Diving Couples
The joys of sharing, the perils of dependency

By Lynn Laymon & Linda Lee Walden

Scuba is a genuinely rewarding experience, and it's even better if you share it with someone you love. This may be the reason why diving now attracts a close to equal number of participants from both sexes, many as diving couples. They're ready-made buddy teams. During our travels, we've had the opportunity to meet literally thousands of other fascinating diving couples. All of them had two things in common: a love for each other and a love of the sea.

The joys of scuba extend well beyond immediate gratification; they can be relived over and over again. On a cold, rainy day when midwinter depression is about to set in, diving couples gather around the fireplace and rummage through their logbooks, recalling the intimate details of each dive. And the men test their senses by viewing their
last trip's underwater photos or video footage. It's a unique sharing experience that only scuba offers.

Scuba is a lifelong recreational activity. Unlike many other sports, it's something that can be enjoyed together well beyond retirement age. We once met a diving couple in Bonaire who were in their mid-seventies. Although they're now more selective about conditions and conservative about profiles, these seniors have been diving regularly for over 20 years and have no plans to stop. We were mesmerized listening to them talk about the diving adventures they've shared — a perfect example of the joys of being a diving couple.

Jim and Lori Onalfo of Reno, Nev., offer another example of the benefits of sharing the scuba experience. Jim's been diving for 10 years, but only with his buddies. Just last year, Lori became interested and enrolled in a class. Now they dive as an inseparable buddy team. During her 25 dives, Jim has been Lori's only buddy. "Diving together has definitely strengthened the bond between us," they both agree. "We have the utmost confidence in each other, both below and above the water." This is a sentiment shared by many diving couples.

Most will agree that diving with your closest companion is a rewarding experience. But some fail to realize that while diving you can't always interact with each other in the same manner you do in everyday social situations. This became clearly evident on a recent dive charter.

**How Diving Couples Interact**

As we looked around the boat, there were faces from all walks of life: a lawyer and her traveling companion, a retired couple, newlyweds from New Jersey, and an assembly line worker from Ohio and her boyfriend who had recently been laid-off from the same factory. Some were seasoned divers, a few hadn't been in the water for a while, and the laid off Buck-eye was newly certified and doing his first warm-water diving.

Observing the interactions within the respective diving pairs was an interesting phenomenon. Most were thrilled to be on the charter, a few displayed slight pangs of apprehension, and one diver was disguising her fear with casual disinterest.

As the couples assembled their equipment, we began forming first impressions of how scuba impacts their lives and relationships. The retired couple's gear was packed in one bag. The husband began rummaging through it, removing several items at a time. When all of the gear was scattered in a disorganized pile on the deck, he began assembling both sets. The Mrs. stood idly by watching him work, as if observing a craftsman at a swap meet.

At one point there was a question as to which regulator went on whose BC. That was easily decided when the wife recalled, "That one is yours 'cause it has the octopus. Re-

Dive trips are more fun when shared with a close companion.

member, you said I wouldn't need one."

The newlyweds went about the task of equipment assembly in a systematic and organized fashion. They each had a gear bag which was kept tucked neatly beneath the seats until they were informed that it was time to assemble equipment. Each item was carefully removed from the bag and immediately set up. When each scuba unit was assembled and tested, they changed places and tested each others' gear. It was like watching a textbook video.

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“No, let me show you,” quipped the lawyer to her traveling companion. He had asked if his buoyancy compensator was positioned correctly on the tank. “And then the regulator goes like this,” she continued while doing it for him. By the time she was done, her companion was set to dive and hadn’t done any of the work himself. And from his pouty expression, he didn’t totally appreciate her attempt to “show” him, either. After all, even though he hadn’t dived for a while, he was certified.

The juices of anticipation began to flow during the dive briefing. The newlyweds stood holding hands as the divemaster explained the profile and how to get on and off the boat. As he described the marine life they might encounter, wide smiles broke across their faces. Just the thought of sighting a manta ray made them tingle with excitement.

The Ohioans listened intently, their enthusiasm building with every word. The attorney was busy interpreting everything that was said. As the divemaster spoke, she would expand upon each point. Her companion made a gallant effort not to offend either her or the divemaster. He did his best at absorbing two simultaneous monologues. The end result was that he knew little about the profile, what was expected of him, or what he might see on the dive.

The retired couple had little reaction to the briefing. He paid close attention while her stare was fixed on the distant horizon. She was interested in what was being said, but knew that for her, diving was the process of following her spouse. We later discovered that, although they had been diving for years, she experiences sheer panic before every dive. She has never felt totally comfortable or confident in the water but enjoys it once down.

