

New Years Day Dive 1/1/2006

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I got up this morning and built a tank rack. A tank rack holds scuba tanks so they don't do major damage to you, your vehicle or themselves rolling wily-nily about the back of your vehicle. I did this feat of carpentry legerdemain because I was going to meet up the infamous Lake Lanier Loonies for their annual New Years Day dive and picnic. So what you are probably saying. Well, even though we are in the "south" part of the states (Georgia) our nightly temperatures hover around freezing this time of year and even today it only reached a balmy 57 degrees Fahrenheit. The lake is undergoing turnover, which means there is no warm layer, it was a uniform 47 degrees from the top down to the depths we planned on diving. Now you can see where the Loony part of the name comes from.

Even when it is at its peak summer temperatures Lake Lanier rarely gets above 60 degrees below its thermocline. On a good day you use a 3mm wetsuit. For 47 degrees you use 5-7mm full wetsuits with hood and gloves, 5-7 mm shorties with hood, boots and gloves or a drysuit. I thought I had it covered with a 5mm drysuit I had been assured was a large and would fit me after I described myself (accurately) to the seller.

The night before I decided, since this would be the first dive of the drysuit, that I had better learn how to put the thing on without making a big fool of myself. I put on my swimsuit and a lycra dive skin (a dive skin is a lightweight suit, think of a whole-body leotard). The next step involved unzipping the drysuit, the zipper goes from the middle back all the way around between the legs to the upper chest. You begin donning the drysuit by inserting your legs into the legs of the suit, think of 5 mm (one half inch) thick panty hose with a sealing ring at the ankle and you will get the idea.

The next step is to simply (right) stick your arms into the arms (again, think of 5mm panty hose for your arms with seal rings at the wrists) and at the same time thrust your head up through the neck seal into the tight hood. The neck seal is like the tightest turtleneck sweater you can imagine. Anyway, I got the arms in, got the head started and then realized I had run out of standup room in the suit. As I stood their hunched over with the neck seal tight around my forehead I glanced on one of the inside panels where I hadn't had a chance to look before. I suddenly realized why I had run out of room and if I had succeeded in thrusting my head through the seal I would have instantly regretted it. All it took was one small word, "Medium" scrawled in permanent marker.

Since by design I am a extra-large type of guy, had I succeeded in thrusting my size 16 and half neck into the medium size neck seal I probably would have choked to death before a I could have got the thing off. Needless to say I was a bit upset. I had expected to get two 3mm wetsuits the previous week, one for my wife and one for me, which I could have used as a 6mm combo in a pinch, but alas, they fell prey to the holiday mails so here I was, the day before the dive, a holiday, no dry or wet suit capable of making the dive. I posted to the Scubaboard website my predicament.

A fellow Looney came to my rescue, seems he had a 5mm “shorty”, a suit with no boots or hood, that he could let me use and was, as I, an XL kind of guy. So, here we are back at where I began the story.

After I built the tank rack I placed into it both my personal and a rental tank, both loaded to 3000 PSI of air, and strapped it down to the bed of my Montero. We then loaded up the other dive gear, some broiled chicken and warm drinks and drove the 20 some miles to the West Bank Park at Lake Lanier where we met, for the first time, with the other Loonies.

The Loonies are a diverse lot, from instructors and dive masters to the barely qualified, nine intrepid divers ready to face the challenges of Lake Lanier, some driving for over an hour and a half for the privilege. While on shore waited our wives, bravely smiling and laughing as we struggled into our dive gear, hiding their fears, at least I hope they were just hiding their fears, I noticed none of them were diving...

We finished donning our dive gear and marched proudly, well, as proudly as you can walking backward since you are wearing fins, into the water. The suit I was borrowing was a 5 mm wetsuit, as its name implies, it is designed to allow a small bit of water in next to your skin, your body heat warms it and it acts as an insulation layer, as long as there isn't too much water flow. Needless to say, the first five-to-ten minutes of any dive in cold water with a wetsuit are always interesting as you warm the cold (in this case 47 degree) water up to body temperature. After the first ten minutes I was actually pretty comfortable except for my hands. Afraid I only had on what are known as “reef” gloves, they are used to protect your hands from rough reef surfaces, not to keep them warm.

