

undercurrent

Special Report

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When Dive Computers Go Missing

questions arise from a tragic fatality

The August 16 drowning of a 12-year-old girl taking a scuba class is indeed a tragedy. But the circumstances surrounding the death of Dylan Harrison at a Texas lake in Kaufman County, less than an hour east of Dallas, are a tragedy that never should have occurred. What happened? Much is a mystery.

We divers know a computer is essential diving gear, even an equivalent to an airplane's black box if there is an accident. One can review dive profiles of the victim and everyone involved, including instructors and divemasters. And, one can assume that Dylan's diving instructor, William Armstrong, who worked for ScubaToys, a Carrollton dive store, would know how critical computers are in understanding an accident, especially since he was also a deputy with the nearby Collin County Sheriff's Office.

Apparently, the data from his computer has never been analyzed. The Kaufman County Sheriff's Office has Dylan's computers, but has not indicated that it has been downloaded and reviewed. Furthermore, Jonathan Roussel accompanied Armstrong as a divemaster, and his dive computer is missing. He claimed to have tried to download the data, but later lost the computer while diving in another lake.

David Concannon, a highly regarded diving industry lawyer who handled the Linnea Mills Montana death case, has taken this case *pro bono*. Alerted by concerned divers, he told Fox4 KDFW News in mid-October that he had been telling Kaufman County Sheriff's Office since early September that the dive computers were key to the investigation and needed to be downloaded. They never attempted to secure the computers. Then, they finally said, "We're going to look at the available evidence." Concannon says the keyword is "available."

"My investigator, a 26-year veteran of the FBI who ran the FBI dive team, has spoken to one of the professionals, and he no longer has his dive computer. He lost it in a 90-foot-deep lake," said Concannon.

Concannon says if someone searched for the computer, it would still work. He then told the sheriff's office what he learned about the lost dive computer in an email.



Dylan Harrison photographed by her mother before she began her last dive.

He wrote, "This is the first case I've had, out of almost 300, where answers have not been forthcoming, and evidence was not gathered at the scene or shortly thereafter by the people who know what to do. If you are responsible for investigating the death of anyone, but especially a child, you should give those families answers as soon as you possibly can."

How Many Certification Deaths are Permissible?

Those who teach scuba should understand the responsibility of taking unsuspecting people into the hostile, non-life-supporting environment underwater. Do some dive stores put profit over safety?

Joe Johnson, the owner of ScubaToys, the dive store that was training Dylan Harrison, has been seen on video, recorded at a meeting in 2017, discussing past diving deaths, saying, "Our insurance company just settles."

An instructor at the meeting, concerned about the direction of the discussion on scuba instruction standards, started recording the interaction. After the meeting, the instructor decided to no longer work with the company.

In the video, Johnson says, "All I know is we've killed ... what? Four people? Five people? And we've never even done a deposition. Our insurance company just settles. Our insurance agent says we can kill two people a year, we are fine."

It wasn't idle banter. Shocked at these statements regarding killing with no consequences, the instructor sent the entire 45-minute video to John Banks, who was NAUI's regional director.

Banks told Fox 4 that while NAUI decided the video was not actionable at the time, he now finds it essential to bring it to light after Dylan's death. Banks, who is no longer with NAUI, says he hopes NAUI will revoke its certification of ScubaToys based on the video.

Banks added, "Scuba [training] is not regulated. It is self-regulated. We have spent years and decades doing it the right way. What I'm seeing is a transition to what has happened. It could become normal if we don't fix this. Safety can't be something calculated based on profit and loss reports."

The story, originally on Fox4 Dallas-Fort Worth News, has gone viral, with one video on TikTok garnering over five million views. A typical reaction from veteran diving instructor Dave Sutton (Narragansett, RI) was, "The only safe ratio for young learners is 1:1. Teaching kids in groups simply isn't safe."

The Death

Dylan, from Rockwall, Texas, hoped to obtain her open-water certification with ScubaToys at The Scuba Ranch, a privately owned 22-acre spring-fed lake in Terrell, Texas. She was looking forward to diving afterward with her father and grandfather. It was not to be.

Eight student divers, including Dylan -- who was buddied up with a 12-year-old boy -- were being certified by Armstrong, who was assisted by divemaster Roussel. They descended to a platform 16 feet deep. Divers in the water that day were quoted as saying visibility was 2-3 feet, "about the length of your arm in front of you."

