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### Diving with a difference

Handicapped divers prove their mettle and their class at the Fifth Dive Challenge in Muscat, organised by the Oman Disabled Divers' Association, writes David Solomon

HANDICAPPED divers made a real splash and proved once more that they are equal to the best when it comes to scuba diving. Over 40 handicapped divers made over 70 dives over the course of three days – October 14, 15 and a major part of 16 – before moving on for another two days of diving in Sohar.

Adding more colour and weight to this spectacular event was the presence of expert divers, instructors and doctors of Hyperbaric Medicine – that category of medicine that particularly deals with physical problems and ailments divers encounter – coming all the way from Germany and Austria, including Dr Roswitha Prohaska (president of the Austrian Society for Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine) and Dr Wilhelm Welslau (president of the German Society for Hyberbaric Medicine). Both are dive instructors and are taking care of safety). Dr Roswitha has been coming regularly to Oman since the past three years to attend all the handicapped meets held so far over here. Other team members include Nina Wyssenbach from Switzerland, working as a surface support team member. Nina says: Surface support is all about briefing the handicapped diver of what is happening before they get into the water, what they will be required to do once they're underwater and the routine they have to follow once they've finished their dives and are back on land".

She adds: "I'm actually the bridge between the divers and the doctors and the instructors". Talking about a handicapped team member who has a similar role in this Fifth Dive Challenge, Nina mentions the name of Saif Al Rawahy, an ex Royal Air Force of Oman (Rafo) who suffered crippling injuries in a plane crash, who also has a similar role to play. "Saif actually plays a more important role than me because he can talk to the handicapped divers in Arabic, making them feel more comfortable. Of course once you're underwater you can't talk at all and everybody understands the sign language that is used by divers underwater.

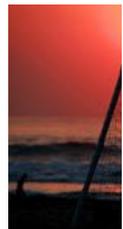
Tareq Al Khabori, the motivating force behind the organisation, who has been working with handicapped people since 1984 and who is referred to as the 'Father of the ODDA' said: "In many countries, diving is already part of therapies for handicapped people as 'inwater activities' have a positive influence on the body and enhances mental and physical fitness. Post-incident depressions can be healed and disabled people motivated to get back to social activities."

Stefanie Trier, one of the founding members of ODDA and an experienced

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diving instructor, said: "In the beginning when we first came up with the idea of introducing diving to the disabled, we were all sceptical about it. But to my surprise, the handicapped turned out to be excellent students, extremely disciplined and eager to do all exercises with high performance. This motivated me to become a diving instructor for the handicapped."

The first dive challenge for disabled was held in March 2009 at the Oman Dive Centre in Muscat. Following its success, the Ministry of Sports Affairs asked the dive challenge team to organise such events on a regular basis in Oman. Diving events for the handicapped have since been held in Sur, Salalah and Nizwa. Nawras, Omantel, Bank Sohar, Euro Divers, Y-Oman and Qalhat-LNG are among the main sponsors of this year's event.

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