As the diverse buddy teams began entering the water, we continued to observe. The attorney and her companion went first. She performed an acceptable giant stride, and from the water immediately began shouting instructions to her companion. The newlyweds were next. Still holding hands, they entered the water in unison.

The retirees caused a brief delay while he defogged her mask and helped don the weightbelt which she had forgotten. The Ohioans were next and the divemaster was last in the water.

As the group made its way to the anchor line to begin their descent, it was obvious that certain members were having second thoughts. The assembly line worker spent a few minutes convincing her buddy that he would have a great dive and there was nothing to fear. She finally took his hand, and down the anchor line they went.

The attorney and her buddy were also experiencing difficulty. Once the divemaster gave the OK to descend, she began heading for the bottom. Her buddy, fearful of being made a spectacle of again, followed close behind. But he had forgotten to let the air out of his BC. He made it down a few feet before being buoyed back to the surface by the captive air. Noticing his predicament, she immediately returned to the surface and grabbed his deflator hose. She depressed the button and down they went.

Underwater, the trends continued. The newlyweds held hands and closely followed the divemaster. The attorney had her hands on her buddy’s inflator button more than on her own. She was constantly adjusting his buoyancy. He never had a chance to do it for himself.

The retirees didn’t do too well, either. At one point, her weight belt was getting loose; she immediately swam to her husband so he could fix it. And when she was dragging the bottom due to having too much weight, she signaled to him that there was a problem. He immediately swam to her side and inflated her BC until she was neutrally buoyant.

The factory workers stayed together — he wasn’t about to let her out of his sight — but became separated from the group. After spending a few minutes searching, they eventually made their way back to the boat and met the other divers who were about to ascend.

Each buddy team exited the water beaming with excitement. The standard first comments to each other were, “Did you see this? Did you see that? Wasn’t that great!” They deluged the divemaster with questions about what they had encountered. There was definitely excitement in the air.

Each buddy team had shared an experience unlike any other, an experience unique to them as a couple. Even Mrs. retiree was enthusiastic. She had seen her first octopus. The
dive master had discovered it midway through the dive and let each diver have a close look. Each person said and looked as if they had truly enjoyed the dive. We were delighted to see their excitement, but we had to ask ourselves if our new-found friends could have enjoyed that dive even more?

**Dependent Diver Syndrome**

The majority of recreational divers agree that scuba is a team sport; two buddies diving together. This approach provides a safety net. If one diver experiences a problem, the other is there to help. But based on that premise, scuba is also an independent sport. To help your buddy, you must first be able to help yourself. Both divers need to be prepared to assume responsibility for the team at any time.

This, however, is not always the case with diving couples. Although they're ready-made buddy teams, there is an inherent danger in relying on their closest companions. Because of the way couples interact with each other in everyday life and the fact that they're so comfortable together, it's easy for them to become dependent, as we observed on the boat.

Would you want to buddy with the attorney or her traveling companion? Probably not. Though he could be a good diver, whether he likes it or not, she has made him the dependent member of this diving couple. She sets up his equipment, constantly gives instructions, and adjusts his buoyancy in the water. Whenever possible, she does it for him rather than helping.

And what about the retirees? If placed in a situation where she had to do it for herself or help him, could she? Probably not.

The laid-off assembly worker also displays signs of dependency. When they became separated from the group, do you think he had any idea where the boat was? Possibly, but probably not.

All three divers suffer from dependent diver syndrome, a condition often found in diving couples, and one which...
can be unsafe and detract from the overall enjoyment of the dive.

Dependent diver syndrome can be triggered by a variety of circumstances. As with the attorney and her companion, if one partner is overbearing in everyday life, it will often carry over into how they interact as a buddy team. This is especially true if the dominant member is the more experienced diver. In this case, both divers are responsible for one member being, or at least appearing to be, dependent. But the dominant personality is usually the major contributor.

The retirees are a completely different case. The gentleman doesn’t normally exhibit a domineering personality. He assembles his wife’s equipment and controls her buoyancy only out of necessity. She may remember how but lacks initiative. It’s the only way he can get her to dive.

Getting certified in the first place was his idea. The Mrs. wasn’t totally against it, but she never would have thought of it on her own. And she is lured back in everything she does, generally a follower rather than a leader. She enjoys the time spent underwater but is happy to let her husband take all the responsibility. Her diving dependency results from her basic approach to life and his willingness to pick up the slack.

The laid-off Ohioan doing his first warm-water dive was unaccustomed to good visibility and became somewhat apprehensive on the surface. He would have turned back if his buddy hadn’t provided the much-needed encouragement.

