

A young man with dark hair and glasses is shown in profile, looking out towards the ocean. He is wearing a brown sweater and is leaning on a stone pier. The background shows a blue body of water and a distant shoreline with buildings under a clear sky.

Rene Leonardo Rojas
diving for life

Forty-one years ago I joined **The Group of Subaquatic Activities**, a dive club
them so badly. That's what we were back then...a combination of

Our school was perched on a hill that over looked the cold pacific ocean, just



at my school in Valparaiso, Chile. I had just turned sixteen and I wanted to join
{students and dreamers}
a stones throw from the water. For some crazy reason, all we wanted to do was
submerge ourselves in it.



My instructor was a classmate who had just recently become the president of the club, Luis Orlando Morales Villablanca. With great patience, he guided us to develop the skills and the knowledge required to finally make the plunge and survive it. How incredible it was to see clearly under water and to learn the magic of equalizing the pressure in my ears, overcoming that obstacle opened the door to my underwater career. All us students were so eager that we were literally running to achieve perfection on every new skill presented to us. As we progressed, we moved into scuba with emphasis placed on learning good skills, understanding the different situations and to anticipate and minimize risks.

At the beginning of December, just before the end of the school year, the club decided to have a weekend dive trip. The site was Quintero bay, about 50 miles north of Valparaiso. There were 12 to 15 of us that made the trip. The discipline was good and we all had a chance to dive. We shared the few pieces of diving equipment. This did not necessarily included a wet suit, and the water was so cold. But visibility was excellent and on the rocky bottom we could see some fish swimming around. **Needless to say, we had found paradise. That day it was just freediving and a little spearfishing by the most experienced divers. The fish was delicious. That gave us material to dream the whole summer.**

The following year gave us more and more new experiences. The club acquired a few wetsuits of different sizes. This allowed more of us to spend time in the water in relative comfort. The dives were usually on Sundays and they consisted of dressing in the school facilities, walking down the long stairways, walking across the Avenida Espanha to the shoreline and then swimming for a long distance. Sometimes we'd make one scuba dive on a newly found

wreck or just freedive to collect shellfish in the extensive reefs in the bay. Spearfishing came later. In the meantime we read every thing we could find in our library related to diving, mainly material coming from Europe like Mondo Sommerso from Italy, C.R.I.S. from Spain and other publications that looked interesting but difficult to read, in German and French. Of course, we devoured the early Cousteau books and the ones by Hans Hass that told us more about this world we were just starting to walk or, rather, swim into.

Another older guy, Jose Ampuero, joined the club. He had some diving experience and, for him, there was never enough time in the water. But even more, he had a Vespa scooter that could take a couple of guys to places farther away. He loved spearfishing and he had his own wet suit, an ever so stiff suit made in Italy by Pirelli. While diving with him, I saw my first sheephead (almost identical to the one in California) and learned to identify other species, like rollizos, bilagais, lenguados, congrios and the closest fish we could find in our waters to a grouper, it was black, it grew up to 25 pounds, sometimes, and it lived in caves and holes on the bottom. As we had read in the European literature, we learned to look for promising features and to approach them carefully and to allow our eyes to get used to the darkness to see this fish that, for us, was every bit as noble a catch as the mystical Mediterranean grouper, and just as good to eat.

One good day I was in the water with this small double banded Arbaleta in about 20 ft of water. I got there with a friend, Lucho, who rowed me in his small wooden boat. It was late in the afternoon, the water was clean and as usual, cold. The reef's name was "el bajo del burro" and the top raised almost to the surface. I dropped to the bottom on one side of the rock

formation and noticed what looked like a narrow channel that had a rock on top, forming a cave. My heart was racing as I looked into the darkness, slowly my eyes adjusted to see a chamber with an opening at the other end. There in the middle was this magnificent fish, suspended, looking at me with black eyes on a black head with black pectoral fins spread like those groupers I had seen in numerous pictures in the European magazines, identical, except in color. The short 7 mm shaft hit it between the eyes and the fish did not even twitch. I pulled it out of the cave and grabbed it by the eyes. **My friend had the boat right next to where I surfaced. He received the fish and identified it for me, my first 14 pound "vieja" (graus nigra). The adrenaline can keep you warm for just so long and shortly after that I got out of the water, shivering but so incredibly happy. Later, Lucho's mother cooked the fish, making a delicious soup with the head and spine. Then she served the fillets fried with a "chilean salad" of well-seasoned slices of tomatoes and thinly sliced onions. What a day. My first fish.**