We finally were able to turn around once we got to mid-chest level and could start to swim out to deeper water. I had on strap-on fins since I was wearing dive boots. Usually I use a pair of full-foot fins (Velocity model) that have a bit of flex to them. The strap-on ones find felt like a couple of boards since they were much stiffer than what I was used to. So what should have been a fairly easy swim was a bit more difficult, but manageable.

Finally we got out to about 15 feet of water. I pulled my mask up over my face (only rookies keep it up on the forehead, which is actually a distress signal) and just then a wave filled my mouth with wonderful Lake Lanier Water. After coughing and hacking and scaring my dive buddies, I finally got my breath back and placed my regulator into my mouth. After a look around and a synchronization of watches we held our BCD inflator hoses over our head and releasing the air that was holding us on the surface slid like German U-boats (well, more like distressed seals) beneath the cold water's surface.

I would like to report that we had excellent visibility and it was grand, however, I don't like to lie. Visibility was about 6-8 feet, this is not so good, even for Lake Lanier. Lake Lanier can have visibility of 10-15 feet above the thermocline and even more below the thermocline, however, when the lake is turning over, visibility gets pretty bad. After sinking through 8 feet of moss-green water we had to switch on our dive lights. I was using one of my Christmas presents, a small UK40 light that attaches to your mask strap

for hands free operation. Unfortunately when you look at other divers straight on, you end up blinding them, something my dive buddy pointed out to me after the dive by telling me if I ever used that light with it hooked to my mask strap again he would mount somewhere the light don't shine...wonder what he meant?

Anyway, our assignment was to proceed to a structure known as "the lumber yard" which was a pile of submerged timber at a heading of 45 degrees east of the main swim marker buoys and place a dive buoy over it so one of the other divers could do a laser sighting and range calculation for a diver's map of the features. We proceeded down the underwater incline, 20 feet, 30 feet, 50 feet when suddenly I saw the dive leader stop and start messing with his dive computer. He signaled me to come over and show him mine, which I did. It seems his had stopped displaying. We found out later his battery was at the near-end-of-life level and would work fine topside, as soon as it cooled down the voltage would drop and the computer would switch off its display. The lumber yard was supposedly at 75 feet.

After messing around along the bottom for a while we came upon some large logs, not a bunch, but a few, we assumed this was the lumber yard so we placed the buoy and swam back our reciprocal heading. Only once did the silt we kicked up from the bottom caused me to get disoriented and temporarily lose site of my dive partners, but I rose enough to get out of the brown-silt filled bottom water and up into the murky-green water and soon spotted their dive lights and with a prayer of thanks rejoined them. It would have been the height of embarrassment to be the new-kid and get lost from my dive buddies.

Since the dive leader's computer was malfunctioning and we were all nearing less than 1000 PSI on our tanks he decided to halt the dive and return to shore. Giving the thumbs up signal which means "let's surface" we all three went vertical, held our inflators over our heads and vented our BCDs. If you don't they can rapidly expand as you decrease depth and rocket you to the surface, if you return to the surface too fast you risk decompression sickness, commonly called the bends. Besides, your dive computer will yell at you with rather loud beeps if you ascend too quickly and let everyone know you are being bad.

We reached the surface safely after having reached a maximum depth of 67 feet and spending 26 minutes in the cold murky water and back pedaled to shallow water, where we once again walked backward out to the shore. Walking backward like that felt like we were in a movie someone had placed in reverse. I really prefer boat dives, it is just more dramatic to do a back roll from the gunwale or a giant stride from a dive platform into the water and forcefully pulling your way up a dive ladder than this trudging backward stuff.

Now came the real hard part, taking off the wet gear. As the dive suit is exposed to air the evaporative cooling from the air can chill you quickly. Again we had the snickers and smiles from the women folk to contend with as we struggled with our gear. Of course my Susan came over and helped me, sometimes it is rather tough to get the shoulders off in a front zip suit.

After everyone else returned from the dive we went up the hill to the barbecue grill and had a wonderful picnic.

All in all it was a great day. Even though the dive was cold, dark, murky and we saw nothing but some old logs, suspended algae and silt and a lot of bottom mud, it still beat a day at the office. I'll be back next year!