

( INSPIRATION )

# The Buddy System

How one disabled man's dream to dive has become reality, with a little help from his friends.

Matt Johnston began his open-water certification classes about three years ago, and like countless other divers, he was immediately bitten by the scuba bug. But unlike others who love the sport, Johnston's passion for diving is hampered by Duchenne muscular dystrophy, an incurable neuromuscular disease that has confined him to a wheelchair, and left him unable to breathe without the help of a ventilator.

In June 2006, Johnston became the world's first ventilator-dependent quadriplegic to make an open-water dive, in Wisconsin's Wazee Lake. This past November, Johnston made history again, completing two ocean dives on Hens and Chickens Reef, off Islamorada in the Florida Keys. Johnston's



Matt Johnston (with Susan Long) before and during (right) his dream dive in the Keys.



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first dive lasted 15 minutes; the second about 10 minutes. “It felt like heaven,” he says. “The reef was very pretty, and the fish life was intense—I even saw a barracuda.” When asked what his favorite part of the dive was Johnston says, “Being with all my friends.”

Indeed, the history-making dive was made possible thanks to one man's determination not to let his disability define him and to the army of family members and friends who helped make his dream come true.

“It wasn't easy, but both Matt and I are stubborn,” says Capt. Gary Mace, owner with his wife Brenda of Conch Republic Divers in Tavernier. “It takes an hour to get Matt geared up. And we needed the right conditions. Luckily, we got them.”

Along with Mace, many of the friends who have helped Johnston achieve this moment were either on the boat or in the water with him. Charlee Dollens, Johnston's father, manned the dinghy that held his son's respirator, making sure the respirator hose didn't get disconnected. Susan Long, president and CEO

of dry suit manufacturer Diving Unlimited International (DUI), helped maneuver the dinghy, keeping it above Johnston while he was underwater. “Everybody needs a dream,” Long says, in recalling the day in 2004 when Johnston first contacted her, asking for DUI's help in designing a suit that would enable him to dive. “If

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**Get More Johnston earned his C-card through Scuba Diving International's Scubility program, which trains individuals who need adaptive lessons. For more information, go to [www.tdisdi.com/news/0602/scubility.html](http://www.tdisdi.com/news/0602/scubility.html). To support Oceans of Opportunity, go to [www.oceanopportunity.com](http://www.oceanopportunity.com) or [www.divingadream.org](http://www.divingadream.org).**

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we can help another person in that endeavor, that's what we should do." DUI engineered a custom-made dry suit that allows Johnston to connect his ventilator from the outside to the inside of his suit. (Ocean Reef Group donated a full-face mask.)

Johnston's dive support team, Frank Fabio and Drew Gerling, flanked Johnston on the dive, and Michael Lombardi, who directs the nonprofit Oceans of Opportunity, which has generated much needed financial support, helped Long position the dinghy. Pete Murray of Scubaboard, which hosted a fundraiser for Johnston at DEMA, was among Johnston's topside supporters.

"This was the culmination of so much effort," Long says. "We all had dinner together the night before and even did a little dancing, Matt included. I told Matt that that was all part of it—hanging out with your friends is as much a part of diving as, well, diving."

"Matt's touched a lot of people," Mace says. "He's such a tenacious individual, but he's also taught me that life is precious."

In talking about his future dive plans—Johnston turned 30 in January; the survival rate for people with Duchenne muscular dystrophy is rarely beyond the early 30s—Johnston says he wants to make a great white shark cage dive, return to the Keys and dive in Bonaire. "You've got to embrace every day. I'm hooked on diving and my plans are to dive until I can't. They say people with my disease don't live past 30, but I'm going to outlive that."

( GADGET )

## STERIPEN TRAVELER



Divers love most forms of aquatic life, but there are some that can completely ruin a trip—the ones that inhabit drinking water in many dive destinations. A new portable water purifier uses ultraviolet light to zap the nasties out of your water and reduce the chance you'll have to skip a day of diving due to a gastrointestinal bug. The SteriPen Traveler has been proven to kill bacteria and viruses and to destroy water-borne microbes like giardia and cryptosporidium. Simply stick the business end of the SteriPen into a container of water and activate the ultraviolet light by pushing a button. The Traveler fits easily in a jacket pocket, purse or travel bag. An optional Solar Charging Case (\$49.95) allows you to purify water even when you're off the grid. The retail price of \$129.95 starts to look pretty reasonable when you consider how much you might spend on bottled water over your next few dive trips. For more information, go to [www.hydro-photon.com](http://www.hydro-photon.com).

Use this nifty portable water purifier to banish stomach trouble on your next dive trip.



( STAT )

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Estimated number of herring making up a school the size of Manhattan off the coast of New Jersey. The school was observed last year by ship-based sonar technology as part of the 10-year worldwide Census of Marine Life.