Our club had joined the Chilean Under-water Federation (FEDESUB) in 1962. We began receiving all the information related to that organization's activities, mainly spearfishing competitions at local, national and international levels. There was a meet taking place in Los Vilos in December. Out of curiosity to test our fish catching abilities, we decided to enter. My dive buddy was my mentor, Luis Morales. Since we never competed before we signed up for B division. A boat took us to the dive area and I remember catching a bunch of fish. We did not attend the banquet (no money), but it was O.K. because our catch put us in third place and there were only trophies for first and second place. Did I mention we hitchhiked the 150 miles to the meet? Both ways!

From that meet I remember several things, like getting to know Alfredo Cea and Federico Schaeffer, both National and South American Champions. They did not win the A division this time. That honor went to a local fisherman, known by the nickname of "Palmatoria" Tapia. His total catch consisted of "viejas" only and instead of a speargun he used a piece of wire with a hook welded to one end of it. His mask was a simple, yellow color, oval one and he did not use a snorkel, making his spectacular catch even more remarkable. In later years, a younger brother of his, Erwin Tapia, became National and South American Champion and placed top five in World Tournaments, a nephew of theirs, Franco Borque, represented Chile at the 2002 World Championships in Brazil.

I noticed other things too, like the fact my team was probably the humblest one there, the youngest one for sure and very probably the worst equipped. We were so intimidated by those big competitors, with the best and the latest in diving equipment. Strangely though, a few of them did not catch a single fish and a few others got sick or caught less than we did...

At the beginning of '63 we "discovered" hyperventilation. In what we should have recognized as a warning, one of my classmates blacked out while trying to beat his own record in UW swimming. I made a supervised dive to 85 ft. in one breath hold. It felt easy, but after that we did not try for depth or time, we felt no need for that.

Then in September of 1963, we entered another spearfishing competition similar to a National event. We had to scramble for equipment, especially spearguns. Each team consisted of 3 divers and we entered 2 teams. The location was a fishing village, Tongoy, about 250 miles North of Santiago. My teammates were again Luis Morales plus another experienced

diver, Steve McColl. Conditions were perfect and there were a large number of divers in the water. The three of us had one boat and we got dropped not too far from each other. The blue water was crystal clear, not common for us. I remember having to resort to catching smaller fish because my old Cressi Saetta spring gun, would just push the big sheephead away from me.

Every thing was going fine, when suddenly we realized that Luis was not around. We started looking for him from the boat. With so many competitors in the water it was not easy to tell who was who. After a while we got scared and went to the staging area, thinking he may be there, but nothing. We alerted the organizers and returned to the diving area with scuba equipment. After a short search Steve found Luis on the bottom, face down, with a big fish on his gun. As Steve brought him up, he looked so relaxed, like he was sleeping...my heart sank. How could this possibly be happening? The medical doctor found Luis had been underwater too long and could not save him. This happened to our hero, our mentor, our sensei, our best friend, the one that excelled in sports and was outstanding in academics, the one admired by everyone who knew him, Luis Orlando Morales Villablanca.

We believe, that our inexperience and our unconditional confidence in our friend's capability and intelligence worked against us rescuing him on time. We did not know then about Shallow Water Blackout. Back in school, the Club met and very seriously considered disbanding, but in the end the consensus was to keep on going. Our buddy Luis would have wanted it that way. After that, we developed strong safety practices, warned everybody about hyperventilation and Shallow Water Blackout. I did not enter another competition until 1969, 6 years later.

SPREAD PHOTO:
Rene and his mentor/friend Luis Morales-Dreaming 1963
PHOTO: Jose Ampuero

PHOTOS CLOCKWISE:
Rene and Juan Bustos winning a meet run by the Azocas Dive Council, Chile 1972
PHOTO: Juan Bustos

Watching giant grouper on the wreck of the eagle 1999
PHOTO: Jim Edds

With a "Hacha" South American Eliminations-Brazil 1972
PHOTO: Juan Bustos

A 17 year old Rene with a "Vieja"
PHOTO: Jose Ampuero



As you may have guessed, things changed a lot in those 6 years. Newer members brought new enthusiasm and energy. We had spent several summers in the south of Chile diving and navigating the Patagonian Channels and other beautiful locations. We had experiences of a lifetime. One of our members, Patricio Arellano, spent a summer diving the same channels with Jacques Costeau in his famous ship, Calypso.

