is a need to invest time and effort in developing your personal skills and your team skills to a higher level than is normally required for recreational diving. Playing cricket in the park with our kids, or in a pub team is great fun. In this environment you will sometimes find very good players, but the level of play is nowhere near the same level as in the Premier League. As technical divers, we should use Premier League cricket as our model, rather than a game in the park or the occasional pub team game. ■

For more information on any aspect of technical diving contact Mark Powell at www.dive-tech.co.uk