Safety Tip of the Month – October 2007
VSI Safety Committee
"Shallow Water Diving Safety"

Myths and Facts of Shallow Water Diving

Myth 1. Everyone knows that they can break their neck and suffer spinal cord injury from diving into shallow water.

Fact 1. Very few people know that they can in fact break their neck and/or suffer spinal cord injury from diving into water five feet or less. Many people know they can hit the bottom and, in fact, have done so, but most of them have never suffered injury and, in fact, many of them will not believe that they can suffer such an injury.

Myth 2. Everyone knows what "shallow water" diving is.

Fact 2. Our nation's 100 million average recreational swimmers do not know what "shallow" water is. Interviews with hundreds of these average recreational swimmers by aquatic experts over the past five years indicate that "shallow" water can mean anything from 18 inches to four feet. Very few recreational swimmers consider a depth of five feet shallow water.

Myth 3. I know how to dive. I've been doing this since I was eight years old and I've never been injured.

Fact 3. The more than 100 million average recreational swimmers in our country are taught how to dive at an early ages, such as 7, 8 or 9. The majority of them are taught in shallow water, 3 to 4 feet or less. Few, if any of them are taught that once they become teenagers, it is unsafe to dive into such depths of water. Young swimmers in our country should be taught to dive into the minimum depth of 5 feet from the earliest age. The danger should be reinforced in their minds throughout their lives.

Myth 4. I've seen dozens of my friends dive into three feet of water and they don't get hurt, therefore, I can do it. I can dive by their "example".

Fact 4. The fact is that fortunately the vast majority of people that do dive into shallow water do not get injured, although many of them do hit their head on the bottom. The myth is that because many of them are lucky, that it won't happen to "me". Unfortunately, it does happen to over 1,000 people each year, probably all of whom had previously seen people dive into shallow water.

Myth 5. Diving is simple. Everyone knows how to do it.

Fact 5. Diving is not simple. There are very complex laws of physics which are totally unknown and not understood by the average recreational swimmer. The fact is that once your body leaves the deck or diving area, your body is completely out of control and that for an average recreational swimmer there's nothing you can do to change your trajectory or entry speed at that point.

Myth 6. The ideal dive is a nice "clean" dive, causing no splash or ripple.

Fact 6. This is not the "ideal" dive for the untrained or unsupervised average recreational swimmer. Again, we have the myth of "diving by example". In the Olympics and other competitive events, we see "clean" dives, but these are done by trained, skilled and supervised divers, not average recreational divers. A clean, ripple less dive also requires at least 12 - 14 feet of water. It is almost impossible to do this in 5 to 6 feet of water.