

Weighting for Scuba Goes Old School

Reintroducing the Weight Belt

[ONE]

Before assembling the weight belt, lay out the belt and alongside position the weights in the order you want them strung on the belt.



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IF YOU HAVE BECOME A CERTIFIED DIVER during the past few years and don't require much weight to maintain proper buoyancy control, there is a good chance that you have little or no experience with the traditional web-strap weight belt. Most likely, all of your weights easily fit into a weight-integrated buoyancy compensator (BC). For divers who require minimal amounts of lead, weight-integrated BCs have virtually eliminated the need for wearing a weight belt around the waist.

In the past few years the weight-integrated BC has become the weighting system of choice for many recreational divers. Setting up your weights is as simple as inserting them into the BC's easily ditchable weight pockets or pouches. Adding or removing lead to adjust your weighting is just as easy.

Aside from being user-friendly, a weight-integrated BC allows a diver to distribute the weights where they

have the most positive effect on trim and streamlining. Most BC's have primary weight-carrying pouches/pockets on the sides and secondary pockets higher up and in the back. This places the weights where they do the most good.

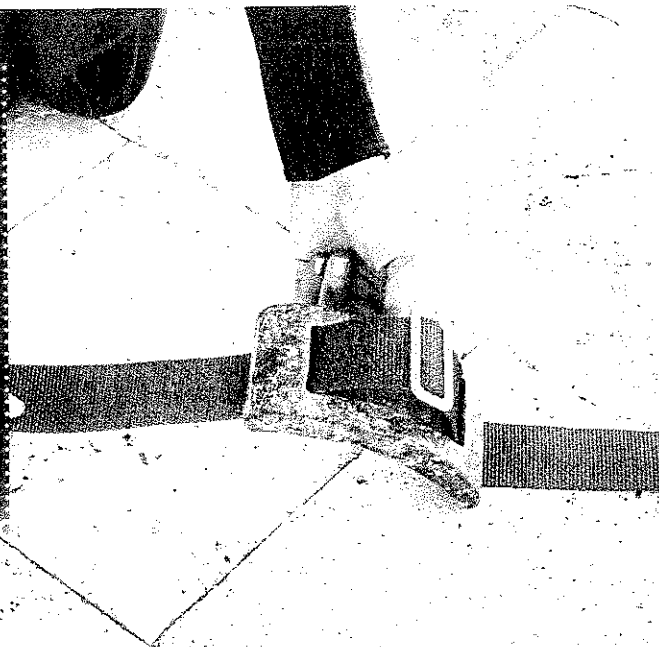
The only drawback to a weight-integrated BC is the weight-carrying limitation. Divers who want to better distribute their weights and those whose weighting needs exceed that limit must find an alternative. That's where the traditional weight belt comes back into play.

Types of Belts

To fully understand the evolution of weight belts, it is important to recognize the part played by innovations in weights. In the early years of scuba a weight system consisted of a length of 2-inch (5 cm) web strap, or possibly rubber, strung with a series of what were most likely

[TWO]

To keep the weights in place on the belt, either twist the belt a half-turn or install a retainer clip before threading the belt down through the



homemade lead blocks. The belt had a quick-release metal buckle and very probably was seriously frayed on both ends. The system wasn't pretty, but it got the job done.

As scuba matured so did weights and weight belts. Lead weights began being commercially produced and the slots for stringing the belt became more consistently sized, making it easier to assemble the system.

Before long, vinyl-coated lead weights were introduced. Because they were coated it was a little easier to string them on a belt and they also were more forgiving when dropped on a boat deck, not to mention a diver's foot. The next innovation was the pocket belt. Pocket belts were available in several designs and materials, but the basic concept was that rather than being strung on the belt the weights were carried in pockets that were part of the belt. To keep the weights in place, the pockets had a zipper closure or Velcro® flap.

The introduction of the pocket belt spawned the creation of soft weights. A soft weight is a lead-shot-filled pouch inserted into the pocket belt or weight-integrated BC. Available in a variety of sizes and different shot materials, soft weights are more comfortable and wearer-friendly than solid lead weights.

