

HDS Honors Bonin

The Society is pleased to announce that our Advisory Board member, Dick Bonin, is the recipient of the 2009 HDS Pioneer Award



Dick Bonin, the co-founder of Scubapro, has been responsible for some of the most technically advanced equipment lines the recreational diving industry has ever seen. For those who started diving in the late 1960s or early 1970s, the Scubapro line was revered as the Rolls-Royce of scuba diving and marked a person as a serious, committed diver.

The list of diving notables who swore by the venerable Scubapro brand included Stan Waterman, Paul Tzimoulis, Dick Anderson, Jack McKenney, Dr. George Benjamin, Tom Mount, Ann Kristovitch, Sheck Exley, Jim Bowden, Wes Skiles, Hal Watts, Rob Palmer, Howard & Michele Hall, Marty Snyderman, Bob Talbot, Jimmy Stewart, Chuck Nicklin, Dr. Sylvia Earle, myself, and just about every Caribbean and Pacific divemaster who knew that the gear from Dick Bonin would endure just about every abuse and still bring them back alive.

It was a brand built from the outset on the reputations of Bonin and his staff who promised high performance and reliability without compromise. Bonin also took the unprecedented step of offering a lifetime guarantee on his equipment, including parts! Think back a moment to some of the "firsts" that Bonin's Scubapro company brought to the industry: the enduring flow-through piston design of his regulators beginning with the immortal Mark V introduced in 1970, the first low-pressure BC inflator, the first back-mounted BC for widespread distribution, the first silicone mask, the first jacket style BC (the infamous Stabilizing Jacket), the shotgun snorkel

incorporating an exhaust valve that made clearing effortless, the first integrated inflator/second stage regulator called the AIR II, the first analog decompression meter, the first pilot valve assisted second stage called the AIR I, and last but not least, the celebrated Jet Fin that forever changed the design of what used to be called "flippers." It's a legacy unequaled to this day and perhaps forever.

Dick's passion for providing great equipment that constantly pushed the envelope in design and practicality, along with the best dealer support in the industry, made him almost a mythical character to those who had a chance to work with him. Above all, Dick was, first and foremost, a real diver who personally evaluated, tested and approved every item his company brought to market. He surrounded himself with the brightest minds in the industry and pushed his research and development engineers to produce the next great piece of diving gear that no serious diver could be without... every year for what seemed an eternity in the short history of the burgeoning diving business.

Bonin got his start as a Navy officer assigned to some of the earliest dive teams and cut his teeth testing gear and blowing up beach approaches in some of the most distant locations in the world. When his Navy hitch was up, he decided to take a stab at selling dive gear for some early manufacturers, before realizing that the only way he was going to get the kind of equipment and the company policies he believed in was to do it himself. A

partnership with another diving pioneer, Gustav Dalla Valle, led to the start of their own company in 1963. Both men were working for the soon-to-be-bankrupt Healthways company. Dick had been brought in to manage a new division for diving equipment that would be sold only through professional dive stores under the name Scubapro. When the parent company bit the dust, Gustav bought the rights to the name and got its earnest hard-charging manager as well. He paid the princely sum of one dollar! Dick has noted ruefully, "Gustav bought Scubapro for a dollar and got me with it. He always said he overpaid."

Well, if he did overpay, these two oddly matched entrepreneurs quickly turned that investment into one of the largest success stories in diving history. When I met Dick, he was 42 years old and was the toughest guy I ever met.

Today, at 80, he looks like he can still kick my butt and those of anyone else who might challenge him. He's still an active free diver and spearfisherman who regularly lands big fish in the company of other top divers young enough to be his grandchildren. His leadership and innovative drive influenced the entire diving industry for generations. He has honored me for nearly 40 years with his friendship. I can think of nothing I hold more dearly.

I join with the Board of Directors of the HDS in congratulating my very dear friend and mentor in receiving this well earned, and deserved, recognition. 🐠

—Bret Gilliam