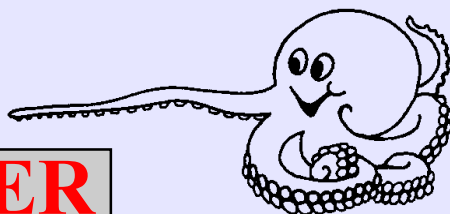


THE REEF SEEKER



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TRAGIC SCUBA TRAINING DEATH IN TEXAS

I was mulling over what the headline should be and said to myself, “Well, every scuba death is tragic” but this one seems even more so. You may have already heard some of the details if you follow any scuba social media but I wanted to weigh in with some thoughts because the lessons that can be learned here go beyond just a teaching setting. I’ll also throw in the mantra I’ve preached for the 45 years I’ve been an instructor: You never get hurt on a dive you don’t make.

Here’s the general outline of what happened. The accident occurred on August 16 of this year, roughly ten weeks ago:

12 year-old Dylan Harrison was taking scuba lessons from Scuba Toys in Carrollton, Texas. The site for their open-water training dives was a lake known as Scuba Ranch, which is about an hour east of Dallas. I’m not personally familiar with it but it sounds like it was outfitted to be a dive training facility. This is fairly common in places without easy access to the ocean or what we’d typically consider to be “open-water.”

There were eight student divers in this class. It’s unclear how old the rest were but Fox4-TV (Dallas) says that Dylan was buddied up with another 12 year-old. They were being taught by an active-status instructor who was assisted by an active-status divemaster. It’s important to realize that sometimes those terms, especially “divemaster,” are thrown around rather loosely. Some instructors have friends

assist them with dives and loosely refer to them as “divemasters” but they may not actually hold that professional-level certification.

In this instance, both men were active-status with NAUI. That’s significant because there are definitely questions of ignoring training standards here or at least bending the interpretation of them. As an active-status dive professional, you have a responsibility and duty to make sure classes meet all training agency standards.

I’m not sure which training dive this was. NAUI requires four scuba training dives plus a skin (snorkel) dive, or five scuba training dives if you don’t do the snorkel. No more than three scuba dives can be counted as training dives in one day. So open-water training – this has nothing to do with required pool or classroom time – has to be conducted over at least two days. My guess – and it is purely a guess, not based on known facts – is that this was the first training scuba dive of the four required.

The entire group of ten – 8 students plus the Instructor and Divemaster – descended to a platform that was 16 feet deep. The visibility has been reported as 2-3 feet. While this may be very common for lakes in general and for this specific lake (which is listed as spring-fed which should create better viz), one underlying question here is whether visibility like this meet NAUI training standards. I’ve been searching through the 275-page “NAUI Standards & Policies” (2024 revision) and can’t find a specific mention about visibility. A lot of times there’s a catch-all phrase of “local conditions” so that if the viz is ALWAYS 2-3 feet, that meets

the definition. However, common sense tells you that in such limited visibility – and I’ve certainly done dives with CERTIFIED divers in limited viz – you might want to either radically reduce the number of people with you, maybe even going only with one person, or cancel the training dive outright.

I’ll also throw in the caveat that it’s easy to be a Monday-morning quarterback with this. One thing we always tried to do at Reef Seekers when we had our brick-and-mortar store open and were regularly teaching basic open-water classes, was emphasize to our instructors that they were NOT under any pressure from us to get dives done regardless of conditions or regardless of the comfort level of the student. Our goal was to certify divers who were comfortable and confident to dive on their own without someone overseeing them and if that took longer than we’d planned, so be it.

Not all dives shops work that way. I have no idea what the arrangement was for Scuba Toys with their instructors. But some shops pay instructors only after students are certified. So there’s a financial incentive for the Instructor to certify the student. Some stores don’t take into account or budget for cancellation of dives that may mean rescheduling. So some Instructors feel pressured to do the dives regardless. (The SoCal equivalent would be to arrive for a beach dive with high surf and do the dives anyhow because otherwise, the instructor doesn’t get paid.) I’m not saying this was the case in this instance. But that scenario exists within the scuba industry.