Somewhere though, there were always diving competitions going on. Along with one of the newer divers, Juan Bustos we decided to give it another try. The rules of diving had changed. We had to dive in pairs and the points were computed to the overall catch of the team and not the individuals. This situation encouraged cooperation and communication amongst the divers in the "buddy team" and it was much safer than the 3-diver individual catches of the older system. The best teams were made of divers with similar skill levels who were able to work together. This established a strong nexus of friendship and loyalty to each other and to the club. With Juan, we entered our first Meet in B division and won. We also won the following one, but since we could not attend the third required dive, we were not eligible to go to the Nationals, but we moved to the next division.

In 1970, We participated in the Nationals and placed among the top 10 competing in the A division. The Nationals of '71 in Africa were good for us again and we both made it to the top 10, earning the chance to dive the eliminations for the 1971 World Championships in Iquique, North Chile.

There were 22 divers chosen, the best in Chile. There were two elimination dives to be held within 2 weeks of each other in Iquique. I found the south had plenty of fish in moderate depth and discovered under the palm tree kelp canopy there were schools of sheephead, called



...I just heard that the White Sea Bass are back in Palos Verdes, I should get a few divers that may need some mentoring, there are so {many places} I haven't dove yet.



**AUSTRALIAN YELLOWTAIL
WORLD RECORD**

Rene L. Rojas + Zane Rakhum (right)
42.2 kg. > 101.85 lbs.
03.01.2001
White Island > New Zealand

"guatacas" by the locals, and that if you were smart to take the ones at the periphery of the group the others would remain for your next dive. The water was like Southern California in summer, warm and clear. My boat guy was an old fisherman who immediately identified with his diver, anticipating every move of mine. Two days of diving, with six hours in the water every day, with three to four gunny sacks full to the rim with fish later, put me in 4th place, for a team of 6. For a novice diver in an unknown area, that was fantastic. Fate is such, sometimes, I caught a cold before the second elimination, entering the water with my sinuses gave me that sensation you may experienced before, of a needle being driven up inside your forehead, forcing me to dive shallow and not on the better grounds. My boatman had been replaced with an unfriendly, uncooperative one at best. I did not make it on the national team that later became World Champions. Raul Choque (chilean) took first place individual honors and John Ernst from the USA took second place.

Iquique was a great event. They even built an "Olympic Village" for the competitors. Most of

the stars of the time were there, like Italian diver Massimo Scarpatti (who is still famous today) and the then unknown Jose Amengual, who later became three times World Champion. I had the pleasure to dive with the late Marc Valentin, several times Champion of France and Europe, who confided to me that to be Champion of the World was probably easier than to be Champion of France due to the great number of talented divers competing in that country. From him I learned the greatness of the humble "arbalettes" or european guns. His guns had features I would not find in a commercially made model until very recently and his Tahitians arrows were incredible. I kept using pneumatics but little by little I used the rubber banded ones more.

In 1972, I made the Chilean team to that year's South American Meet in Puerto Madryn, Argentina. In 1973, I made the team that went to the Worlds in Cadaques, Spain. Jose Amengual won his first title. In 1974, I made it to a fun South American Meet that took place in Peru. We were accommodated in that country's naval school in Callao, near Lima, the capital. The diving was good with lots of fish.



Rene + Antarctic Humpback PHOTO: Antonio Larrea

In 1975, I did not make it to the Nationals due to my involvement in a filming project concerning a glorious wreck, La Esmeralda, a very important part of Chilean history. As a consequence, I missed my chance to dive the 1975 Worlds that took place in Peru. The experience of diving the historic ship was another of my life's highlights, though.

My last participation in competition diving in Chile was in the Nationals of 1976, not in spearfishing this time but in UW navigation and Photo Fishing, becoming the first National Champions in both specialties with my new dive buddy, Humberto Ravest. Then, that year I got married to Jacqueline Bayley, my beautiful bride.

lobsters for the family before the season ends, then there are those great young



1972 CHILEAN NATIONAL TEAM Axel Schmitt, Richard Riedel, Francisco Sanchez, Fernando Sanchez, Ricardo Voss + Rene Rojas



After spending two months diving in Antarctica, I followed my better half to California, who needed to go back to school. I thought that because of my age and being in a different country, my competition years had ended...