In what Concannon describes as a miscommunication between student and instructor, a trainee went to the surface, so Armstrong brought the others up. When they descended again, Dylan disappeared.

Armstrong later said that when he noticed Dylan was missing, he "immediately began searching for her," then surfaced with the group and alerted another team when he couldn't find her.

She was eventually found at a depth of 42 feet, away from the platform, by divers from International Scuba, another Carrollton dive store. Richard Thomas, the dive store owner, told Fox4 KDFW News that "When we finally realized it was a girl in water lost from her class, all my instructors had gear already. I had them get in."

"I ran over to the other shop's pavilion. . . no one was doing anything. They were all standing shell-shocked. . . A lady walked down. I said, 'Is there an instructor here?' She said, 'Yes, my husband.' I said, 'Where is he?' She said, 'He's standing right in front of you.'" I asked, 'What is going on? Where did you see her last? I have people in the water, help me out,' Thomas said. "He started telling me, 'I didn't do anything wrong.' . . . It was very difficult to get information out of him."

Thomas said one of his divers managed to locate Dylan within seven minutes of searching.

Two months after the fatality, there remains disagreement about what procedures were followed during Dylan's fatal dive. According to a student, they let their air out of their BCDs and descended as a group, but not on the line. The instructor's and dive master's statements claim the group descended on a line. "Which is the way you're supposed to," Concannon said.

Training Rules

Most training standards allow up to 10 trainees to be accompanied by one instructor, aided by a divemaster, although that presumes benign conditions with clear water. Mark Caney of PADI told *Undercurrent* that, typically, there are “additional limits where children are concerned: For any open water or confined open water dive that includes 10-11-year-olds, the maximum ratio is 4:1; no more than two of the four may be age 10 or 11.” ScubaToys is affiliated with NAUI.

The rules depend very much on the responsible attitude of those teaching. Even with a divemaster to help, the two would have been hard-pressed to keep track of all the trainees in the poor visibility, especially when so many would have been crowded together on the small underwater platform. And trainees in an Open Water certification class cannot be expected to take responsibility for their buddies -- they are too concerned that their own regulator delivers air. Especially if they are 12 years old.

Pairing two children as buddies shows a lack of understanding of the emotions of children who have little experience of breathing underwater. Dylan’s parents paid for individual instruction and had expected she would be paired with an instructor who could take responsibility for the child and be capable of a rescue if required, a responsibility no 12-year-old buddy could realistically assume.

Back in 2010, the late Bret Gilliam wrote in *Diving & Hyperbaric Medicine*, “The recreational diving industry has seen an increase in accidents and fatalities. Many of these fatalities have been the result of the degradation of the training standards of those who are responsible for initial training.”

Shortly after the incident, The Scuba Ranch permanently suspended Armstrong from teaching at the

facility and suspended Scuba Toys pending the results of an investigation. He recently resigned from the Collin County Sheriff’s Office.

The Aftermath of the Search

Thomas says he had concerns about how long Armstrong, Dylan’s instructor, had been out of the water before the search was instigated, since Armstrong appeared to be dry when he met him. It raises the question: how long was it before anyone realized Dylan was missing? Why did Dylan go missing during the second descent? These questions can be answered if the computer data is downloaded and analyzed.

Dylan’s family is seeking answers and accountability after the death of their 12-year-old daughter during the scuba class, citing a failure by law enforcement to secure and analyze crucial evidence, including missing dive computer data. There appears to be a lot of haste in closing the case.

As David Concannon says, “One hour and 37 minutes -- that’s how long it took from the time 12-year-old Dylan Harrison was declared dead until the Kaufman County Sheriff’s Office called her parents to tell them they were closing the investigation into their daughter’s death. Dylan’s bathing suit wasn’t even dry yet.”

Why were the computers not impounded by the police so that their data could be downloaded? Was the Kaufmann County Sheriff’s Office covering for the mistakes of a fellow lawman? Texas Rangers are now assisting the Kaufman County Sheriff’s Office with the reopened investigation.

John Bantin

Undercurrent’s primary sources include David Concannon and Fox4 Dallas-Fort Worth News reports.

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