Based on the sheriff’s report (posted

on ScubaBoard due to a FOIA request) and the Instructor's comments to the reporting deputy, the Instructor gave instructions for everyone to descend to the teaching platform 16 feet below. As they descended, one of the students had some problem and went back up. The Instructor says that he brought everyone back to the surface and all were accounted for. I want to stop here for a moment because what he's describing – remember the viz is 2-3 feet – is not easy to do.

On a Catalina training dive, where we expect 30-40 foot visibility, I can easily see everyone in the group. If one person goes up, I can easily signal the group and my assistant to also go up. But in 2-3 foot visibility, that's not the case.

First of all, there's no way you've got that many people close enough to you to see them all at the same time. I just measured and my shoulder to my fingertips is about 24 inches. Yours is likely similar. Stick your arm straight out and level. The end of your fingertips is 2-foot visibility. I'm amazed the Instructor was even aware that one student went back up. I question how quickly he could have located everyone else and gotten them all back to the surface. I'm not saying it can't be done. But I am saying it can't be done quickly. If you had them diving shoulder-to-shoulder in a line so they wouldn't lose each other as they descended, eight people in that fashion with each person being about two feet wide means the line would have stretched out 16 feet away from the instructor. I don't know that that's the way they descended. But they certainly weren't all directly within his line-of-sight. I would guess/estimate it would take a minimum of 2-3 minutes to find all the other divers (and the Divemaster) and signal them to ascend.

The Instructor states to the sheriff that he accounted for everyone at the surface. I certainly believe he thought he did. But I question whether his belief matches the reality. The limited-viz-abort-the-dive-because-someone-went-up scenario is also the perfect recipe for one diver to go missing be-

cause (1) They didn't realize everyone else ascended, (2) They might have missed the platform (Dylan was eventually found in 42 feet of water, not 16 feet like the platform), (3) They reached the platform with no one else in sight, (4) At some point they get nervous and that leads to panic because they're all alone, and (5) Maybe they try to ascend, aren't sure where people are or which way is up, panic in the process, and spit out their reg and pass out underwater.

I can't say with certainty that this is what happened. But in the cases I've looked at or investigated over the years, including the 22 years I've worked directly with the L.A. County Department of Coroner looking into L.A. County scuba deaths, it seems more likely to me that Dylan had a problem during this phase of the dive, not a subsequent part.

This brings us to another mystery surrounding all of this. This question could easily be resolved. According to the sheriff's records, Dylan was diving with a Cressi Leonardo computer. They have it in their possession. The computer is downloadable and will show Dylan's exact profile. The Sheriff's department is refusing/declining/failing to download the computer data. It is unclear why as downloads are non-destructive. In other words, they don't change the data, they simply let you see it. It would also show if Dylan surfaced with the group as the Instructor says or if that's where things went south as I

have posited could have happened.

To put this in further perspective, any time I've tested gear for the Coroner here investigating an accident, our goal is to at least preliminarily test the gear and download the computer (if it's downloadable) within 24 hours of the accident.

On top of that, you can then take the Instructor's computer and the Divemaster's computer, download those, overlay all three profiles, and get a very good idea of the timeline of what happened and where people were (in a 2-D sense, not 3-D) at the various times. The problem with this possibility is that the Divemaster's computer was not collected by the sheriffs and he says he lost it the following week in a 90-foot deep lake. It has not been searched for as far as anyone knows. (I don't know if the sheriffs took the Instructor's dive computer.)

The Instructor says, after he allegedly accounted for everyone at the surface, he divided them into two groups of four and each group was to descend to the platform. It sounds like Dylan was with him. But there's another wrinkle here.