This was a critical stage in his diving career; it’s the formative period. His first few dives with his constant companion are when dependent diver syndrome will most likely set in. If she is overbearing like the attorney, or he takes the path of least resistance as does Mrs. retiree, he too could become a dependent diver. Since his buddy is more experienced and willing to show him around, it’s easy to fall into that trap. But if they are both aware of the potential, there are steps they can take to avoid his becoming a dependent diver.

Are you a dependent diver?

Take this simple test to see if you or your partner suffer from “Dependent Diver Syndrome.” (Circle one answer)

1. Do you carry your own gear? ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
2. Do you assemble your own equipment?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
3. Do you take part in pre-dive planning?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
4. Do you defog your own mask?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
5. Do you wear an underwater timing device (watch, computer, or dive timer)?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
6. How frequently do you navigate the dive?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
7. How frequently do you lead the dive?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
8. Do you use a compass? ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
9. Do you maintain your own logbook?
   ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
10. Do you know how much weight you need?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
11. How frequently do you personally monitor surface intervals between dives?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
12. How frequently do you personally calculate your residual nitrogen group and/or no-decompression limits for repetitive dives?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
13. Are you confident of your water skills?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
14. Do you control your own buoyancy?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
15. Could you rescue your buddy? ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
16. How frequently do you practice out-of-air emergencies?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
17. Do you rinse your own gear after diving?
    ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER
18. Do you enjoy diving? ALWAYS OFTEN SOMETIMES NEVER

Scoring: Count 6 points for each question answered always; 4 for often; 2 for sometimes; and 0 for never. Total your scores.

72 or above = You don’t suffer from Dependent Diver Syndrome.
51-71 = You may be a borderline case. Take more initiative in your diving.
36-50 = You are probably a dependent diver. Improve your skills; obtain the necessary equipment; increase your diving confidence.
35 or below = You are definitely a dependent diver. Seek instruction to improve your skills; obtain the necessary equipment; increase your diving confidence.

Compare your score with your partner’s. Even though you may not be dependent, could you be contributing to his or her dependency?

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Avoiding Dependent Diver Syndrome

The first step is avoiding dependent diver syndrome is being aware that such a malady exists. If you recognize it, it can be dealt with. Beyond that, it requires a conscious awareness and effort by you and your buddy. The newlywed diving couple who met on the boat were an excellent example of how to avoid the dependent diver syndrome, yet enjoy the dive and the companionship of each other.

Avoiding the syndrome begins in your open-water class. Although you're a couple, train as independents. You don't need to enroll in different classes; that would take the fun out of it. But while in training, work separately. Assemble your own equipment, do your own homework assignments, have separate books and read them individually.

Having the proper equipment is another important aspect of diving. When purchasing gear, the couple should do so as equals. Often a couple will buy one watch, bottom timer, compass, knife, or computer for the two of them. Like the reefer on the boat, sometimes they even feel that only one alternate air source between them is sufficient. This approach to equipment purchasing not only mandates becoming dependent divers, but is also extremely dangerous.

Once certified, make an effort to maintain individuality in your diving activities. Dive together, of course, but take responsibility for your own diving destiny. Get involved in every aspect of the dive outing. Assemble (unless done by the dive crew) and test your own equipment; listen carefully to the dive briefing, and, if you have questions, ask the divemaster. Defog your own mask, discuss the dive plan and underwater communications procedures with your buddy, and initiate buddy checks. Don't take anything for granted or leave it to your partner.

On the dive, one buddy has to lead, but both parties should navigate. Whether using a compass or natural navigation skills, always be aware of your relative position to the entry/exit point. This is probably the most frequent example of dependent diver syndrome. One spouse leads and the other has no idea where they are or how to get back.

If one partner is more experienced or dives more frequently, the other person should consider taking refresher training after not diving for a while. Spend time in your dive center pool or do a shallow refresher dive under an instructor's supervision before venturing into more demanding conditions. Better yet, participate in the reorientation session together, since "good divers are always training." And continuing with advanced and specialty training is always a good idea.

To avoid being a dependent diver, don't assume that your more experienced partner will take care of you if there are problems. What if he experiences an emergency and needs your help? Every diver should be mentally, physically, and technically prepared to take a leadership role whenever required. In fact, you and your spouse should alternate the leadership responsibility; you lead this dive, he leads the next.

A good way to prepare yourself to handle emergency situations is to enroll in a Rescue Diver course. The skills you learn and water exercises you perform are great confidence builders. Many female divers feel they lack the strength and stamina to perform water rescues. This myth is generally dispelled during rescue training. As told by a 105-pound female rescue diver, "During rescue training, you'll find that if you are physically fit enough to dive, using the techniques taught in the course you'll be able to assist your buddy."