

## Putting the “F” into GUEF

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**Warning this article contains strong language that may offend those who are easily offended.**



I am reliably assured by Jamie that, at 49yrs old, I am not the oldest to be awarded a GUE Fundies Tech pass (apparently some septuagenarian in Florida holds that particular trophy), nor at 4 years between taking the course, obtaining a Provisional pass, then a Rec pass and finally a Tech pass am I the slowest to make the grade. However, my recent Rec to Tech upgrade did highlight the importance of time as one of the key ingredients to progressing in the GUE system – along with commitment, application and the support of team members.

To give you some background, I'd come away from my initial attempt at Fundies with a Provisional pass, having struggled with buoyancy and trim in a drysuit. At Jamie's suggestion I had moved from a horseshoe wing to a Halcyon donut wing – Lo! And behold, my trim improved. I spent time adjusting my weighting and saw positive results. I thought I was 'working on it' and after almost 6 months I finally got my Rec pass.

However, after obtaining my Rec pass there was a crunch point, which hit me during a subsequent dive at the Poor Knights with Jamie. We'd been happily swimming around Landing Bay Pinnacle for an hour and were making our way back to the line when he signalled me. I swam closer and signalled 'question' with a crooked index finger - "What?" At about 3m range Jamie signed "I. Watch. You. Valve drill". I froze, stopped finning and shook my head. "F-that", I thought. I was Flustered, both the fact that I wasn't 'ready' for a valve drill and I that wasn't confident I'd pull it off. I shook my head and thumbed up, but it wasn't until the drive back to Auckland that I pondered why I bottled it.

The whole idea is to be able to perform a valve drill when you least expect to have to perform a valve drill! I reflected on my thought process which was along the lines of: "I can't do it, so why bother trying!" Clearly this was not an approach which would result in any positive outcomes long term, so I decided to address the issue and put in a concerted effort to improve.

Happily I was not alone in my quest and I joined up with two recent Rec pass students, Stefan Nordbruch and Andrew Davidson and also Chris Bardon, (a lapsed Provisional pass), all of whom had set themselves the goal of a Tech pass. After some discussion we determined to set out and follow through on a plan which involved at least one lake session and one open water session per month, for each of the three months leading up to our scheduled date with Jamie.



A Fundies pass is more than pulling off a valve drill in trim, it's a set of skills and team protocols that when performed together make the whole process easier. Both during and after my initial GUE training sessions I have found myself in discussion with other would-be Fundies divers, and a common theme that comes up is the fact that you don't wake up one morning being able to do, for example, a valve drill fluidly. *It comes one dive at a time*, by chipping away at the peripheral issues which are conspiring against you. I also noticed that in a couple of pre-dive planning sessions my G (Goal) in G.U.E. E.D.G.E included the phrase "I won't bother with a valve drill, I can't do it" or a variation to that effect, so when the four of us met up at Lake Pupuke, we all agreed to focus on the bits we couldn't do easily, not the bits we could.

Interestingly, in our group we each had a different set of strengths and weaknesses to work through. Stefan, with excellent trim and buoyancy control, needed to work on team awareness and supporting others. Andrew had rock solid trim and could back fin as fast as he could forward - when not task loaded. As the task load went up, so did his arse. Chris struggled to reach his taps and still hold trim, but was pretty much sorted as a team player having been through Jamie's Advanced Wreck and Cave courses. I just needed to nail the trim side of things, as I could reach my taps, deploy an SMB and air-share without difficulty. Or so I thought. The reality was a little different.

The Basic Five skill (1. Primary reg remove/replace 2. Regulator swap 3. Primary reg donate /reg swap 4. Mask flood/clear 5. Mask remove/replace/clear) is all about building muscle memory and confidence. Tasks one through four posed no problems, but could I remove my mask and replace it in 6m of water? No - despite having done so unplanned at depth in the past, on previous courses and generally being OK with my mask off. I snorted water, closed my eyes, pinched my nose, sorted myself out and replaced my mask, expecting to see the rock we'd been referencing in front of me. It may well have been there, but it was more than 6m below me as I Polaris'd to the surface. FFS!



Valve drills weren't much better. Although I could reach the taps just fine and despite laying money on the fact I didn't move a fin muscle, I just kept drifting forwards. Not by much, but enough that back finning while tapping-off was too much for me - in the same way that rubbing your tummy and patting your head can be for some people - and so the Frustration and over-breathing started.

We all had similar troubles, which lead to some very ragged ascents with air-shares across space and time - followed by some exceeding frank debriefs. Then we received a gem of information from outside the group, from Cameron, a vastly experienced cave diver and former classmate on my original Fundies course. His advice was "just practice doing nothing". By this he meant at the start of each dive, find a rock and form up with lights centred on it. Get sorted and comfortable and then just hang there 50cm off the bottom.

As a group we embraced this idea and while on the early dives we would last barely 10 seconds before a fin was fluttered, towards the end of our training - some 10 Lake-hours later - we could all ride out a minute or so



no problem. And from that foundation we found the valve drills came easier, the SMB deployments smoother, the ascents co-ordinated and the team awareness increased as we could look outwards not inwards. Suddenly depth referencing, spotting slack SMB line, watching for the 'ascend' signal and air-shares all came together. I even took to removing my mask for the hell of it to go from 6m to surface with only blurred buddies to relate to – reasonably confident that they were indeed at the correct depth.

Which brings me back to my starting point and the importance of time. We had put the time in. We had identified the issues, addressed them bit by bit, worked on them as a team and it had paid off. And so one chilly morning at the end of May we were rewarded with our coveted Tech passes. That said, we all still came away with a list of things to work on, but we went from the F in GUEF standing for Frustration, Flustered, FFS or F-that to: Find the time; Focus; Fully debrief; Fine tune and Find the next thing to work on.