Stringing a Web Belt

Compared with other scuba equipment, a weight belt is a fairly simple piece of gear. You spend relatively little time learning how to handle it safely and efficiently, yet it is the item of equipment most likely to injure a fellow diver or damage other gear or the boat deck. Chances of having an accident with your weight belt can be minimized by assembling and handling it correctly.

Only slotted lead weights, bare or coated, are used with a web strap belt. Assembly involves stringing the weights on the belt, one slot at a time.

Begin by positioning the belt on a flat surface and laying out the weights in the order that you want them on the belt — first weight on the left goes on first, etc. Be sure to arrange them so the weight will be equally distributed — similar amount on each side (Photo 1). Place any larger curved weights where they will end up just behind the hip bones.

If you need, let's say 13 pounds (5.9 kg), 6 pounds (2.7 kg) on one side and 7 (3.2 kg) on the other is better than a 5-pound (2.3 kg) block on each side and a 3-pounder (1.4 kg) in the middle of the back, where contact with the tank will cause the weight to press against your spine. The 1-pound (0.45 kg) difference in weight on one side should be barely noticeable.

If you require more weight, say 30 pounds (14 kg), a better choice than three 10-pound (4.5 kg) blocks is to put 12 pounds (5.4 kg) on each side and another 6 (2.7 kg) distributed elsewhere — perhaps 3 in ankle weights and 3 on the tank. If using a weight-integrated BC, the weight can be distributed between it and the belt.

To string the weights on the belt, start on the left end and, from the back, thread the belt up through the first slot and pull through the slack until the weight is positioned where you want it. To keep the weight from sliding out of position, either twist the belt a half-turn or place a retainer clip on it before threading it back down through the second slot (Photo 2). Some divers secure only the weights on each end; however, twisting or clipping each weight will keep everything in position. When using a single-slot weight, place a retainer clip on each side.

Continue stringing the weights until all are in position and secure. When you lift the belt by the free end the weights should not move.

Donning and Removing

Once the weights are strung on the belt, it is time to don the belt and confirm that they are properly positioned. When handling a weight belt the most important factor is safety. Even small amounts of lead weight gone astray can damage toes, knees, scuba gear and boat decks.

Two methods are commonly used to safely don a weight belt. The step-through method is most popular among divers who wear large amounts of weight. Place the weight belt flat on the ground in front of you with the buckle on the left. Stoop and grasp the belt by the free and buckle ends, step through the belt and straighten up. The belt is now behind your back and ready to be raised to your waist (Photo 3).

An alternative method, which often is used with lighter belts, is to loop the belt, lift both ends with one hand and pass it behind your back. Reach back and grasp the nonbuckle end with your free hand and pull the belt into position around your waist.



[THREE]

The step-through method of donning a weight belt involves grasping each end and stepping over it before raising it to waist level.

The next step is the same regardless of which method you used to get the belt to waist level. Holding the buckle in your left hand and the free end in your right, bend forward so the belt lies across your lower back with the ends hanging down in front. From this position, insert the free end of the belt through the buckle, pull it snug and snap closed. Check that the buckle is securely closed before straightening up. Once erect, confirm that the weights are equally distributed and comfortable (Photo 4).

The safest method of carrying a weight belt from one place to another

is to wear it around your waist or looped in your hand with the buckle fastened. Grasp the loop with the fastened buckle at the bottom, so there is no weight on the buckle.

