

Divers spend day in search of weapon



Dive Captain Floyd Parkinson prepares to get into the pond at Beal Park Saturday morning. photo by Gary Rhodes 07/11/09

By Audrie Palmer
Staff Writer

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A non-profit search and rescue forensic diving team spent all day Saturday combing through the bottom of the fishing pond at Beal Park for a weapon Midland investigators believe was used in a robbery last year.

Beginning at 8:30 a.m. and dressed in scuba gear with oxygen tanks attached to their backs, the four licensed technical divers began to search the larger half of the pond by working in a grid system and moving up and down a yellow rope dropped in the water.

One pull on the rope meant the diver was OK; two pulls notified those on the shoreline to give more line.

It was three tugs that officials were waiting for. Three tugs to signal the diver had found something in the water - something that never seemed to come.

The divers found a wide assortment of items in the pond - several baseballs, a broken reel, clothing and even a coffee mug - but by the time they stopped for the day after 8 p.m., they still hadn't found the weapon allegedly thrown into the middle of pond.

This is the first time authorities have ever had to call in a diving crew to search for evidence, said Midland County Assistant District Attorney Laura Nodolf.

The Midlothian non-profit organization, United Response, brought 10 volunteers including the four divers to search the area Saturday.

Nodolf said the county needed help to locate the weapon and called the organization. While investigators said having the weapon isn't crucial for the case, it would help when going to trial.

The pond, which is usually about 10-15 feet deep, had been drained some earlier last week and was estimated to be only about five feet deep at its deepest point Saturday. While one pair of divers used a metal detector, the others simply just crawled along the bottom and sifted through with their fingers the four inches of silt that lined the pond.

"They basically have to search in the dark and feel their way through," said Nodolf.

Still the Beal Park pond was the smallest the diving crew has had to search so far this year. Since January, United Response director Dana Ames said the group has done four searches so far in Texas, but the others have been for drownings.

"This one is slightly different," she said.

Each diver goes down for a 20-minute dive, and depending on how much information the group receives from witness statements prior to the event, the search can take anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of days.

"It's a slow and methodical process," said Ames. "The point is to be thorough and not quick."

The team will continue their search this morning, and said they plan to continue their search until the weapon is recovered.