

Scuba diver won't let disability deter his underwater pursuits



Greg Rodriguez, left, confined to a wheelchair after a 200- car accident, dives with Jim Elliott, founder of Diveheart, which train people with disabilities to enjoy the underwater world.

About 30 feet deep on Molasses Reef off Key Largo, Greg Rodriguez chased a barracuda, temporarily eluding his scuba-diving buddy, Jim Elliott. When Rodriguez and Elliott emerged about 45 minutes later, they were chuckling.

“You left me in your dust,” Elliott said to Rodriguez.

Said Rodriguez: “I thought we could catch him.”

What made this playful exchange remarkable is that three months ago, Rodriguez, 26, was confined to a wheelchair -- the result of a traumatic brain injury from a March 2006 car accident that left him in a coma for three weeks. Rodriguez, a Marine Corps veteran from Stickney, Ill., has trouble speaking and can only walk with a cane. But you would never know he was disabled by watching him zip around in the water.

“Diving has helped me a lot. It helps me with my frustrations,” Rodriguez said. “I’m a highly active individual and Marine. Due to my disability, I can no longer run. Once I get in the water, I feel that I’m completely buoyant and can dive around the whole world and not get tired.”

GOING TO DIVEHEART

Rodriguez became a certified scuba diver more than two years ago through Diveheart -- a nonprofit organization near Chicago that trains people with a wide range of disabilities how to enjoy the underwater world. Diveheart also teaches able-bodied scuba divers how to be buddies and instructors. Elliott is founder and president of the group.

Since Rodriguez took up scuba diving, he said he has made two trips to Key Largo and one to Cozumel, Mexico. Rodriguez's last Key Largo plunge several weeks ago was a special treat because he and Elliott got to try out a new piece of equipment -- the Pegasus Thruster.

Invented by Dean Vitale of Miami, the thruster is a hands-free scooter that fastens onto a scuba tank. It weighs only about 5 pounds underwater and can propel a diver at speeds of up to two knots for 30 minutes on batteries. The diver simply pushes a button on a cord, and it goes.

Vitale briefed Rodriguez and Elliott on board the Rainbow Reef dive boat before turning them loose.

"I'll make sure the bracket is centered on your back. Keep the strap tight so it doesn't roll and keep your gear tight," Vitale said. "The motor plugs directly into the battery. There's a one-second delay when you press that switch. It'll take you a whole three seconds to be a pro at it."

Elliott nodded and looked at Rodriguez.

"So, be careful, dude. Don't lose me," Elliott said.

Elliott and several crew members helped Rodriguez into the water, and they were off, exploring Molasses Reef. Underwater photographer Sharon Baron trailed them, trying to snap photos.

"I couldn't keep up," she said.

ENJOYABLE TIME

Rodriguez was all smiles when he returned to the boat nearly an hour later.

"I enjoyed it," he said.

His diving buddy was intrigued by the possibilities of using Pegasus in Diveheart's training programs.

"This could change diving for people with disabilities," Elliott said. "If somebody is mobility-impaired, it takes them a while to get around the reef."

"This gives them the potential to see a whole bunch of dive sites. It's really cool. They can control their own destiny with this thing. They can go out and have a lot of fun with it."

By the second dive, Rodriguez was buzzing around the reef like James Bond in *Thunderball*. The Rainbow Reef staff eagerly took turns trying out the Pegasus so they could hang with Rodriguez and Elliott.

Rainbow Reef dive instructor Jardin MacDonald watched Rodriguez as he chased the barracuda. "He chased that barracuda around for about five minutes," MacDonald said, shaking his head. "It was awesome."

SHARON BARON / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD