



The NOGI Awards:

Celebrating Over Six Decades of Underwater Excellence

by Dan Orr

The NOGI Awards stand as the oldest, most distinguished, and most coveted honors in the recreational diving world. Often referred to informally as the "Oscars of diving," the NOGIs carry a rich heritage that traces back to the formative decades of modern underwater exploration. Over more than six decades, the awards have evolved from a regional sporting event trophy into an international institution dedicated to honoring the luminaries, pioneers, and protectors of the underwater realm.

The Unlikely Roots: From the Gulf of Mexico to Houston

The origin of the NOGI name is rooted in a regional sporting event from the 1950s: the underwater division of the **New Orleans Grand Isle (NOGI) Spearfishing Tournament**. Held annually around the offshore oil rigs of Grand Isle, Louisiana, this prominent spearfishing and skin-diving competition utilized a distinct trophy system for its participants. The acronym N.O.G.I. was derived directly from the first four words of the tournament's title.

The transition from a regional fishing tournament trophy to a national diving accolade occurred in August 1960 during the inaugural convention of the **Underwater Society of America (USOA)** in Houston, Texas. Organizers Jay Albeanese and Louis Cuccia approached the newly formed USOA with a vision to establish a formal mechanism for recognizing national leaders in skin and SCUBA diving. Utilizing identical statuettes originally cast for the New Orleans tournament, the society presented the first official NOGI Awards on August 20, 1960. The inaugural recipients included Carl Hauber, the first president of the USOA; Chuck Blakeslee and Jim Auxier, the founders of *Skin Diver* magazine; Eugene Vezzani; and George Youmans.

Evolution of Categories and Administration

For decades, the NOGI Awards were administered directly under the umbrella of the Underwater Society of America. Originally, honors were bestowed across four foundational pillars representing the multidisciplinary nature of underwater pursuits: Arts, Science, Sports/Education and Distinguished Service.

As the recreational diving community matured and environmental consciousness became paramount, the structural framework expanded. In 2013, a fifth official category, **Environment**, was formally introduced to recognize individuals who dedicated their lives to ocean preservation, advocacy, and marine habitat protection.

The Academy of Underwater Arts & Sciences (AUAS) has established the following criteria for NOGI award nominations. We hope the following guidelines will help you in making your nominations for the prestigious NOGI Awards:

ARTS: A nominee for the ARTS should be the master of their craft. The artist should be the first, the best, the most widely acknowledged worldwide, published, artist. Art can include film or video, photography, painting, sculpture, writing, acting, directing, poetry, music and more. The major part of the artist's work should involve underwater subjects.

SCIENCE: The nominee for SCIENCE should adhere to the highest standards of the scientific community. The nominee must have numerous published books, research papers or research audio-visual presentations in acknowledged peer-reviewed journals or libraries showing results of research that they have performed that has advanced the knowledge within their field of expertise. Their work can include, but not be limited to, diving physiology, marine biology, oceanography, ocean geology, marine archeology, and exploration. This scientist's work should be unique, and not a repetition of knowledge already established.

ENVIRONMENT: The nominee for ENVIRONMENT should be an individual who has, by their life's work,



made important strides in understanding, protecting and/or advocating for the ocean environment, whether it be through the establishment of marine parks, working for global protection of coral reefs or creatures, or developing programs, laws and/or policies that specifically address areas of concern regarding the underwater world. The nominee should be an active advocate for the marine or aquatic environment whose career contributions have noticeably improved our underwater environment or protected a marine species.

SPORTS & EDUCATION: The nominee in SPORTS & EDUCATION should be someone who has drawn others into the underwater world by teaching, exemplifying, and/or enthusiastically inspiring others to enter the underwater world. The nominee may be an outstanding athlete who personally pushed the boundaries of the sport and/or advanced the sport of diving through innovative equipment design, advocacy for the sport of skin and scuba diving, diving safety and lifesaving, or through education. The educator will have designed educational material and published books and/or articles used for teaching or education. The subjects can be in virtually any area of underwater expertise including rescue, safety, or diver education and training.

