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What a Feet

Follow this bevy of tips to get yourself barefooting this summer.

BY ZENON BILAS, 7-TIME USA NATIONAL BAREFOOT WATERSKI CHAMPION



BAREFOOT WATERSKIING IS EXHILARATING, OFFERS plenty of excitement and is a real attention-getter. When you first learn, it's always memorable. Unlike waterskiing or wakeboarding, barefooting only offers the bottom of your feet to support and balance your body weight.

The sport has a daredevil image and brings a real adrenaline rush, but I also see it as an extremely technical sport, more like figure skating or gymnastics. It's about understanding optimal body position and implementing precise movement, which begins with focus and mental discipline.

With so little surface area on the water, the boat speed needs to be a bit faster and the balance point is more critical and less forgiving. But

good technique will have you solid as standing on land, with minimal falls.

In the 38 years since I learned to barefoot, I have studied and dissected the sport from every angle. My suggestions for getting started with the right equipment and good body position will have you 'footing with less trial, fewer errors and quicker success.

NOT BY TRIAL AND ERROR

I learned to barefoot by stepping

off a ski on a stretchy 70-foot waterski line and with no instruction. That's the hard way. It's always best to have professional coaching or find someone with barefooting experience to help you.

WELL EQUIPPED

You will need some specialized equipment, including a snug-fitting barefoot wetsuit, a barefoot tow line and, ideally, a boom. A barefoot wetsuit features flotation in the chest, seat and crotch areas to make gliding on the water easier. The padding also helps cushion falls. A non-stretch or low-stretch 90-foot line will provide a consistent pull, instead of the jerky feeling that a traditional waterski line gives. Lines come with 10- and 20-foot takeoff loops. I like a shorter line, but you may need a longer one depending on your boat's wake.

Attaching the line to a wakeboard tower provides the 'footer with an upward pull, and that will make barefooting on the line easier.

To dramatically reduce the learning curve, get a barefoot boom or find someone who has one. Booms are typically seen on dedicated ski boats, but they are also manufactured to affix to wakeboard towers and to fit recreational boats. A barefoot boom is a stationary aluminum bar that extends off the side of the boat's gunwale about 8 feet. You hold on to the bar, which is much more stable than a line with a handle.

The boom is safe, the water is smooth and your coach is just a few feet away. You can step off a ski to barefoot while holding the boom, but it is less complicated to start stretched out on either your stomach or back. From your back, your legs and feet are stretched out in front of you. From your stomach, you have to bring your legs and feet in front of you once the boat is on plane. Either way, you plant both feet on the water at the same time to place yourself in barefoot

position. You can plant both feet on the water by riding on a kneeboard in a sitting position with your feet placed slightly in front of the board.

BODY POSITION — NOT

WHAT YOU THINK

Everyone thinks that to barefoot you need to curl your toes and drive your heels in front of you, thinking that doing so is “safe.” Actually, that position will cause falls and limit your progress. Imagine your knees bent with your feet under them, gliding over the water instead of resisting the water with your heels. Think about sitting in a chair. At first, stay low and keep your knees fairly well bent. As you improve, you can raise up to a higher chair position. Your legs should be parallel to each other, slightly narrower than shoulder width, a stance that allows you to distribute your body



weight over your feet evenly and effectively. When your position is correct, there will be little or no spray to the front or side. If your feet and legs are covered with spray, you are not in the correct position. The correct stance will allow you to learn basic tricks such as one-foots

and wake crossings, and graduate to more advanced tricks such as back barefooting and front-to-back and back-to-front turns.

NOT SO FAST

Some 'footers like more speed, but you can do it slower than you think. A great formula to remember is to take your weight, divide by 10 and add 20. At 160 pounds, my speed behind the boat would be 36 mph. When you are learning on the boom, you can reduce your speed by 5 or 6 mph. Most men I teach on the boom learn at 30 mph, and most women, teens and kids learn at about 25 to 30 mph. To this day, I still work on my body position, both forward and backward, by dropping the boat speed to 25 mph. This exercise forces me into a position that supports my weight most effectively — and shows that you don't have to go that fast to barefoot. **BW**