

History of Barefoot Waterskiing

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The History of Barefooting

By Philippe Poyet

The first man reported to meet the challenge of barefoot skiing was Dick Pope Jr, on March 6, 1947. In fact, it was the first time barefooting was recorded in pictures. According to sources at Water Ski Hall of Fame and witnesses of the event, it was actually the then 17-year-old A.G. Hancock, who made the initial attempts, the same year in Winter Haven, so they both stepped off into the unknown....Three years later, the first barefoot competition was held at the 1950 Cypress Gardens Dixie Championships. As the tournament began, the first participants ended up with nothing but headaches, until Dave Craig of Miami successfully stepped of the ski. Then Stew Mc Donald of Tampa managed a short ride without skis. Pope, unaccustomed to the rough water of the tournament area had a difficult time, but was able to move into the first place with the longest ride. Finally, a young skier from Mexico named Emilio Zamudio was up. He kicked off his ski, stood up high, and waved joyously at the crowd, winning the competition.

As the story goes, Ken Tibado of Lake Wales introduced the two-ski jump out in 1953, and the beach start in 1956. In 1958, Joe Cash was the first to accomplish the front deepwater start, taking off in the water with no skis at all. The "tumbleturn" was invented purely by accident in 1960, when Don Thompson and Terry Vance were performing a double barefoot routine, on the lake of the Ozarks, Missouri. As Vance stepped off his skis, he began to fall, but while he continued to hang on, his feet spun around, returning almost in front of him. Thompson, still on his skis, reached over and pulled Vance's legs around, so that he could stand up.

Backward barefooting brought a new dimension to the sport. In 1961, Randy Rabe of St Petersburg started on a trick ski, then turned around, planted his foot in the water, and finally stepped off the ski. A friendly rivalry developed between Thompson and Rabe, who were both determined to learn new and different tricks. Rabe first accomplished the front and back toeholds, while Thompson perfected the piggyback barefoot ride with Joline Paoli Nathey. Thompson and Rabe share credit for the introduction of front-to-back and back-to-front surface turns, with Thompson even attempting back deepwater starts in 1965.

Meanwhile, barefooting interest was taking hold on the other side of the World. In March 1960 at Sackville, the Australian Water Ski Club was founded by such great exponents as Jack Murray, Ray Leighton, John Hollands and Ron Marks. In April 1963, Australia held its first official national competition, patronized by 38 skiers and eventually won by Irwin Luthiger. It was the first step toward barefoot tournaments, as we know them today. The Australians had their innovators: Garry Barton and John Hacker, considered to be the World's best in the late '60s, having developed many new maneuvers, including

the back deep, stepover back to front, and backward flying dock start. In Europe, a show team included a barefoot act in 1963. In 1968, the first tournament in Europe was held at Cirencester in Great Britain and the rules were a simplified version of the rules developed by the Aussies. The first successful jump in Europe - of 10.30 m - was performed during 1969, but before that time, jumping was already a regular event in Australian competitions.

In 1973, Cypress Gardens invited the Australians for an international competition. Garry Barton, Peter Trimm, Grant Torrens and Mary Mc Millan - Australia's best footers - accepted the invitation. As expected, they astonished everyone and made a clean sweep of the tournament. No one Australian came close to being beaten by a Yank, and the overall winner was 16 year old Grant Torrens. The seeds were planted here for the next wave of U.S. barefooters and this competition was the beginning of the active promotion of the sport in the United States. Other tournaments were held in Wisconsin and other parts of the country, consisting only of endurance and starting methods.

In 1977, Australian John Hacker acting as an ambassador for the sport, returned to the United States, to promote the first World tournament to be held in Canberra, Australia in November 1978. Meanwhile, the first European Championships were held at Princes Club in London, during August 1976, with 18 men and only one woman. At that time, there were already national championships in England, The Netherlands, Italy, Belgium, South Africa, New Zealand and of course Australia. During summer 1978, five regional competitions were held in the United States and in September the first barefoot nationals took place in Waco, Texas. Randy Filter won the men's overall title, but show skier Mike Botti had the most outstanding performances, placing first in start methods, wake crossing and tricks.

Because he elected not to enter the jump event (Mike Seipel too !), he was ineligible for the overall title. Following the tournament, the first official U.S. barefoot team was selected to represent the United States at the World

Championships. During November 1978, barefooting history was made in Canberra, where 54 barefooters representing 10 countries gathered on the banks of the Molongo river. Even with the increased level of competition in the United States, Australia's talent and influence stunned U.S. footers. The Aussies were performing then unheard maneuvers, like backward and forward toehold starts, 360 degrees surface turns and even toe turns! Brett Wing and Colleen Wilkinson captured the men's and women's overall honors, but Mike Botti showed the potential threat of a strong U.S. team, by placing third in tricks and fourth in jumping. In addition, he was the first to complete a wake front-to-back and a wake back-to-front in competition.

