

Tech 1 Class Report - August 2005 - Ft Lauderdale FL

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I spent last week in Fort Lauderdale as one of the students in a Tech One IE.

Logistics

The class was hosted by Brownies Southport Divers. This is an ideal location for training with numerous hotels/restaurants/shops etc. within short walking distance and across a wide variety of price ranges. The only time I got in a car all week was to and from the airport and to the pool for the swim test ! I was staying at The Bridge boat crew lodging less than a minute from Brownies.

Brownies have the boat docked at the rear of the building (setup on the tables out the back and walk your tanks from the dock to the boat) They pump all the GUE standard gases and the shop has any gear you may need. With the classroom across the street, everything you need is right there and this frees time for concentrating on the class without the distraction of travelling between sites or getting fills etc. When you're done diving for the day, there are rinse tanks and lockers for the gear, so no need to carry everything around.

Florida is really hot and humid at this time of the year, so lots of sunscreen and drinks were always close by. The weather was perfect for diving all week with ridiculously smooth seas and gorgeous blue skys, we really had perfect diving weather and were fortunate that the effects of Katrina were not felt into the area until after the class had concluded on Wednesday.

The Class

The class was an IE for Dean Marshall and Martin Lorenzo and they were presenting all the classroom sessions, dry skills as well as the water activities. Of course being an IE the instructors were being evaluated as well, with David Rhea and Jarrod Jablonski filling that roll and providing some great feedback and adding to the information Dean and Martin presented.

The first four days we spent the morning doing a combination of dry runs (line drills, manifold/reg failures etc.) as well as classroom in preparation for the afternoons diving. The classroom work is very through and rigorous, with a substantial amount of material covered and a solid working knowledge and understanding required to get through the classroom, diving and final exam.

The class starts where Fundamentals leaves off, with lectures on Situational Awareness, Gas Management and Planning, Rock Bottom calcs etc. It's all material that Fundamentals students know well, but presented with an eye to where the class is aiming - 150ft decompression diving. Lectures on Oxygen, CNS/OTU tracking and Nitrox round out the material before we start to look at Narcosis, the importance of CO₂, and the introduction of Helium into the breathing mixture with all the benefits it provides. The classroom finished up with detailed lectures on Decompression and Decompression mechanics, looking at each of the three strategies employed and how to shape the decompression curve to maximize the effectiveness of each startegy. Everything we had covered during the week was then brought together and we went over dive planning for Tech One range dives covering all aspects of the plan.

Like skills in the water, having a solid working knowledge of the material from Fundamentals and/or Rec Triox sets the foundation for building the pieces necessary to take things to the next level. The classroom and land sessions move out onto the water from Day One and a working knowledge of the material from Fundamentals is important for optimal performance during both the classroom and dives.

The Diving

I'm sure there is some really nice reef in the Fort Lauderdale area, we saw a bit of it in the first three days, although the amount of "sightseeing" reduced as the week developed with increased task loading and the habit of masks to fail at the most unfortunate times !

The diving was challenging from the beginning and while it started where Fundamentals/Triox leave off, the ability to do all of the basic skills in a controlled, smooth and relaxed manner while remaining in trim and neutrally buoyant is necessary to succeed. Being comfortable in the water and comfortable with your equipment is paramount to success, with the focus of failures and other task loading during the dives quickly bringing your weaknesses out.

As with all GUE training, the emphasis in all the diving was on the performance and communication of the team. While individually each diver needs to be comfortable and skilled, the ability to communicate effectively and concisely as a team, make the right decision and safely execute the plan or abort the dive was where the focus was. While my buddy and I had not dived together prior to arriving in Florida, we developed into a tight team over the week, building on the basic skills and communication from previous classes to work in a cohesive and efficient manner. I believe our prior GUE

training and experience had given us the necessary skills to build on for this class and had us on the same page with equipment, planning and communication to develop into an effective team. It is exciting to think back to where we were as a group that had not dived together at the beginning of the class, and to look at the way we developed over the week as a team; it was an "in your face" example of the importance of the team in getting the most from diving and having everyone on the same page.