As mentioned previously, Fox4-TV reports that Dylan's official buddy in the group of four was another 12 year-old taking the class. This may pose at least a judgment issue if not a standards violation. NAUI S&P for Junior Divers (anyone 14 or younger) states the following (page 40): "The parent or guard-

2026-2027 DIVING VACATIONS

March 9-22, 2026 • Yap

July 1-14, 2026 • Indonesia

Sept. 2026 • Philippines

August, 2027 • Eclipse & dive

ian and Junior diver agree that the Junior diver will dive with a certified adult (18 years of age) diver of the parent's or guardian's selection." If Dylan was paired up with a younger diver, even with the instructor nearby, that might at least be a lapse in judgment if not an outright standards violation.

The Instructor says that as they were descending, one diver got below him and the other three – including Dylan – were above. The Instructor looked at the diver below him and when he looked up at the divers above, he realized one diver was missing. He then says that the buddy indicated no knowledge of where Dylan went, so the Instructor immediately started searching for her (but it's unclear as to whether he simply left the group of three or what), searched "several times under water" and when he couldn't find Dylan, surfaced with the three remaining divers.

At the surface he confirmed one diver was missing, and alerted the "Dallas Dive team" who were training nearby (I assume these are police divers). They fairly quickly located Dylan in 42 feet of water. The various time stamps on the official report indicate that the initial call came in at 10:30AM and Dylan was located (this is all from that report) at 10:48AM, brought out of the water at 10:50AM, and CPR was initiated. It appears an air evac helicopter (Careflight) arrived on scene at 10:46AM and eventually transported Dylan to a hospital where she was pronounced.

As I said at the beginning, every death, scuba or otherwise, is tragic but this one seems even more so. And there are plenty of lessons to be learned here that can pertain to certified divers.

- Evaluate conditions, especially visibility
- Make sure you're diving with a competent buddy
- If you're not comfortable on a dive (and I don't know if Dylan was comfortable or not), it's OK to cancel even if everyone else chooses to dive
- Just because some in authority says it's OK doesn't mean it is

There are a couple of more wrinkles to add to this already sad scenario.

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES & CLASSES

DAY	DATE	BOAT/SITE	PLANNED DESTINATION	\$\$\$
Sat.	Nov 8	Veterans Park	Surf Entries Made Easy	FREE!!!
Wed.	12	--- CLASS ---	--- FISH I.D. ---	35
Wed.	19	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	180
Wed.	Dec 3	--- CLASS ---	--- TABLES/COMPUTERS ---	FREE!!!
Sat.	13	Veterans Park	Beach Diving Made Easy	35
Wed.	17	<i>Catalina Express</i>	Avalon UW Park	180

The instructor, William Armstrong, is the Assistant Chief Deputy for the Collins County Sheriff's Department. The accident happened in Kaufman County and there have been suspicions that one of the reasons for what would seem to be sloppy investigation techniques for this accident smack of sheriffs looking out for one of their own.

On top of that, the day preceding the accident (Friday), Armstrong worked a full day for the Collins County Sheriff's Department, then worked a night job at a private business from 9PM Friday until 6AM Saturday morning. He then had roughly a 1-hour drive to get to the training site. So fatigue certainly becomes a question here and how it might have affected judgment.

Additionally, Fox4-TV reports that Armstrong was out of the water and dry before Dylan was brought out of the water. Given the timeline above (10:30-10:50AM), and having personally participated in missing diver scenarios, I fail to understand why an instructor would get out of his gear. If it was me – and again, easy to be a Monday-morning QB – I'd either be looking myself or directing the search efforts but I guarantee you I'd still be in my wetsuit.

Once all of this information became public, Armstrong resigned his position with the Collins County Sheriff's Department.

And while it's easy to point fingers and talk about judgment calls, standards violations, and the like, there is one additional piece of info – on videotape – that has surfaced that's even more troubling.

One thing we try to develop in scuba diving, especially when we're teaching or supervising, let alone "just" diving, is to establish what we call a cul-

ture of safety. In other words, we should always be thinking about what could go wrong, if something went wrong what could we have done differently, and just always being aware of worst-case scenarios and seeing what we can do mitigate and lessen the chances of accidents, let alone fatal ones.

