

Scuba Confidential:

# It's Not Beasting

SCOTT BENNETT

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Photos by Scott Bennett  
and Peter Symes

**In the 1950s, in the early days of recreational scuba diver training, many of the instructors were retired ex-military and they would use words like “beasting” to describe the harsh regime they meted out to their students to ensure they met their exacting standards for diver certification. Much was made of dropout and failure rates, as if the quality of an instructor resided not in how many students passed the course but how many failed.**

This kind of mind-set was unlikely to build a successful commercial industry and, in the early 1960s, scuba diver training attitudes changed.

Over time, scuba diver training became much less of a commando exercise. The drills and skills changed so that they were no longer a test of courage, self-discipline, determination and the ability to conquer fear. The skills that were retained were those that taught new divers how to deal with the aquatic environment, manage their equipment and rescue themselves or their buddy from any emergencies that might arise. The emphasis was on “no-decompression-stop” diving, excursions where a direct ascent to the surface was always a viable avenue of escape if something went wrong, and the training was built around that

premise.

The result of these changes was a boom in the diving industry. From once being a sport that only the young, brave and super-fit could enjoy, now virtually everyone could learn to dive. So far, so very good.

However, having started swinging, the pendulum of change kept moving, as pendulums are designed to do. Over time, not only did diver training become less physically and mentally challenging, the trend towards cheaper, shorter courses meant people were being certified as divers with less well-developed capabilities. Beginner diver courses now gave students little

experience of dealing with stress and less importance was accorded to skills, such as mask clearing, that required mental discipline and took time to teach properly. It became very rare for a diver to fail a course. “Beasting” was a thing of the past.

