

'Once You Get Under the Surface, You're Safe'

So Say Madison Skin Divers, Who Have Become Experts on Mendota, Perch and Beer Cans

By GEORGE VUKELICH

MADISON, Wis.—It was a ripply, sparkling day on Lake Geneva when the fisherman noticed a bright yellow something drifting 100 yards off his stern. Upping his anchor, he backwatered until an inertubelike rig bumped into his gunwale. He lifted the rig into the boat and then saw the attached line trailing away into the depths.

He might have been expecting a fish or some sort of bonus booty, but what he got was a diver, in rubber suit, "lung" and flippers. The diver surfaced, raised his glass face mask, removed his mouthpiece and smiled.

"I guess this is yours," the fisherman said sheepishly. He hefted the yellow tube. "I didn't see anybody around."

"I was down at the bottom," the diver said.

"Oh? Whattaya doin' down there?"

"Just looking."

Safe Under Water

"Oh," the fisherman said. He tossed the yellow float into the water.

The diver began to adjust his mask. "Well," he said. "See you around."

The fisherman shook his head.

"Not down there you won't!"

The Madison Diving club still chuckles about that Geneva outing.

"We've come a long way since then," Vice-President Dick Bowen says. "Now the

floats carry a flag marked 'diver' and boats are supposed to stay 200 feet away from us."

"There's a lot of motorboat traffic on Mendota," President Harold Stitgen adds. "On most lakes. It could be rough if they didn't see us."

Bowen nodded his blond, close cropped head.

"And that's our biggest worry. Once we're underwater it's pretty safe."

The club members got underwater in the first place largely because a buddy returned from wartime service in the navy frogmen. They struggled through a sink or swim phase of homemade equipment, leaky, uncomfortable dives and trial and error lake testing. They studied the literature of skin diving, notably the Frenchman Phillippe Dirole and the famed Capt. Jean Cousteau.

"We had women members, too," Stitgen smiles. "We had two UW coeds in the club for a while until they were graduated. They're teaching school now."

Freeze the Flippers

The "lung" consists of a portable tank in webbed shoulder straps hosed up to a "demand regulator" and linked to a rubber mouthpiece. The mouthpiece is clenched in the

teeth, covered with the lips and air is sucked in. A shut-off valve thereupon closes the compressed air supply until it is again "demanded." A glass face mask, set in rubber, fits over the eyes and nose, providing clear vision and an air space for exhalation. This is the business end of SCUBA (Self Contained Under Water Breathing Apparatus).

Basic SCUBA required of divers is mask, flippers, snorkel, knife and rescue pack (fired by a carbon dioxide cartridge, the pack inflates like water wings and carries the diver to the surface if he gets into trouble).

"Most of our members have rubber suits, too," Bowen adds. "For cold water. You know, if you dive below the thermocline, that temperature can be in the thirties and you freeze your flippers off."

Through the Ice

"We usually put on a pair of longjohns under the suit if we're going to deep dive," says Stitgen. "Wintertime, a couple of pairs of longjohns, wool socks, even a heavy muffler. We dive 12 months a year, you know. Right through the ice."

"It's cold but quiet," Bowen says.

"No motorboats."

The club was formed last March and now has 30 members. The menfish swim in from all walks of life. Stitgen is a printer, Bowen a baker. In the rubber suits and under the snorkels you can find biologists, civil engineers, a mechanic, a policeman, university students, a housewife and a Catholic priest.

Most of the members learned diving the hard way,

on their own. "And some of us nearly drowned," Bowen says. "That's one big reason we organized. It only takes one mistake down there."

Expert Swimmers

To prevent that one mistake, the club will hold a 12 week course in the city YMCA pool this winter. All equipment and instruction will be furnished free.

The Madison Diving club insists its members be expert swimmers. An incoming diver must not only meet Red Cross lifesaving requirements, he must also skin dive to a depth of 18 feet wearing only flippers and mask. A senior diver must be able to lose and recover his mouthpiece and face mask 10 feet down. He must be able to ditch all apparatus underwater. And he must be able to reach a minimum of 30 feet with all equipment.

Fish and Beer Cans

The club has aided the university scientists who are studying Mendota's famous perch population.

"Sometimes they have difficulties in their sonar trackings," Stitgen says. "Then they ask us to go down and take a look."

"They say there's 50 to 80 million catchable perch in Mendota," Bowen adds. "I don't think that surprises the perch fleet."

"Say, about that perch fleet," Stitgen says. "You know, you can tell where they fished by the beer cans on the bottom." He turns to Bowen and smiles. "Fifty to 80 million?"

"I don't think," Bowen says, "that would surprise the perch fleet either."