Again harkening back to when Reef Seekers was a brick-and-mortar store (and I'm not trying to spin this as Reef Seekers was perfect in every way and better than anyone else, although I do think we were/are pretty good at what we do and the way we do it), we'd have an instructor/divemaster meeting every year. We'd talk about safety, what was working and not working with the way we were doing things, and bat around ideas as to how to get better. And throughout the year, we'd have conversations with our instructors about what went right and wrong in various classes and what we could change to do better.

It seems Scuba Toys, the shop Armstrong taught for, had a similar meeting with their instructors but it took on a very different tone. Roughly ten days ago (October 22), a video from 2017 surfaced, provided by a former instructor for Scuba Toys. In this eight-year-old video, the owner of Scuba Toys, Joe Johnson, reacts to a question from one of the instructors present who suggested Johnson wasn't taking seriously enough the idea of lawsuits from dive accidents. Here's the quote from Johnson on the video:

"All I know is we've killed... what? 4 people? 5 people? And we've never even done a deposition. Our insurance company just settles. John Witherspoon says we can kill two people a year, 'we are fine'." (NOTE: John Witherspoon was a diving insurance agent/broker but his company stopped selling dive

insurance policies a number of years ago. To my knowledge, he has not commented on Johnson's assertion.) Johnson's wife then chimes in with "We don't want that to happen," and Johnson responds with, "Just kidding, I'm just kidding," to which an unknown instructor at the meeting adds, "Challenge accepted, challenge accepted."

WTF????? "Horrificed" doesn't even begin to describe my reaction to this. To go back to the idea of "culture of safety," this ain't it. And to be that cavalier about it is unforgivable.

This brings up a closing overall thought for you to ponder when you're choosing who to dive with. Character counts. Attitude counts. Reef Seekers institutionally and myself personally will do everything we can to provide a safe and enjoyable diving experience but there's only so much we can do. Dive accidents can happen at any time for a variety of reasons. And while we may

try to do everything we can to prevent them, the reality is that when you start your dive, it's pretty much in your hands now. As the saying goes, "No one is more responsible for your safety than you."

We had a diver one time, one of our somewhat regular customers, who got separated from our group – he had a camera, stopped to take some pictures, and didn't know which way the guided group had gone – and had to surface and make it back to the boat on his own. (This was a warm water dive in the Lembeh Straits so very calm water, good viz, and the boat was maybe 50 feet away.) We surfaced when we realized he wasn't with us and got a signal from the boat that he was safe and onboard so we continued our dive and finished maybe 20 minutes later. When we got back on the boat, he was furious with the dive guide for "losing" him and started berating the guide. (The guy's a VERY good guide BTW.) I stepped in and pointed out that, if you're

going to fall behind the group because you're stopping to take pictures, you've got a responsibility to know which way the group headed and catch up. And he replied with, "I have NO responsibilities on these trips!!! That's up to them!!!" Once he said that, I felt my choice was obvious: I no longer let him join our groups because I don't think he has an attitude of responsibility let alone has developed a culture of safety.

All of this with Dylan Harrison's death will continue to play out for a while. Within the industry, it's created a lot of soul-searching as to what we do and how we do. Scuba is a self-regulated industry but I've always believed that with that comes greater responsibility, no less. I wish there was some pithy phrase I could insert here to button all of this up but there's not. All I can promise you that there's no way something like this would never happen on a Reef Seekers outing and that we will keep you apprised of future developments in this case.

PICTURE PAGE - Head-on Shots

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2025)



Sabre Squirrelfish
Maldives



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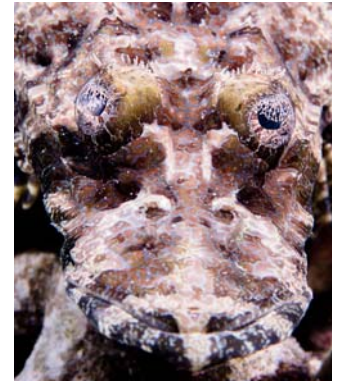
Curious Damselfish
Maldives



Staring Eel
Easter Island



Pursled-lip Boxfish
Roatan



Crocodilefish stare-down
Yap