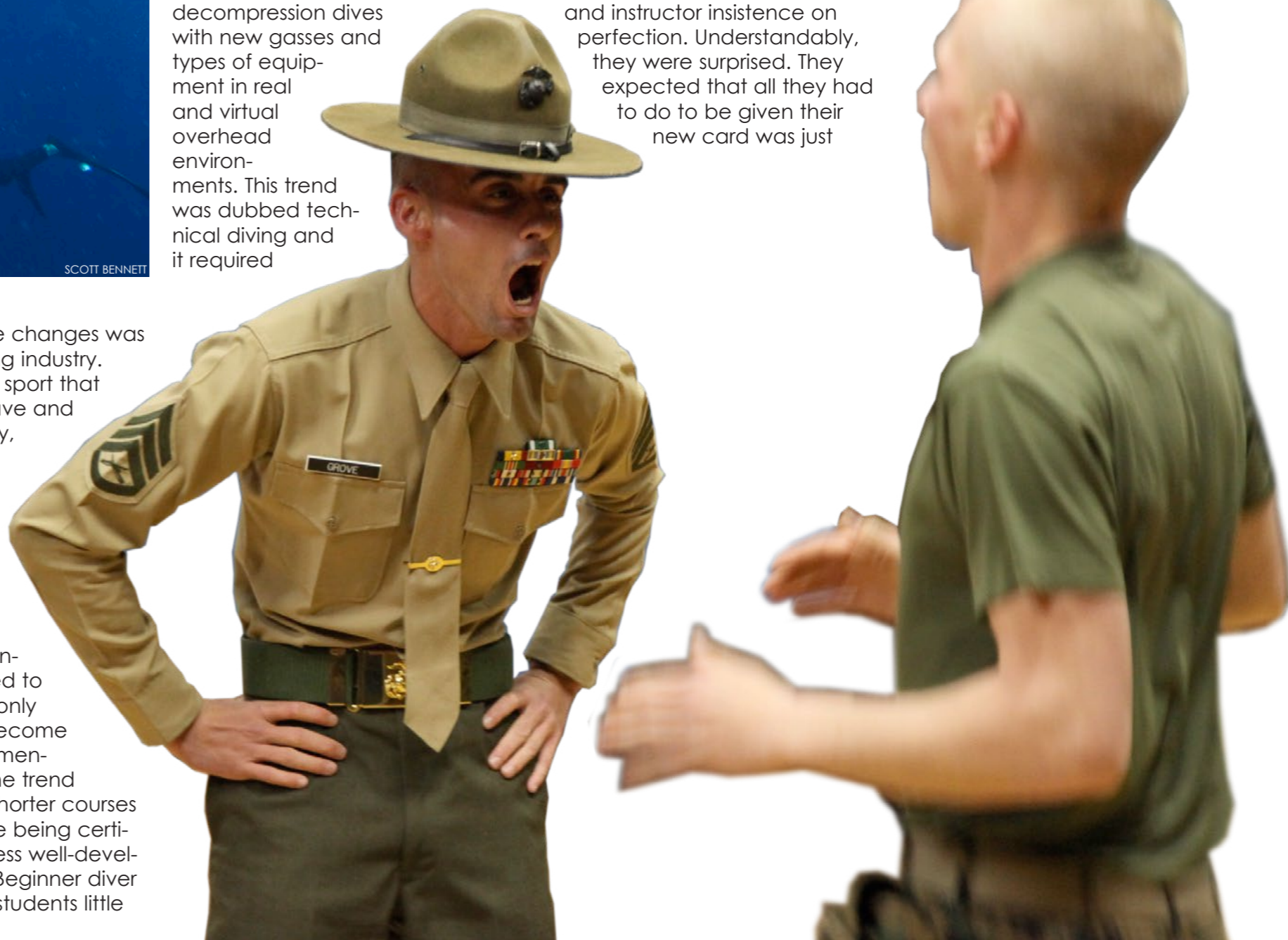
## The technical revolution

In the early 1990s, opportunities arrived for sport divers to begin engaging in extended decompression dives with new gasses and types of equipment in real and virtual overhead environments. This trend was dubbed technical diving and it required

levels of skill and training far beyond the sport diving norm.

Dealing with more complex equipment and surviving in more challenging environments and situations demanded very high levels of performance. Most candidates for technical diver training, even very experienced divers, found it very tough. They had never before encountered concepts such as conditioning exercises, repeated practice and instructor insistence on perfection. Understandably, they were surprised. They expected that all they had to do to be given their new card was just

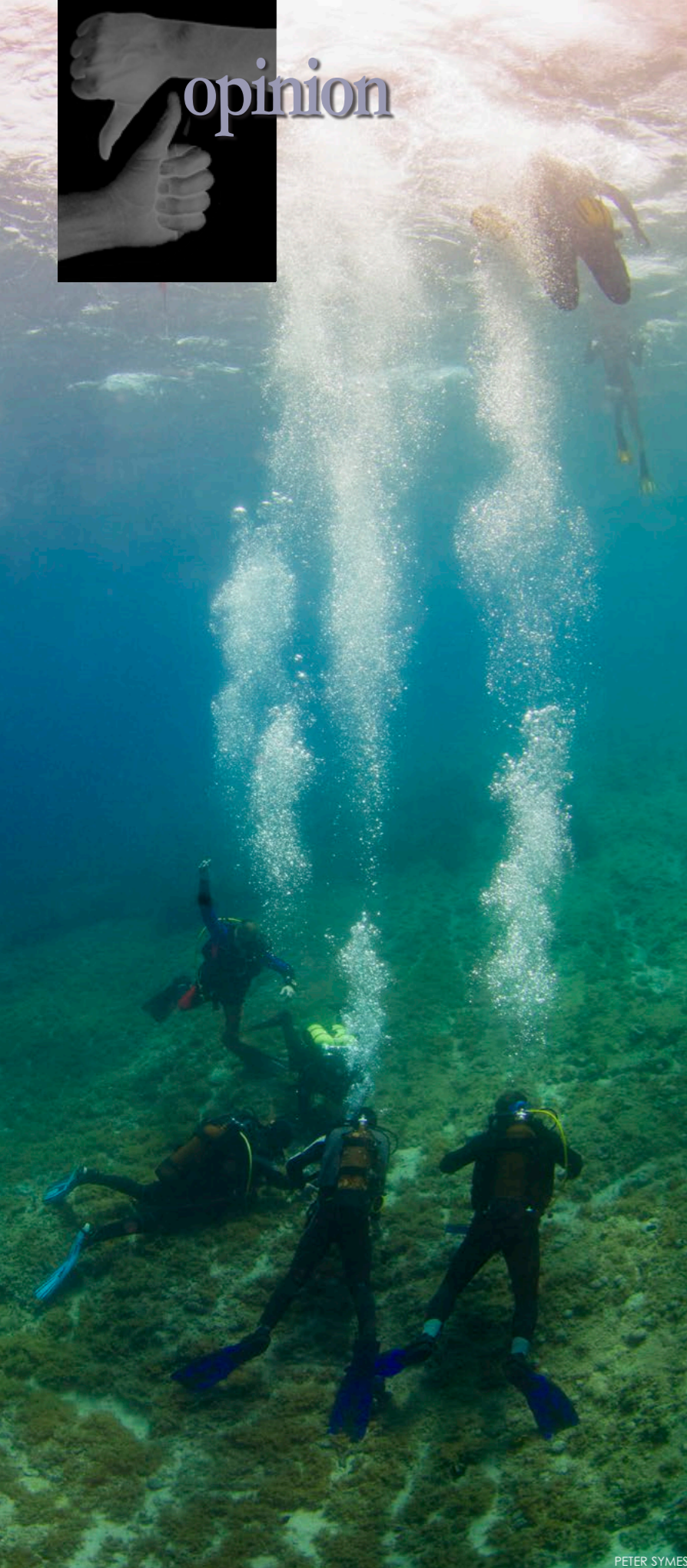
turn up, go through the motions, get things kind of right and that would be that. After all, every diving course they had done before had followed this sort of format. Oh, what a shock they got! And this, of course, led to technical diver training being referred to as “beasting”—the same word associated with the courses run back in the 1950s.



