

Gretchen M. Ashton Guest Blog about Fitness in Diving

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This post is provided by Gretchen M. Ashton, CFT, SFT, SFN, NBF, Founder ScubaFit, LLC

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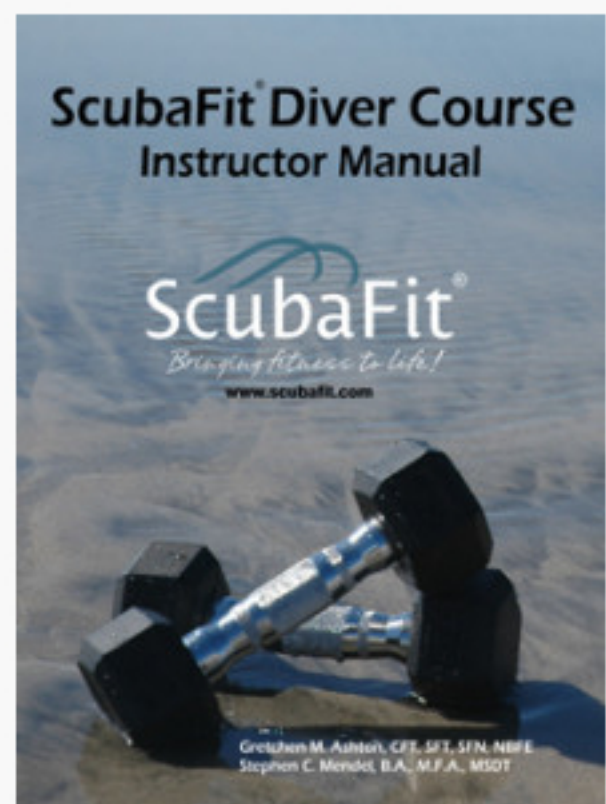
Hi Jill and Renee,

I enjoyed reading your book *Women Underwater*; particularly the section on fitness for diving, and more specifically fitness for women divers. Often this discussion includes gender differences such as size, body shape and the unique health and medical concerns of women. I also think women are more interested in being comfortable than men which leads some women to seek out solutions and others to simply choose not to participate. Although generations of women role models lead the way, diving is still a predominantly male recreational sport. I mention this to point out that many women are introduced to both recreational and professional diving by men. Not always, but most of the time without really thinking about it beforehand, women find themselves with male instructors and their dive buddy is usually a man.



From my experience women find themselves in this situation in many areas of life. I was introduced to the sports of diving, sailing, kayaking and powerlifting by men. Interestingly, I found because there were few other women around that shared my interests, I trained and participated with men. It was a clear advantage to train with men when powerlifting because most women did not have the strength to safely spot my big lifts. But I also watched many young women pushed by male coaches beyond their limits with improper training and technique into competitions. They were usually injured or humiliated and decided to quit before they ever really started. Improving my experience as an individual and as a women came from desire and experience. For example, fitness equipment is designed for people between certain heights of which I am short and out of range on the small side. This meant I had to develop training to be better than women with bigger bodies and to keep up with my male team members. It took several years and a rotation of three boats before my paddling experience helped me find the perfect boat, paddle and protection from the elements. My first two kayaks were too big for me and although a strong woman it was difficult to keep up with the men on paddling outings. Now, with ideal equipment, some men have to work to keep up with me and I never fall behind at any pace. My local yacht club held an annual women's' sailing regatta but because there weren't enough women to make full teams on every boat, the only requirement was a woman at the helm. My experience with diving equipment went fairly smoothly with options for women's gear. My biggest challenge in the beginning was finding a wet suit that fit athletic shoulders and thighs without being too long in the arms and legs. I finally went with a semi-custom option which definitely cost more. The good thing is that eventually many women become more efficient paddlers, sailors, and divers than men. Your book *Women Underwater* is an excellent resource giving women valuable insights to better enjoy their introduction to diving and comfort in the water.

With all of the above activities, the basic principles of fitness for performance and good health are the same regardless of gender. Depending on the activity and individual goals, women, because of their unique body shape, biomechanics and hormone profile usually need to train harder in the gym to accomplish the same results as men. To best prepare for diving, everyone must prioritize aerobic exercise to maintain the heart and lungs. Maintaining a healthy body weight with exercise and good nutrition is the next most important goal to reduce risks associated with diving, illness and disease. Resistance training is necessary to develop overall strength. Women divers will benefit by improved upper body and low back strength. Women often need to develop muscles of the shoulders and chest to maximize upper body strength and prevent injury during diving activities. These muscle groups can be emphasized as part of a well-rounded total body workout which most women prefer. Total body workouts prepare women for all water sports and sculpt the feminine body.



As mentioned in your book, women can also prepare by considering the type of diving and training accordingly in both skills and fitness. Fitness for women divers is first and foremost focused on individual safety and performance as well as being able to help others in an emergency. It is often the pursuit of comfort in the water and enjoyment of the sport that motivates women to get and stay in shape making them better divers.

Best Regards,

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