

The HangLine

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Cowboys, VooDoo Gas and Mt Everest

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While back I was asked to write about the trials and tribulations that technical divers had endured back when deep and mixed gas diving was considered a foolish and irresponsible act. In a recently published article I pointed out that many agencies in the recreational dive training industry have withdrawn from incorporating risk analysis and acceptance into their programs. What was not printed in that article was the following opinion I wanted to make regarding the dive training industry;

'There has been a grave irresponsibility by many training agencies and their advocates to teach divers the realities of technical diving because they know nothing about it or it did not meet their financial agenda'.

Less than a decade ago these same institutions set an embargo against any

individual or company attempting to promote Nitrox or technical diving. In fact IAND (now IANTD) was originally prohibited from participating in any significant North American Dive Show because it was feared they were offering some snake oil that was not good for divers.

It is interesting how they have allowed themselves to make these decisions for divers inferring that recreational diving is strictly this and very safe and technical diving is specifically that and very risky. During a discussion regarding insurance coverage, the head of another recreational training agency once referred to technical diving as *'that dangerous shit'*. By implementing maximum depth limits, specific dive equipment and restrictive diver training practices the recreational agencies

This is a reprint from the HangLine published in December 1998. Part Two in a series of 'Looking Back' where despite how long mixed gases and specifically 'normoxic trimix' has been around, many divers still do not take advantage of the benefits. Ironically this message is still very relevant today.





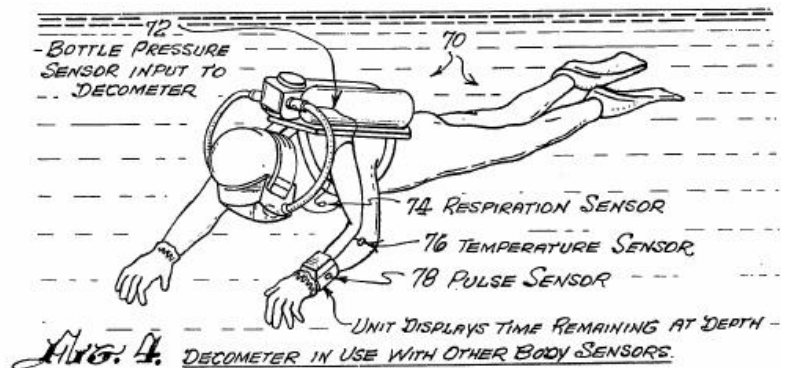
have determined for their students how much risk is acceptable without saying why. And then in a one fowl hypocritical swoop they adopted the very same principals and tools that began so long ago and have always been the fundamental practices for 'technical divers' (for example; Nitrox). Advanced sport diving does require a great deal more training, experience and thought, but it can be just as safe as regular recreational diving activity. Unfortunately the hypocrisy of it all has done it's damage and the bandwagon ride has encouraged too many 'armchair tekkies' to go where they have no right to be with arrogant and over confident attitudes. The result will be a higher-fatalities report giving the technical industry an undeserved rap of unnecessary high risk.

Passions are the winds which fill the sails of the vessel; sometimes they sink it; but without them it would be impossible to make way... Everything is dangerous here below, but everything is necessary. ~ Voltaire 1747

Let's put things into perspective; I have been referred to as a cowboy breathing voodoo gas because I choose to dive twins or quads with Trimix and Nitrox on deep wrecks and in caves. Yet when I do these dives I incorporate extensive dive planning practices, equipment preparation, mental, emotional and physical fitness exercises and draw upon years of training and experience. For me these dives are no more risky than an eighty-foot dive on a wall with a

single tank, and what risk that does exist I am clearly aware of. I once heard a statistic that listed scuba diving and bowling somewhere along the same line in the 'risk' category. Bullshit. As safe as diving might be there have been far more diving fatalities than bowling - in fact I'd be willing to bet my argon bottle that Truth, where does it lie? It is out there but in many different forms. Let's compare a table of no-stop limits from some of the more reputable organizations in the diving industry. From this table we can see how very diverse the interpretations of safe diving practices can be. But even at an extreme end of conservatism the table indicates a possible risk as great as 1% or a possible 1 in every 100 are likely to have a problem by spending only 8 minutes at 100 feet.

So which table do we than use? This should be up to the student by giving them everything they need to know about dive tables, their history and how the tables actually calculate residual nitrogen. The dive tables are an excellent example of how different diving activities can be perceived as both risky and safe. In an Open Water Program the students are taught how to use their table and told that exceeding their limits is strictly forbidden however we do not explain how the tables





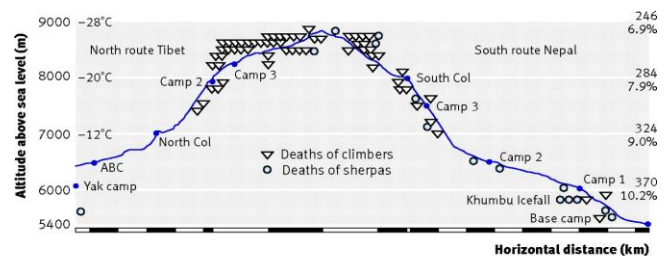
actually work and what will actually happen when one exceeds the limits and gets bent. The 'B' word - as recreational instructors we are prohibited to expound upon it and are encouraged to use phrases such as *'in the unlikely event you should...'*. By maintaining such a covert attitude we do not honestly provide our students with the true risks of diving nor do we teach them anything about risk analysis or acceptance. We also sentence those who follow human ambition to explore and challenge the limits of human capability as guilty of acting like cowboys. Karl Huggins, in his first edition of 'Dynamics of Decompression Workbook' wrote about truth;

"Some training agencies dictate which decompression tables should be used by exposing their students to only one of the available tables. If any of the other options are discussed, it is generally in a disparaging light. All this does is lure newly trained divers in to the false sense of security that the technique they are taught is 'truth'. They are not exposed to other theories, models, tables and debates which exist in the decompression field that are needed to make educated and knowledgeable decisions regarding their own decompression."