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### It's not beasting

There is a huge difference, however, between attitudes in those days and the way modern day technical diver courses are run. In technical training today, divers with poor skills are not cast aside as failures. They are encouraged to work harder and improve.

Technical diving courses are tough because the risks involved in technical diving are greater than in mainstream sport diving. Technical diving demands dedication of time and effort. Courses are academically testing. There is a vast quantity of information to digest and a huge amount of maths. The courses are also physically challenging with many hours of skills sessions and several long dives, during which students are confronted with a number of staged life-threatening incidents to deal with.

Complacency is a major threat to the safety of a technical diver. People who sign up for the courses often have a great deal of diving behind them and think that they already know everything. The initial confined water skills session is designed to be a sharp reality check, a reminder to the students that, despite their experience, they do not have the necessary skills. They discover that there are levels of diving ability that they have not even perceived before.

### Embrace the opportunity

If you are not yet a technical diver and you are contemplating going down this road, don't be deterred by this. Prepare yourself for the feeling of being a novice again and embrace



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it! Don't let your ego get in the way. Understand that the concept of pushing students to a point where they may break helps identify weaknesses in skills, mind-set, attitude or teamwork that must be strengthened if you are to become a safe technical diver.

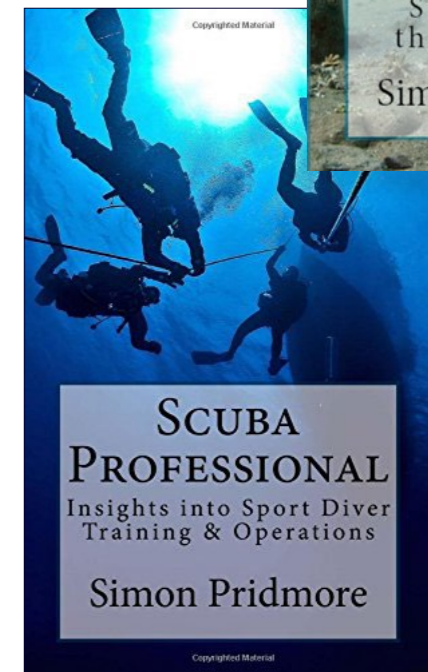
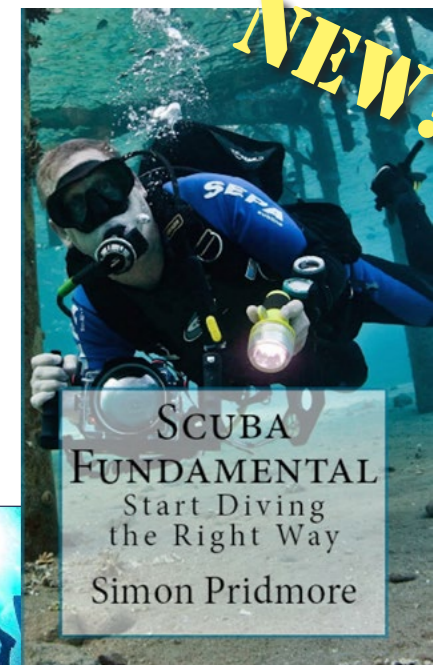
This training concept requires the instructor to devise artificial situations mimicking real life emergencies that will induce stress in the students. The students are faced with problems to solve, and their failure provides the instructor with opportunities to make teaching points in circumstances where the student is in the perfect state of mind to receive them. When divers make mistakes, particularly mistakes that they know could threaten their survival if the mistakes were made in a real life situation, then the memory of

the incident and the course of action they should have taken will become seared permanently into their minds. Such experiences also dispel complacency and encourage the diver to continue to practice and maintain their newly acquired crucial skills and instincts beyond the course so that they do not get forgotten.