DISTINGUISHED SERVICE: The nominee for DISTINGUISHED SERVICE should be a person who has demonstrated outstanding leadership, professional competence and significant career accomplishments that have encouraged widespread interest in or about the underwater world. The nominee's work can be focused on ocean advocacy, or work with a particular marine organism, coral restoration, ocean health, establishment of marine parks and the like. The nominee should have made a significant and consistent effort to introduce others to the enjoyment of the underwater world, which can be through philanthropy for marine or diving-related research or projects, or establishment of foundations devoted to the ocean, or through volunteer activities that have increased awareness of the underwater world.

To safeguard the prestige, independence, and long-term administration of the accolades, **The Academy of Underwater Arts and Sciences (AUAS)** was established in 1993 as an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization by Harry Shanks and other diving leaders. Since assuming control, the AUAS has operated as an international body dedicated to identifying global standouts whose career achievements have permanently transformed humanity's relationship with the sea.

The Evolution of the NOGI Statuette

The physical representation of the NOGI has undergone several distinct artistic transformations that mirror the craftsmanship of their respective eras:

- **The Early Wood Carvings:** The original statuettes handed out in 1960 were hand-carved out of dark mahogany by renowned New Orleans artist and sculptor Vero Puccio.
- **The Polywood Era:** As demand and the scope of the awards grew, Puccio created molds to produce subsequent iterations out of polywood.
- **The Wyland Masterpiece:** In 2005, the statuette was completely redesigned by world-renowned marine wildlife artist and fellow NOGI laureate Wyland. The modern statuette, crafted from cast Lucite, depicts a pedestal-mounted skin diver standing with upraised arms holding a plaque bearing the iconic "NOGI" inscription.

A Legacy Carved by Legends

The historical registry of NOGI recipients reads as a chronological roll call of underwater history. Over the decades, the academy has honored legendary oceanographers, aquatic filmmakers, military innovators, medical researchers, and safety advocates. Past laureates include global figures such as Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau, Dr. Sylvia Earle, Dr. Robert Ballard, filmmaker James Cameron, astronaut-aquanaut Scott Carpenter, author Clive Cussler and a veritable Who's Who of the diving and marine sciences world.

By continuously recognizing those who push the boundaries of technical diving, marine science, underwater art, education, and environmental stewardship, the NOGI Awards remain the ultimate benchmark of excellence in the global diving community.

The NOGI Awards are presented at the annual NOGI Awards Gala, held in conjunction with the annual Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) Trade Show. The Gala is organized by NOGI Fellow, Ed Stetson and Emceed by NOGI Fellow, Leslie Leaney. NOGI Fellow, Dan Orr is the President of the Academy.

In 2006, the AUAS Board of Directors created the Zale Parry Scholarship to honor, NOGI Fellow, Zale Parry, actress and pioneer in scuba diving.

In 2017, the AUAS Board of Directors created the Lee Selisky Future Leaders of the Diving Industry Program to bring young diving industry professionals in contact with the NOGI Fellowship in order to foster mentorship relationships between these young people and the NOGI Fellows.

In 2018, with an initial grant of $10,000, NOGI Fellow Mike Gower encouraged the establishment of a diving medical scholarship to foster diving medical research. The scholarship has now grown to $50,000 through the continued financial support of Mike Gower, financial support from Divers Alert Network (DAN) and NOGI Fellow, Dan Orr. Due to the significant annual financial support from DAN, the scholarship is now named, the AUAS/DAN Diving Medical Scholarship.

From its humble beginnings around and under the oil rigs in the Louisiana Gulf Coast, the annual NOGI Awards recognize those who have made and will in the future make significant contributions to the sport of scuba diving, free diving and research that contributes to improving our sport and the world we live in.