

EQUALITY IN WATER – TOBY’S STORY By Dr. Wilson Li (PDF file)

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Disabled sports are perhaps the best example of equal opportunity: Handicapped persons are equally entitled to participate in recreational and athletic pursuits, things beyond basic needs, as the able-bodied. In IAHD we emphasize the equality that water provides for people with disabilities. Most of us understand that water provides buoyancy, balance, and stability. It allows a mobility-challenged individual a chance to shun the law of gravity and freely exercise like anyone else once underwater. *“From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free.”* said Jacques Yves Cousteau, founder of our sport, more truly so for people with a physical handicap. Moreover, through participating together and interacting among each other in challenging environments, handicapped and able-bodied people could learn more about each other and gain a deeper respect for one another, an important step in social integration in our community.

Born with a deep passion for the ocean and the marine environment, Toby has loved swimming and watersports since childhood, and was a member of the school swimming team. He took up the summer job as a lifeguard after his school certificate examination, to earn his enrollment fees in a scuba diving course to answer the call of the ocean. He was actually going to complete his scuba diving training when an accident changed his fate. He broke his neck during a water rescue training by hopping head first into water from a swimming platform off a beach. A fracture dislocation of his fifth cervical spine, or C5, resulted. This means permanent paralysis of all four limbs, sparing just the biceps and shoulder, and difficulty in bladder and bowel control. To most people, this means almost lifelong confinement to the wheelchair, and the end of an active athletic life.

Nevertheless, Toby has not given up. With a caring and supportive family he returned to study (he finished his bachelor degree and is now studying for a master degree) and sports participation after a long treatment and rehabilitation period. He participated in wheelchair sports and some outings to the countryside. One thing deep inside his mind has continued to haunt him, however: the call of the ocean. Swimming, let alone diving, appears to represent a great barrier for the tetraplegia. Access to swimming pools, let alone beaches, has been difficult for the physically handicapped in Hong Kong. On the rare occasion that he was brought to the seaside by his family he felt a strong urge to come back to the freedom of water. His wish was rekindled by hearing about the activities of IAHD earlier this year, some seven years after his spinal injury: even tetraplegics can take part in adaptive diving, with proper supervision and training.

As an orthopaedic doctor and a dive instructor, I always tell people that a C5 spinal cord injury represents the upper limit where we can still allow a spinal cord injured person to dive. Any “higher lesion” above this level may mean compromise of the respiratory nerves and thus fall into medical contraindication for diving. Still Toby’s case is extremely challenging in that besides the mobility problem, the lack of sensation in the limbs calls for extra caution guarding against abrasions, impaired bladder and bowel control calls for special care, and weakened body temperature regulation may pose risks of overheat or cold injuries. Also, having been out of touch of water for some years may represent a psychological challenge too.

30th May 2010 became a special day for Toby. He made his first immersion in water after his spinal cord injury, through participation in a Discover Scuba activity organized by the IAHD in a temperature-controlled swimming pool. “I am so thrilled by this fulfilling experience—one that I’ve longed for so much, coming back *into* water. It is really having my dreams come true.” says Toby.

As one of the dive instructors to facilitate him that day, I was truly amazed by his relative “ease” to enter water and propel himself under water as a tetraplegic. Perhaps that was due to his previous dedication to swimming and partial completion of dive training already, but I think largely that was a result of his strong motivation. To relive his unfulfilled dream matters much to him and we just happened to be there to give some guidance. “I am so thankful to the selfless dedication of the volunteers of the IAHD to give their precious time and energy to help us actualize our dream, so many professional and devoted people who care to make their effort to share the joy of their favorite sport with disadvantaged people like us” Toby remarked, “Surely I will come back, and eventually make it to the ocean for my open water dive!”.

It was equally a fruitful experience on IAHD’s side. For a C5 cord injury we went through meticulous preparation for catheter care, temperature control, water entry, avoiding abrasion, and propulsion under water. I was amazed by his quick adaptation in rotating his shoulder under water to allow his only remaining functioning muscle in the upper limb, the biceps, to propel him front and back. It was really a most rewarding experience both for Toby and for us the helpers. There are things that we learnt from each other, and we understand and appreciate more of each other now. Or indeed there is no longer “each other” but just an “us”, because *we* are the Hand-in-hand divers now, looking forward to the next dives together. *It is Ability and NOT Disability that counts.*