At the beginning of 1977 I found myself in a new country with a new language. I had to think of those things like...making a living. Very soon though, I found the best Underwater Instructors Program was where I was, in Los Angeles County. So I joined as a candidate, becoming an instructor after 3 months of hard work. The staff was fantastic and the person in charge was no less than Ron Merker, who was featured in the HSD special issue of Spring 2000, with his picture on the cover.

As I kept busy with work and dive instructing, I was always testing myself to see if I could still freedive and catch some fish for dinner. It was as much fun to hunt the calico bass in California (*paralabrax clathratus*) as it was to hunt the cabrillas (*paralabrax humeralis*) in the North of Chile.

In 1979 I met the L.A. Fathomiers at Westward Beach, where they had a club dive. I was fortunate enough to speak to one of its friendlier members, Ken Pitcher, who invited me to one of the meetings and later became my sponsor. In those years, the Fathomiers were strongly involved with competition and each member had to participate, not just in the club dives but it was highly recommended to be part of the GLACD elimination dives. So I remember wondering if I still had a chance, since I was so past my prime...

In the early 80's I joined the Fathomiers and entered competition, not taking it too seriously and not even thinking of scouting. But I did OK, I guess, since I got to go to my first Nationals in the U.S.A. in 1982, in Kona, Hawaii. My son was just 8 months old and from his endless playing in the tide pools he got so dark that every body kept asking his mom if he was a little Hawaiian kid. The main Team from the island had none other than Terry Lentz, the only American ever to earn the title of World Champion.

I scouted 4 days and marveled at the clarity of the water and the exotic fish. A couple of divers got my attention at a pre-tournament dive. I kept thinking that those guys were so incredibly good. Later, I found the divers to be John Ernst and Terry Maas, no wonder! Terry eventually won the National Title, I placed 8th overall and my consolation prize was to be number one the second day of the two-day contest.

Later that year my team placed third in the Pacific Coast Championship in Santa Cruz, California. My first team title was in 1987 in Piedras Blancas, California, with Gary Thompson and Al Schnepershoff. During the 90's and beginning of the 2000's I was part of the winning Team again, 4 or 5 times, taking the top individual honors on several occasions. I kept active on the National level, but not very hardcore. Until I put together a relatively loyal and well performing team. My best individual position was second one time and third twice. My only claim is to have been a consistent contender and that I tried my best to be honest and loyal to my teammates.

The plus, was the privilege of representing the USA in 1994 in Peru, in 1998 in Croatia, in 2000 in Tahiti and in Brazil in 2002. I made it to the team in 1996 but I just went to be a support diver in Gijon, Spain. What an honor it was to represent this great country.

So the question is: What moves you to do all this competing? There is no money in it, and only in the last few years have we had sponsorship from spearfishing manufacturers. But still, most of the expenses are the responsibility of the individual participant. **In my case, it is to see how well I can do in the sport I love, amongst the best there is. Some people compete to beat other people. In my case, I don't remember ever wanting to beat any particular person or team. The competition was always within myself. To see how well I could perform and how much I could improve. If doing my best put me on top, I felt great.** Recognition has been a great part too. I still remember those few words of praise that came, unsolicited, from outstanding competitors like John, Terry

Wendell, Tim, Terence, Paolo, Pedro, Eddie, Ernie, Skip, Karl, Mike and Glenn, Dennis, Arturo, Jean. The support from my club was always a matter of pride too. Friendships emerged as I rose to different levels. How else can you get to know the best divers in your area, in your state, in the country and in the whole world. Individuals whose names have become part of diving lore. On the other hand, one of the best parts has been sharing a dive with so many great people in my everyday life.



Upon my return from the Worlds in Brazil, in what may have been my last opportunity, I find myself at 57 years of age, thinking a lot about all this. The good days and the few unpleasant ones, the fact that my team for the next Nationals deserted me... Umh, but I just heard that the White Sea Bass are back in Palos Verdes, I should get a few lobsters for the family before the season ends, then there are those great young divers that may need some mentoring. There are so many places I haven't dove yet.

So, I confess, today, as in my beginnings, diving and competing is my life and it will be so, I hope, for a very long time. **PAU**



PHOTOS CLOCKWISE:
Catch of halibut off Vina Del Mar 1968
PHOTO: Juan Bustos

Genald Lim, Bill Ernst and Rene: National Champions in Rhode Island 1998
PHOTO: Mike McGuire

Orlando and Salvador Rojas: The Future.
PHOTO: Rene Rojas