The truth that Huggins writes about can be applied not just to dive tables, but to training objectives, philosophies and curriculum. We create a false sense of security with phrases such as "...as long as a diver follows all the rules, he or she will never have a problem." Divers need to know that regardless of what kind of diving you are doing, there will always be some risk - exactly how much can be calculated by considering all of the factors involved.

As long as you follow all the rules you will never get hurt - true or false? As a 'technical diver' I enjoy diving deep and in places beyond the sport diving limit. Yet some authorities in diver training are reluctant and in many cases adamantly opposed to deep diving. At this time there are no laws regulating how deep a diver can go. Adventurers who climb mountains to reach record summits; skiers that challenge slopes that have never been skied before; Indy drivers who assemble teams to break world speed records; these individuals all maintain the same rights as a diver wishing to dive deep. Yet unlike deep divers, these people are hailed as accomplishing great feats of endeavor.



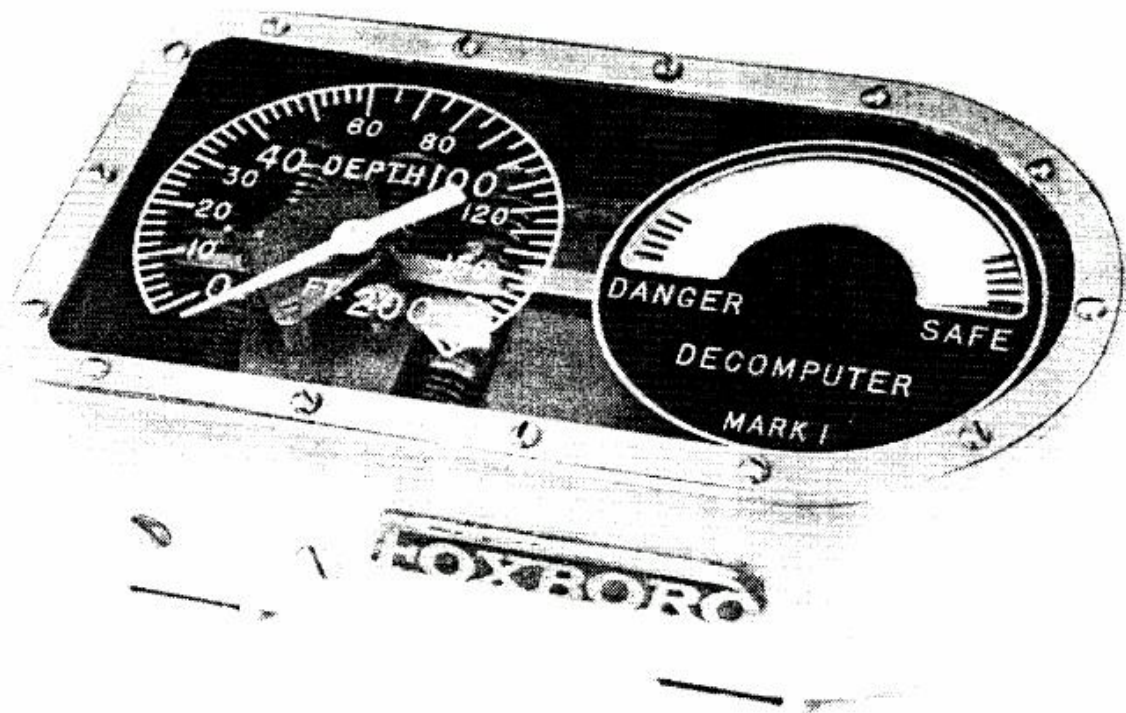
Route	Mountaineers	Death rate during descent from summit (%)	P value*
North	Climbers	3.4	0.0001
	Sherpas	<0.2	
South	Climbers	1.7	0.02
	Sherpas	0.4	
Combined north and south	Climbers	2.5	0.0001
	Sherpas	0.2	
North	Mountaineers	2.0	0.1
	Mountaineers	1.1	





Today people without any mountain climbing experience or preparation pay small fortunes to climb Mt Everest. The majority of them are guided by experienced, well-equipped guides to safely reach the summit. Those who wish to make it a record breaking event challenge the summit without oxygen, without safety lines or on trickier faces of the mountain only because the summit of Mt

Unnecessary risk taking and deep diving activity by those who are not properly trained is unacceptable. Yet advanced diving principals such as risk assessment and diving realities should be a part of every diver program. At the DEMA show this year {1998} nearly every dive travel and manufacturer booth had some connection with the advanced sport diving



Everest has been reached by hundreds of people and no longer considered a unique and honorable event. These people increase the risk to increase the glory. Today hundreds of divers visit the Andrea Doria, a wreck once thought of as purely exploration. Deep divers will not, however increase the risk to make a dive on the Doria more glorified, in fact they will take advantage of any extra safety measures available.

industry. High tech diving has arrived and is now as much a part of the diving industry as any other. With it comes a challenge to accept and incorporate the infrastructure that provides divers with knowledge to make every dive safely. Accept it partner.

~ Safe Diving