Day two was more of the same, although now we were increasing the complexity of the failures and changing ascent schedules etc. to keep us thinking. Like other GUE classes I have taken, we usually had a little time early in the dive for ourselves to check out the reef before all manner of failures started to occur. Today the failures were stepped up and task loading increased. We also had the unconscious and toxing diver rescues.

Day three we added the decompression bottle and started back with the simpler dives of day two, before continuing to where we had finished on day two with multiple failures and a task loaded, timed ascent.

Day Four was two deeper dives (100') on Triox 30/30 with the 50% stage for simulated decompression. Very similar to the final dives on day three, with multiples failures (lights/regs/vales/lift bags/masks/gauges etc.) as well as the switch to deco gas at 70', the timed ascent and continued failures. We got to dive some exciting sandy bottom and check out some lobster traps, all a little boring (compared to the reef) before the failures started and we were ascending.

Each dive was followed with a debrief in the water covering the major points and areas for us to be aware of on future dives. Like all GUE classes, the dives were also video taped for a more through review later where all the details were highlighted and solutions to problems discussed. Having the second set of instructor eyes in the water seemed to make the most difference here, with nothing slipping by that needed to be highlighted and corrected for future dives. It was also an excellent time to pick up on a lot of little "hints and tricks" from all the instructors, those little things that have you looking slicker in the water and make diving that little more comfortable and relaxing - even where you're sharing gas, shooting a bag, and running the deco because your buddy lost their mask. The pretty blue water was gorgeous to dive in and, I just would love to have had my camera !

Dive Five we had our experience dive on the wreck of the Trio Bravo. This was our experience dive and as such there were no planned failures or other harassment from the instructor. The Trio Bravo is a 140ft tug boat resting in just over 150ft to the sand. On the descent, we started to see the wreck around 80ft, the water still a beautiful blue with awesome visibility. We hit the wreck and took off for a lap around before checking out some of the superstructure and the multitude of marine life that have made their home here. After making our way back to the bow, our 20mins were up and it was time to ascend. The downline was moved into the sand and we started our deco moving with the ball, a very relaxed and no hassle dive, certainly a highlight of the week. The boat was right there when we completed the ascent and we were quickly aboard.

Summary

The class was a unique experience and very educational. I have always found GUE training to be very thorough and intensive, coming away from each class with a unique understanding and appreciation for the environment we were diving in and the skills and knowledge required to safely dive in that environment. The importance of diving as a cohesive team with everyone on the same page in regard to all aspects of the dive was something that really clicked for me in this class, extending all the way out to the boat and the importance of involving the boat crew in dive planning and execution (they really are part of your dive team).

If you are considering moving into this type of diving in the future, everything you need to succeed you already have from Fundamentals or Triox - the skills and where the bar is set. It is time to polish them up and get to the point where you are relaxed and comfortable, with communication and responses to problems that are clean, clear and effective. You need to become comfortable doing all the basic skills and ascent/descent drills where the pressure change is going to make your buoyancy the most difficult to control (no more than 20-30ft of water) As David Rhea said all week, "Slow is Smooth, and Smooth is Fast"; start by getting relaxed and efficient with your movement and responses in 20ft and the speed will naturally come.

The additional of the decompression bottle and decompression is really a small (but critical) part of the Tech One experience. I found the emphasis to be on planning and safely conducting a dive, with intense focus on the ascent and failure/task/time management while maintaining an awareness of the environment, your team, what has failed and what you have left (to later fail).

A big thanks to Bryan Palmer, my buddy for the majority of the diving. Bryan had moved down to Florida a few months ago from the NE area so that connection helped us pull it all together. Dean and Martin are both great instructors and did a superb job all week in the classroom, keeping us busy during the dives and made the class both humbling and rewarding. Jarrod and David were our videographers for the class, as well as doing the IE evaluations.