

Incremental Steps: Lessons from a Provisional Pass

About a year ago, I was what some might call a holiday diver. I had a poor trim, no drysuit or cold-water experience and not spent much time thinking about gear configuration at all. But I loved the water – particularly the ocean. I had just come back from fieldwork in the Maldives as part of my master's in Marine Science and Policies from the University of Edinburgh where we were surveying coral reefs impacted by heat stress and land reclamation. Those surveys were my first taste of diving with a purpose – and I was hooked. But they also made it abundantly clear how much more I needed to learn. In hindsight, I would have given anything to be able to do proper back kicks and helicopter turns in the field. It is a pretty uncomfortable and stressful situation to hover inches from a coral quadrat to examine its polyps in detail, only to realize you don't know how to back out without risking contact with the delicate animals.

I said to myself that, if I wanted to do serious work underwater and participate meaningfully in project-based diving, I needed a drysuit as well as proper training – and to start with the basics again. This realization led me to GUE, renowned for its rigorous training and standardized protocols as well as equipment configurations. I was fortunate enough to receive a spot in a Drysuit Primer and Basic Fundamentals course through the NextGen Legacy Program.

However, for me, the learning began way before taking my classes. I remember looking at the GUE Base Equipment Configuration list and having so many questions: What am I looking for in a drysuit? Should I start practicing with doubles? And do I really need a 2-meter hose on my primary regulator? So, I had quite a bit to catch up on, to say the least. Luckily, my instructor – Benjamin Ott – and all the other people I met in the community were happy to answer and help me with all of these questions – and to explain to me why a 2-meter hose really is a good idea.

When I showed up for my Drysuit Primer in January, I was full of questions – and some nerves. It was my first time diving in a drysuit, using a wing and backplate system, and trying out the GUE base equipment configuration in the water. It felt like starting from scratch. Before we even got into the water, I peppered Ben with what must have been a hundred questions, trying to understand how everything worked together. Once submerged, I realized just how much I had to re-learn: My buoyancy was all over the place, my boots too big, and the experienced GUE diver's perfect trim I had seen online just seemed impossible to achieve. During the second dive, things started to get a little better, but I struggled with controlled ascents and drysuit ventilation. Still, by the end of the day Ben smiled and said, "Not bad at all for your first day in a drysuit." It was the start of a steep learning curve ahead.

In the lead-up to my Basic Fundamentals course, I began practicing with doubles—I wanted to get comfortable with the equipment I hoped to use long-term as early as possible. But due to above-the-waterline work commitments between my two courses, I only managed the minimum number of training dives in the new setup. The course kicked off with a swimming test, followed by gearing up at a murky lake near Cologne. Every day, we would do a few dry runs before practicing skills, drills, and kicking techniques in the water. These exercises went pretty well – though the helicopter turn took some time to figure out. I understood the concept, but my legs had other ideas. More importantly, however, I kept struggling to ventilate my drysuit in time – especially because I would get the gas trapped in my boots. On day 3 of our course, during an S-drill ascent at around 2.5 meters, I realized – too late – that I had trapped too much gas in my drysuit – and popped to the surface. I was gutted. This was a problem I had not experienced before drysuit-diving – and it meant I would receive only a Provisional Pass.

Now, in hindsight, I think a Provisional Pass is great. It reflects not a shortcoming but the progress I have made since becoming a NextGen Legacy trainee – and it has only deepened my

commitment to continue training and achieving a full Pass in the months ahead. Working towards becoming a project diver and eventually integrating diving with a professional career is no small task. Progress comes in small steps, especially when you lack the network and resources to get to where you want to get and are still figuring out your path as you go. GUE and its community have been incredibly encouraging, supportive and inspiring on my long (and still evolving) journey toward becoming a project diver and field-based ocean communicator.

I'm deeply thankful to everyone who made this possible: to Benjamin Ott, a patient and generous instructor who has shared his expertise and time with me; to Jenn Thomson, who has shepherded the NextGen Legacy trainees through this year with care and dedication; to GUE for launching the NextGen Legacy program and supporting young divers on their journey; and to everyone else who reached out, offered guidance and support, and helped me along the way.

