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PROGRESSION

TECHNICAL CROSSOVER

HOW YOUR BAREFOOT TECHNIQUE CAN BENEFIT YOUR SLALOM SKIING OR TRICKS AND VICE VERSA.

BY ZENON BILAS

» Are you stuck in a one-event rut? All too often, skiers focus on a single water-sports discipline, and I think this limits their potential on the water. After 30-plus years of coaching and competing in barefoot, slalom and tricks, I'm a firm believer that many of the core techniques cross over among disciplines and that being a well-rounded athlete will ultimately enhance your favorite event.

Above: Four-time world overall barefoot champion David Small performs a clean front-to-back by remaining structurally aligned and balanced over his feet while keeping his eyes on horizon throughout the turn. Above right: Whether you're crossing the wakes on a slalom ski like Chris Rossi or on your bare feet, it's important to remain quiet with your upper body.



LET'S TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THE
COMMONALITIES BETWEEN DISCIPLINES
AND LEARN HOW YOU CAN UP YOUR GAME
THIS SEASON.

RELAXED BREATHING

To be successful in any discipline, you need to maintain a normal breathing pattern. If you're breathing hard after a slalom pass or trick run, you're likely holding your breath to some extent.

Slalom skiers are often guilty of holding their breath during a pass, which results in unnecessary upper body tension at the gate and throughout the course. It's also common for trick skiers to hold their breath while attempting a new trick. When I do a back barefoot deepwater start, being relaxed and breathing normally lets me get up long line in about six seconds.

VISUAL ACUITY

In the late '90s, slalom legend Wade Cox and I were both training with Chet Raley in Palm Beach County, Florida. Cox told me that he sees everything on the water, including the entire width of the course and even the officials in the boat.

As I watched him ski from the boat, I could see that his eyes weren't fixated on the buoy, even at 38, 39½ and 41 off. This illustrated to me the importance of visual awareness, and it applies to every discipline.

For barefooting, it's equally important to see the big picture. When performing a front deep-water start for example, footers have a tendency to close their eyes and tilt their heads to the sky. When you're gliding on your butt before you plant your feet, your eyes should be level with the horizon and your upper body should be facing the boat. When you see everyone in the boat — just like Cox does for slalom — then the barefoot start will be much easier to accomplish, and your consistency will improve.

The same concept is true for both trick and barefoot turns. Being aware of the scenery at the horizon as you turn

will help keep you level and balanced and increase your chances of success.

ULTIMATE BALANCE

Body position has always been critical for me in barefooting. But after studying the techniques of elite slalom skiers like Nate Smith, Will Asher and world champion wakeboarder Raimi Merritt, I have developed even more awareness of my position. Great balance on the water starts by aligning my head, shoulders and hips over my feet. It's important to find your balance position without relying on the rope.

An increased level of balance on my bare feet has allowed me to use more of my foot on the water and to do barefoot tricks with better technique, less effort and at a slower boat speed.

SKI QUIETLY

In the mid-1980s, I was ranked No. 1 in the world in barefoot slalom. It was a time in the sport when there was considerable disagreement about whether skiers' shoulders should be closed or open to the boat.

This was true for traditional slalom skiing as well. Through my training and experimenting with different wake-crossing techniques, I discovered that my shoulders had to be level and equal in distance to the boat to ski my best. A balanced and quiet torso also allowed me to be very efficient as I zigzagged across the wake.

Today, many top-level slalom skiers use the same technique. Skiing quietly also keeps the ski line quiet. If your rope is bouncing off the engine box as you move in and out of the turn and through the wake, it's a signal that you're using too much muscle and not enough technique.

TECHNICAL CROSSOVER

TURN THE RIGHT WAY

The front to back, aka 180, is a difficult trick in barefooting because of the small surface area of our feet. Moving or leaning away from the boat during the turn — which puts barefooters off axis and leads to more falls — adds to the challenge. Whether you're turning 180 degrees while barefooting or on a trick ski, it's important to stay balanced over your feet and structurally aligned from head to toe.

Novice trick skiers initiate turns with their shoulders not their knees and ankles. You may eventually make turns by throwing the upper body around, but you won't be consistent and learning new tricks will be more difficult.

The upper body lean can wreak havoc on swervers too. That's why it's important to stay balanced over your feet and not force the turn with your upper body. Instead, let your hips, knees and ankles initiate the turn.

BODY POSITION: IT'S ALL THE SAME

There was a time when I thought that the ideal body position varied among the disciplines. For example, old-school slalom skiers leaned their chest and shoulders away from the boat, while barefooters used more of a squat or heel-heavy position.

Now, I see many more commonalities among the skiing disciplines, with the upper body centered directly over the feet or bindings and the ankles and knees slightly flexed. Modern skiers are lighter on the line since they are structurally aligned over their bindings.

I apply the same technique to my barefooting. Now versus 20 years ago, there is very little spray in front of my feet, and the spray behind me is much smaller. In tricks, slalom or barefooting, if you push your heels in front of you, your balance will suffer, and you won't be as efficient. Your feet have a job to do, and that's to effectively support your body weight while you're skiing.

Thirty years ago, I watched Kreg Llewellyn, one of the top trick skiers, successfully complete a barefoot front to back and back to front on his first attempt. Llewellyn's technique was perfect.