This was compiled with the help from:

John Gillette's "barefooting", 1987

Zenon Bilas, 1989

Charles Ramsey, 1987

Silver anniversary programm from Australian Barefoot Club, 1987.

History of barefoot water-ski jumping

As with many water sports, the history of barefoot water ski jumping is a bit sketchy until the mid `70s. Water ski historians such as Zenon Bilas were unable to discover exactly who was the first jumper, when he jumped and why on earth he considered it in the first place. Bilas theorizes, "Maybe they thought it was so sick that they didn't want to report it."

Early jumpers hit the ramp without benefit of padded suits, helmets or knowledge of the best technique for jumping without skis. They toughed it out, though not without consequences: Higher boat speeds mean barefooters go much faster than traditional skiers, and the combination of speed, ramp and height means bruises on nearly every part of one's body. Jumping lore has it that a few early jumpers paralyzed themselves after falling on the ramp.

Timeline 1922: Ralph Samuelson, generally regarded as the father of water skiing, straps two 8' X 9" pine boards to his feet and takes off behind a motor boat on Lake Pepin, Minnesota.

1947: Barefoot water skiing is born in Winter Haven, Florida, when water ski pioneer Chuck Sligh theorizes that skiing without skis might be possible if boat speed is increased. Seventeen-year-old A.G. Hancock, proves him right but leaves on a family vacation before he can show the trick to Cypress Gardens' Dick Pope Sr. Pope's son, Dick Pope Jr., successfully drops a ski and gets all the glory--photographs, newsreels, the works. Hancock sees one of the newsreels during his vacation.

1950s/1960s: Barefoot skiing primarily remains a novelty in the U.S., showing up in ski shows such as those at Cypress Gardens and in Wisconsin. Without helmets or the padded barefoot suits worn today, footers learn tricks such as barefooting backward, piggyback-style and with one foot through the ski handle (toehold). Dominance in barefooting shifts from the U.S. to Australia during the 1960s.

1961: Australia organizes its first barefoot nationals, more than 10 years ahead of the Americans. Of course, it doesn't include jumping, since no one has jumped yet.

1967 (approximately): Australian barefooters begin experimenting with jumping

a water ski-style jump ramp.

1969: The American Water Ski Association's magazine, "The Skier," shows a picture of U.S. show skier Mike Pierce jumping in a 1969 issue.

1973: Cypress Gardens hosts the International Championships, the first international barefoot competition. The Australian team demonstrates barefoot jumping to the U.S. footers. 16-year-old Grant Torrens of Australia is the overall winner.

1977: U.S. skiers begin barefoot jumping. Australian footer John Hacker, one of the skiers at the 1973 Cypress Garden event, returns to the U.S. to teach U.S. skiers how to jump. The earliest U.S. jumpers include William Farrell, Ed Finley, Mike Seipel and Bill Price. Finley wins the Bougue Falaya barefoot tournament in Covington, Louisiana--the first U.S. barefoot tournament to include jumping. Richard Mainwaring of the U.K. becomes one of the first barefoot jumpers in Great Britain.

1978: The American Barefoot Club, an affiliate of the American Water Ski Association, formed, giving a denied credibility to skiing without skis in the U.S. The first Barefoot World Championships in Canberra, Australia, and the first U.S. Barefoot Nationals. The tournaments feature three events: wake slalom, tricks and jumping. Greg Adams, Australia, wins the jump event; fellow Australian Brett Wing takes the overall title.

The U.S. sends its first U.S. barefoot team to the Worlds. Team members include Mike Seipel and William Farrell. Farrell didn't know how to barefoot backward when he was chosen for the team; he won a spot because he could jump. He utilized a technique known as bum jumping- -the skier went up and off the ramp on his buttocks, jumping farther than feet-to-feet jumpers but often uncontrollably. In November, Greg Rees of Australia sets the first world record, 44 feet.

1979: Paul Jones of Australia sets a new world record of 49 feet. He breaks it with a 49.5-foot jump within the next two weeks. Mike Seipel wins his first of seven national barefoot jump titles.

1980: Vaugan Cox of New Zealand breaks Jones' world record with a 50.2-foot jump. Twenty-one days later his record is broken by South Africa's Peter Lindenberg, who jumps an incredible 57.4 feet. Australian Brett Wing wins the jump event and the overall title at the Barefoot Worlds in California. Mike Seipel gives mainstream America a taste of barefoot jumping when he appears on the TV show That's Incredible.

1981: The Australians take back possession of the world record with Brett Wing's 61.3-foot jump, a record that stands for more than three years.

1982: Ron Scarpa of the U.S. wins the jump event at the Barefoot Worlds in Acapulco. Brett Wing takes home his third consecutive overall title and then retires undefeated.

1984: Mike Seipel sets a new world jump record of 65.9 feet.

Mid-1980s: Not everyone in the barefoot community is a fan of jumping. Well-known U.S. barefooter John Gillette, president of the American Barefoot Club and author of the first comprehensive book on barefooting (1980), opposes jumping so strongly that he lobbies to remove the event from sanctioned competition. Although he has some support, the attempt fizzles.

