

# *Heartland* **BOATING**®

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## **INLAND NAV 101**

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**+Part Four of our  
Great Loop Adventure**

# ZENON BILAS

This month, we sit down with pro barefooter Zenon Bilas, who honed his skills while growing up in the Heartland.

## **Tell us what first attracted you to barefooting.**

In the '70s, my family would go to Wisconsin Dells for summer vacation, and that's where I first saw barefooting in the Tommy Bartlett Water Ski Show. The idea of skiing without skis blew me away. Few people were barefooting then, and only a handful were barefooting backwards.

## **What obstacles did you face getting started?**

Barefooting was first done in 1947, but even in the '70s there was no specialized equipment or coaches. It wasn't until 1980 that I first saw a boom.

For me, learning to barefoot was done behind the boat on a 70-foot line. I wore jean shorts, a flotation vest and sometimes a thin shorty wetsuit. My attempts were trial and error, stepping off a ski, arms flailing as my body flipped over.

Finally, during a step-off attempt on Round Lake in northern Illinois, the ski was gone and I was still following the boat. It took me five seconds to realize I'd made it. I still remember that amazing feeling. It was July 31, 1977.

## **How did you know this was something you wanted to do as a career?**

My family lived in the Chica-

go suburbs. I saw my dad and many others take the train to work each day. Even at age 17, I knew I didn't want a job that required such a commute.

In 1980, I was working part time at the Munson Marine water ski pro shop when I met barefoot champion Mike Seipel. He wanted to open the first year-round school devoted to the sport, so I headed with him to West Palm Beach, Fla., to start Barefoot International.

The first two years were hard, but by the third year we were teaching students from six continents. My four years at Barefoot International helped develop my skills and passion for coaching, which continue today.

## **Are you surprised you're still at it?**

No, I'm not surprised that I'm still barefooting. I like being in the action, not on the sidelines. Many pro athletes turn to second careers later in life, but I'm in this for the long run. I'm just as enthusiastic about barefooting now as when I first learned.

## **Looking back, do you have any standout memories?**

I have so many great memories of special people and places. There were several shows in China I'll never forget: Footing with then-85-year-old Banana George Blair for a huge live audience in Beijing. The day before the show, we wore our barefoot wetsuits for a photo shoot at the Great Wall.

In 1997, I footed the part of Tony the Tiger on Lake Powell



for a Kellogg's TV commercial. The steep canyon walls were surreal. And I once did a clinic in Pitea, just south of the Arctic Circle in Sweden. Where else can you foot and see reindeer? There was enough light for an all-night clinic. At 3 a.m., the sun was high in the sky. That was a wild experience.

## **What's a normal week like for you now?**

My schedule can change with a phone call. I always have to be ready for the unexpected, which keeps life exciting. Last year, I got a call to do a clinic and show in Lebanon. One week later, I was on a plane to Beirut.

TV commercials and appearances also pop up. When they do, it's always hectic to get things organized and make the most of the opportunity.

Since I'm still based in West Palm Beach, I can coach and train all year. On top of that, I write about the various water-ski disciplines for magazines in the U.S. and abroad.