

Waterski

AUSTRALIAN WATERSKI MAGAZINE

SEPT/OCT 2014

THE IMPORTANCE OF HANDLE CONTROL START OF SEASON SLUMPS THOMAS DEGASPERI

ISSN 1441-3507



Print Post Approved: PP 31879900134

RRP \$7.95 (INC GST) NZ \$8.95 (INC GST)

VOLUME SEVENTEEN ISSUE ONE



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WE'RE COMING BACK INTO SEASON, AND CHANCES ARE THAT YOU'RE TWEAKING YOUR EQUIPMENT OR MAYBE DREAMING ABOUT SOME NEW GEAR. BUT HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT TWEAKING YOUR SKIING FORM?



While slalom, tricks and barefoot are specialised waterski disciplines, with different amounts of surface area on the water and different boat speeds, I find the disciplines to share more similarities than differences. Though many think slalom, trick and barefoot each require unique body positions, my experiences coaching, competing and observing the best in the world suggest that the opposite is true. All three disciplines require the same body position: balanced over your feet. The better balanced you are, the better you will perform as a slalom skier, tricker or barefooter. And the more each discipline evolves, the greater the similarities I am seeing.

In 1983, I saw 10,000-plus trick ski phenom Kreg Llewellyn execute a flawless barefoot front to back and back to front on his first attempt. The crossover of technical elements between tricks and barefoot became obvious. Top level trickers have long understood that to do advanced tricks they had to be balanced over the front foot to make the trick ski work

effectively. So when Llewellyn did his barefoot turns, he didn't find them difficult.

Barefoot turns are not easy, but Llewellyn already knew how to be in perfect balance, and he knew how to do effective, efficient turns.

But certainly slalom is different, isn't it? Since the 1940s and 1950s, slalom position has traditionally been more on the heels of the feet, with weight on the back foot and an upper body lean away from the boat position. The idea was to use the pressure of the back foot to help steer and direct the ski. Many skiers still use this technique to some degree. This position adds tension on the line.

But the trend is changing. Today's competitive slalom skiers like Nate Smith, Karina Nowlan and Nick Adams are implementing a position that puts them up over the front foot more than ever before. You can see this taller, over-the-front-foot position with Nick and Nate, especially during the pullout for the gate, the turn into the gate, and approaching the ball. When the weight is over the front binding,

there is less tension on the line. This gives the skier a better sense of balance and quieter body throughout the pass. It also keeps more of the ski in the water, especially in turns. Having the mid-zone of the slalom in the water allows it to perform optimally, as it was designed to do.

Since slalom skiing is constant movement and edge change from ball to ball, it's a bit harder to change old habits and maintain changes in body position. Go slowly, and work on your position incrementally. The goal is to let your feet come under the knees a bit, so you have to relax your calves.

After seeing these advances in position and technique by elite slalom skiers, I began employing them for my barefooting and again, the crossover became obvious. I already focused on being tall with my hips and seat aligned over my feet. This made front to backs and back to front turns easier. But now my goal was to take my barefoot position to the next level.



Instead of my feet just gliding over the water, I focused on how well they were supporting my weight, and whether the weight was spread evenly over the feet, both side to side across the foot and from heel to front of foot. The balance point is the middle of the feet, just as the balance point for slalom and trick is the middle of the front foot. Adjusting my feet, legs and upper body even just a little bit meant a more balanced and more effortless position on my feet than ever before. Just like with the newer slalom technique, the handle was lighter with this position. If you typically foot heel heavy, this change will take time to get used to. But I promise it works in glass water, and surprisingly is quite strong in bumpy conditions.

It all started for me with watching tricker Kreg Llewellyn, and I am convinced proper trick ski balance can help your other disciplines. As an added benefit, while you're learning the speeds are slower and the falls less punishing. Top trick skiers like Ryan Green ski over the front foot. But many trickers who are primarily slalom skiers carry their older style slalom habits over to tricking and ski with their body weight over their heels. You may be able to muscle through some tricks with a heel centric position, but I guarantee this will be more work and will make it more difficult to achieve consistency and progress to more advanced tricks. So relax the pressure on the heels and let that foot come

under your knee. You might need to just stand over the front binding a little more. Once you feel more over your front foot, the handle will feel lighter as you are skiing more efficiently. A great drill is to start about 5 feet out from the wake and jump the wake. Did you land just inside the wake or near the second wake? It's great for warming up, and it puts you over your bindings, especially your front binding. Some competitors even do this in a tournament as the towboat approaches a course. Tricks, slalom and barefoot are different, of course, but they have lots in common. They all work better if your balance is better, and that means over your feet. Try it now, and enjoy the progress come tournament season.

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BIO: Zenon Bilas is a seven-time US National Barefoot Champion who trains in West Palm Beach, Florida. He has coached champions and conducted slalom, trick and barefoot clinics throughout the US and 16 countries, including China, Japan, Brazil and Lebanon. For personalized coaching or a clinic, reach Zenon at zenbilas@bellsouth.net or visit www.zenonbilas.com for additional information.