1985: Quentin Posthumus of South Africa gets his turn with the world jump record after soaring 67.2 feet. The record will not be broken until 1988. Peter Wellham of Australia wins the jump event at the Barefoot Worlds in Canberra, Australia, and Mike Seipel wins his first world overall barefoot title.

1986: Ron Scarpa jumps out of a helicopter 67 feet above the water and barefoots away for the Guinness Book of World Records. In Kelheim, West Germany, Gavin O'Mahoney of Australia wins the Barefoot Worlds jump event, but Mike Seipel captures the overall for the second time.

1988: Mike Seipel sets his second world record: 69.2 feet. Bum jumping is prohibited in competition after the 1988 Worlds: Members of the barefoot community say barefoot jumping isn't barefoot jumping if it's not done on the feet. The unofficial reason may be that bum jumpers have learned to control and ski away from their jumps. Australian jumper Rod Trevillian wins the jump event at the Worlds bum jumping. Rick Powell of the U.S. takes the overall title.

1989: In Feb., Australian Dodd Dwyer takes the world record Down Under when he jumps 70.2 feet. Brett Sands breaks the record 13 days later by jumping 72.5 feet. Ron Scarpa's book on barefooting, "Barefoot Water Skiing: An Illustrated Guide to Learning and Mastering the Sport", illustrates the still controversial nature of barefoot jumping by not mentioning it once in the entire book.

1989/1990: Mike Seipel makes his first inverted jump -- unintentionally. He says it happened because he had learned to relax his body while jumping, to the point that after he went off the ramp, his feet went out behind him. The first time it happened, he let go of the handle because he thought, "I'm going to kill myself." But he realized he had jumped farther and so tried it again, skiing away from the jump on his third try.

1990: Mike Seipel unveils the inverted jump in competition at the 1990 Barefoot Nationals in Illinois and jumps 72.8 feet for a new world record and, of course, the national jump title. Zenon Bilas says the lightbulb went off in his head when he saw Seipel's new jump style. "I said to myself, 'This is it. This is how it should be done.'" Few share his opinion, saying inverted jumping is even more dangerous than traditional jump style.

U.S. skier Casey Scalise is the second skier to master inverted jumping as he trains with Seipel for the 1990 Worlds in Florida. Seipel, further refining his inverted jump technique, sets another world record of 76.4 feet less than two months later at the Worlds. But it's Rick Powell of the U.S. who earns the overall world title.

1991: The floodgates open. After training with Mike Seipel during the winter, Jon Kretchman of the U.S. switches to inverted jumping and sets a new world jump record of 86.3 feet. (The record isn't broken for a year and a half.) Apparently, Seipel's and Scalise's inverted jumps weren't so much farther than most jumpers believed they ultimately could match or better jumping in the traditional style.

Kretchman's new record eclipses Seipel's by a whopping 9.9 feet, and until that event Kretchman wasn't known as a particularly strong jumper. Barefooters around the world quickly began learning the inverted jump to avoid being left behind in the dark ages of 60- to 75-foot jumps.

1992: Ron Scarpa acquires the world overall title. Lane Bowers, a U.S. skier, wins the Worlds jump event. Barefoot skiers from South Africa compete for the first time at the Barefoot Worlds. They hadn't been allowed to compete in the tournament since its inception because of international sanctions over Apartheid.

1993: Dodd Dwyer of Australia sets the world record for the second time in his career with an 88.9-foot jump.

1994: Jon Kretchman recaptures the world record with an 88.9-foot jump, only to be bested by the U.K.'s Richard Mainwaring the following month. Mainwaring,

Europe's top barefooter but until now not at the top of the international barefoot jump heap, jumps 90.2 feet. At the Barefoot Worlds in Sydney, Australia, the Aussies dominate as Brett Fritsch wins the jump event and John Pennay foots his way to the overall title.

1995: The 1995 U.S. barefoot season opens with the Budweiser Pro Water Ski Tour stopping in Orlando, Florida. Peter Fleck wins the barefoot jump event with an 88.75-foot jump. He is the only jumper at the event to land all three of his jumps. The tour stop also introduces a new barefoot jump format in which competitors get extra points for doing barefoot tricks during their approach to the ramp. The same format is used for the Extreme Games where Australia's Justin Seers tops veteran Ron Scarpa to win the title. The world record is smashed again as Italy's Massimiliano Colosio jumps 92 feet.

The inverted jumping style is the norm. Every top barefoot jumper is being more aggressive in the inverted style, and jumps are going farther and farther. In 1994, there was one 90-foot jump. In 1995, there were four. In 1996, a 90-foot jump is probably needed for one to win. Peter Fleck says it's now the standard and, provided the conditions are good, anyone could top the 90-foot barrier. The 100-foot mark may also be challenged this year for the first time ever.