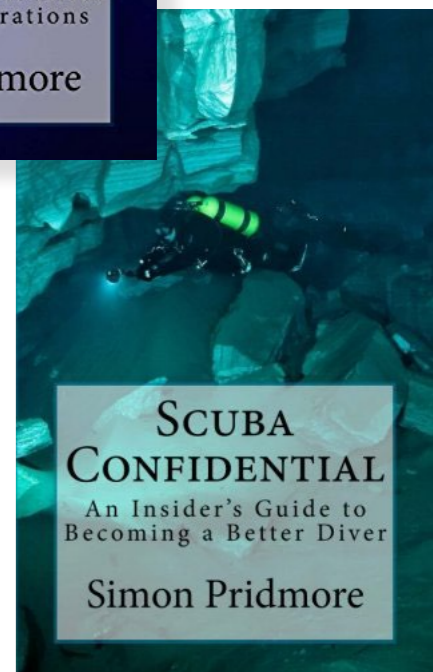
Divers learn the skills and techniques required to survive emergencies and repeat these until their performance becomes automatic. This creates a physical memory of a series of procedures that the divers will deploy instinctively, should similar emergencies occur for real in the future. Also, the knowledge that they have encountered the problem in training and dealt with it successfully gives them confidence. This is another crucial weapon in their survival armoury.

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## Not Beasting

### Luis's story

One of the reasons that technical diver training needs to be tough is in order to break divers of habits that they have fallen into and that are a threat to their survival. Let me end with an example.

Luis signed up for a technical diving course and was determined to show the instructor his stuff. He excelled in the confined water sessions and was made team leader for the first training dive.

It all started off fine. Arriving at depth, he gave an OK signal, indicated the direction of travel and then started swimming along the wall. For someone wearing doubles and a stage cylinder for the first time, his buoyancy and trim were excellent. He had a powerful fin stroke and looked good in the water. The only problem was that his team were not faring so well and they quickly fell behind.

Seeing the situation and spotting a great teaching opportunity, the instructor created a number of simulated team emergencies, all of which the team had to handle without their leader. They began to fall still further behind and, by now, Luis was too far ahead to notice. Half way through the planned bottom time, he reached the turn point of the dive. He waited patiently for

the others to catch up, flashed a quick OK sign, indicated that they were all to turn around and headed back to the ascent point. He arrived right on time. The others, who had fallen behind again, were late. This meant extended decompression time, which took them all, Luis included, to the limit of their gas reserves and created a lot of stress.

With everyone back on the boat, equipment stowed and drinks in hand, they all went to the bow for the dive debriefing. Luis was smiling confidently. But, instead of conducting the debriefing himself, the instructor handed it over to the dive team and asked them to assess their leader's performance. They completely savaged him. All the resentment, frustration and anger that had built up during the 90-minute dive spilled out. The lessons Luis learned from his teammates were transmitted with such passion that he probably still remembers them today.

Luis ran the dive as if it was a competition rather than a team exercise where, unless everyone succeeds, they all fail. Scuba diving is a team exercise, not an individual pursuit. Unfortunately, in mainstream sport diving, although the concept of diving together is mentioned frequently in the

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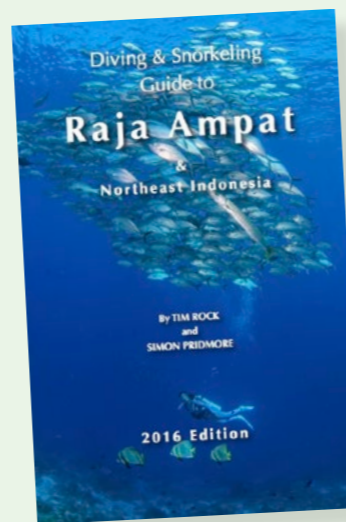
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# opinion



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context of the much-maligned buddy system, it is greatly misunderstood, poorly applied and largely ignored. So experienced divers usually end up functioning alone and only look for another diver to help them when an emergency strikes, hoping there will be someone around.

In technical diving, the concept is that the team is always stronger than the sum of its parts. It is crucial that a dive team swim together, stay in visual contact and not drift too far apart. This is so that they can always use their

combined force, skills and gas supply to help a team member who gets into difficulty. This is one of the principal things that most divers have to learn when they begin technical diving and it is not easy to break old habits. That is why the training is uncompromising. The reason why students often fail tests in the early phases of the training is that they try to solve the problems alone. Once they start working as a team, the solutions are much easier to find.





There is a method. There is a purpose. It is not just beasting! ■

*Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers, Scuba Confidential – An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional – Insights into Sport Diver Training & Operations and Scuba Fundamental – Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of diving and snorkeling guides to Bali and Raja Ampat and Northeast Indonesia. This article is adapted from a chapter in Scuba Professional.*





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