To remove the weight belt, use the reverse procedures from donning. Bend forward so your back supports the weight, grip both ends of the belt — this prevents it from falling off when you open the buckle — and unbuckle. With an end in each hand, lay the belt on the ground/deck behind you (the reverse of the step-through donning method). Or, if using a lighter weight belt, pass it behind your back,

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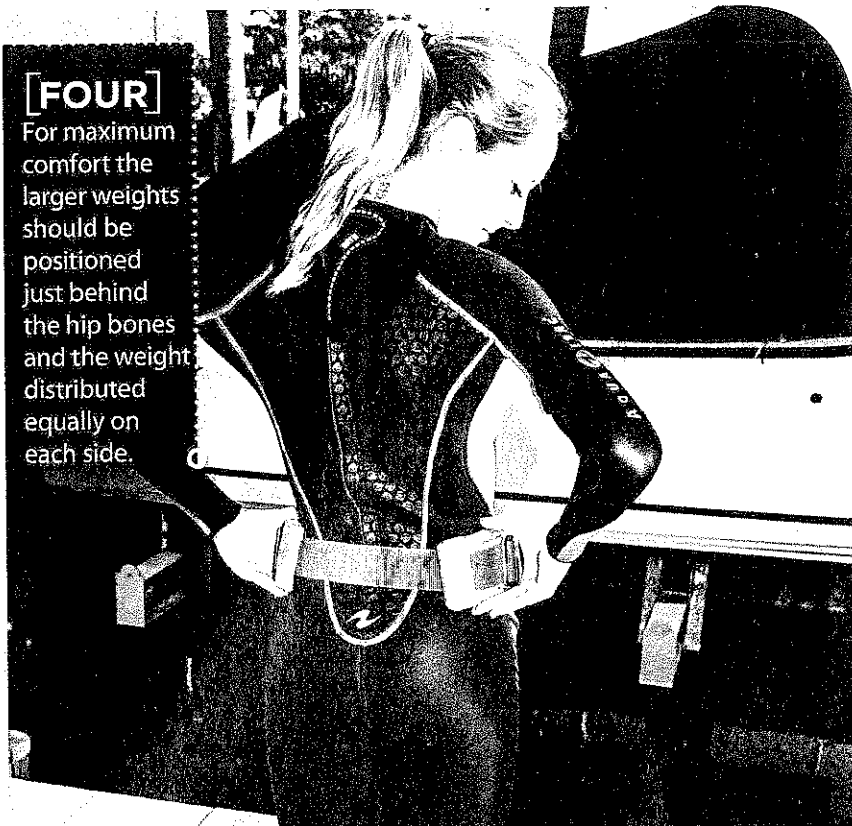
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Michael Lawrence

[FOUR]

For maximum comfort the larger weights should be positioned just behind the hip bones and the weight distributed equally on each side.



[FIVE]

When ditching a weight belt in an emergency, open the buckle, grasp the free end and hold the belt at arm's length before dropping. This should be practiced with the scuba unit in place.



form a loop held in one hand and lower the belt to the ground. Avoid holding the belt by one end, which would allow the other end to swing free.

Always remove the weight belt before the scuba unit, whether in or out of the water. When performing a deep-water exit, remove the belt and pass it up by the nonbuckle end before taking off your BC. If climbing a ladder with your gear in place, clear the exit area and then remove your belt, before removing the BC.

For safety sake it is a good idea to develop the habit of removing the weight belt with gear in place. When faced with an in-water emergency a diver must be prepared to instinctively remove the weight belt, without thinking about it — reach for the buckle, pull it open, hold belt to the side and drop (Photo 5). Donning the belt with the buckle in the left hand guarantees that the buckle can be efficiently opened with the right hand (i.e., right hand release). This too is a good habit to develop so in an emergency you won't have to think about which hand to use or which way the buckle opens.

Belt Versus Weight-Integrated BC

For many divers there is no question. If they require a minimal amount of lead, in the area of 5 or 10 pounds (2.3 or 4.5 kg), a weight-integrated BC is all that is needed. And when your weighting needs exceed that, but still are within the limits of the BC, you might want to consider distributing the lead between the BC and a weight belt. Most definitely, however, if you require more weight than the limit of your particular weight-integrated BC, you'll need to distribute the excess on a belt and/or use ankle weights. Wearing a weight-integrated BC and a weight belt applies mostly to cold-water divers.

Regardless of which option you choose, using the appropriate amount of weight for the exposure protection worn and distributing it properly makes for a safer and more enjoyable diving adventure.