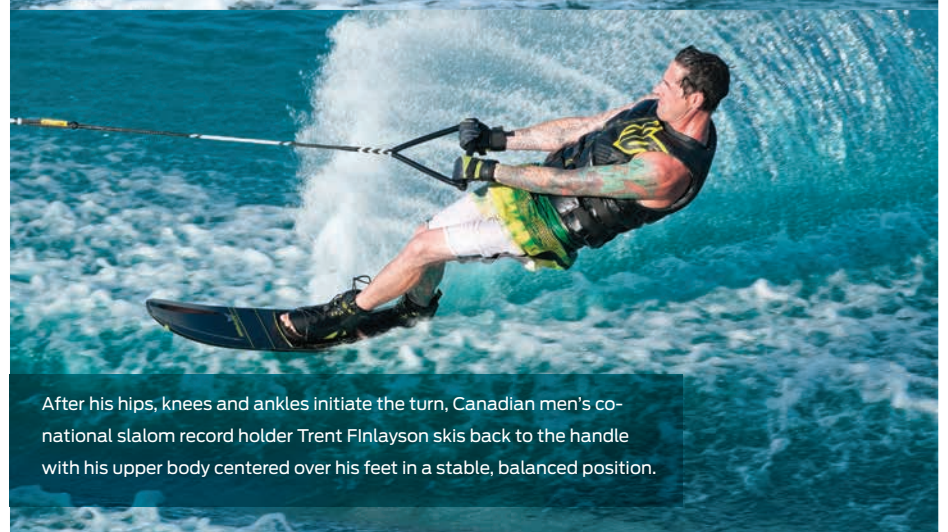
After he nailed the trick on his first attempt, he asked, "Was that supposed to be hard?" A trick ski's flat, finless balance point forces skiers to think about their body position and technique rather than muscling their way through tricks. I believe that's why Llewellyn, a 10,000-point trick skier, found 180 surface barefoot turns so instinctively easy.

That's why I think it's smart to spend some time out of your comfort zone trying a new discipline that will bring you back to the basics. You'll have fun, feel refreshed, maybe ski with some new friends and build a better base. **WATERSKI**

Zenon Bilas, a seven-time U.S. barefoot national champion, has coached skiers all over the world for the last 30 years. If you'd like to host Bilas at your site or ski with him in West Palm Beach, Florida, call 561-433-4554, or visit zenonbilas.com.



It's clear to see the head-to-toe alignment of U-21 Worlds competitor Georgia O'Connell as she completes a turn without leaning away from the boat and while remaining balanced over her feet.



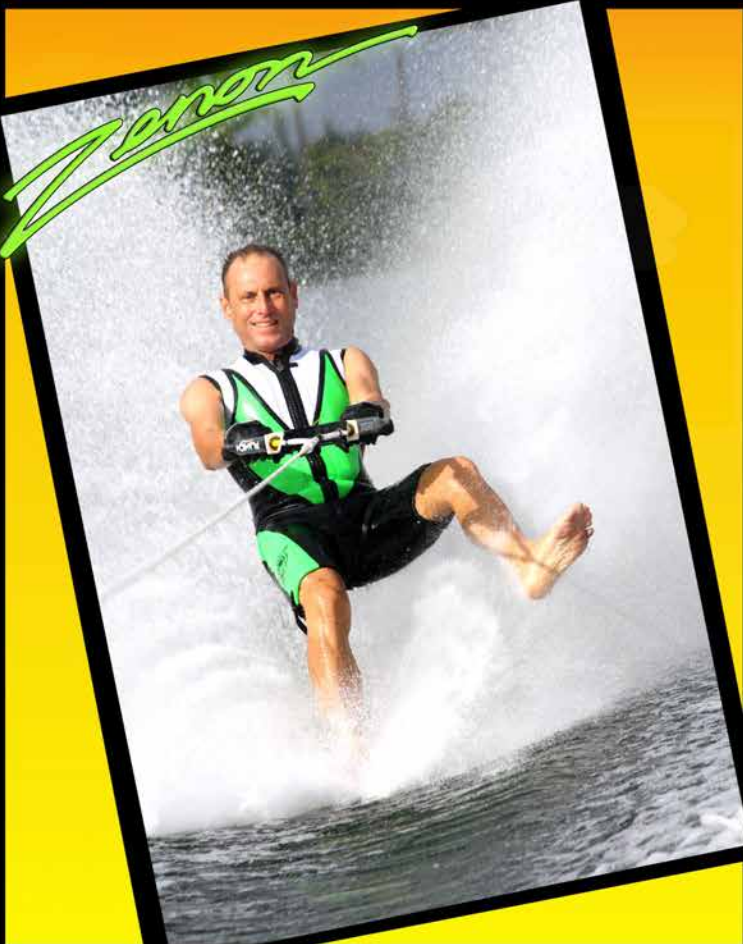
After his hips, knees and ankles initiate the turn, Canadian men's co-national slalom record holder Trent Finlayson skis back to the handle with his upper body centered over his feet in a stable, balanced position.



Coach Zenon Bilas demonstrates the perfect front barefoot position with his weight evenly supported on both feet and balanced alignment from head to toe.

FROM TOP: BILDOOSTER.COM (2); STEVESCHNITZER (1)

7 time US Barefoot Champion



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Zenon Bilas Highlights

- ☐ 7-time USA barefoot water ski champion
- ☐ Currently profiled in the media: Growing Bolder TV, International Boating Industry, Palm Beach Post, Soundings, Southern Boating, WaterSki, WPTV
- ☐ 30 years of teaching all levels of water skiers, including national and world champions
- ☐ Performed barefoot shows and water ski clinics on four continents with stops in the USA, Sweden, Belgium, Brazil, Japan, Lebanon and China
- ☐ Performed barefoot shows in Beijing, Changsha, Guiyang, Nanchang, Shanghai, Zhanjiang -- and one before 500,000 people in Yueyang, China
- ☐ Barefoot double as Tony the Tiger for Kellogg's TV campaign.
- ☐ Author of hundreds of editorial articles -- boat tests, product reviews, water ski coaching tips

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