

LEARNING TO STAND

Brian Wright

I went windsurfing on a Monday morning. Tuesday, I woke up hungry with bloodied and bruised shins, aching triceps and a throbbing chest, an exhausted body and mind, and only a 15-second glimpse of what it's like to be up on the board actually windsurfing.

And I don't think I've ever had a better time on the water.

LACK OF BEGINNER'S LUCK

I joined Dale Nicklas, a stay-at-home father of two originally from Canada, who was, like me, taking his first windsurfing lesson on that stormy day in mid-October with veteran Red Sail Sports instructor James Grainger.

"Windsurfing isn't an easy sport to learn, and everyone learns in a different way," James assured us. "Some people need to understand why it works as it does, others simply need to see it done."

Dale had the advantage of being a proficient surfer for quite some time, hitting the populated beaches of Australia for many years before his first windsurfing lesson.

"I don't think it was just the surfing background, but I also used skateboard and ski," said Dale. "Both of those sports help out with balance and coordination."

After a small delay in start time due to sporadic lightning strikes -- which was quite frightening considering a windsurfer holds a three-metre carbon pole in his hands if doing it properly -- we headed for the beach simulator.

The simulator is nothing but a windsurfing board attached to a tripod sitting in the sand. With it, one can practise jumping on the board, standing, balance, pulling the sail upright and turning, all while feeling the sail's resistance to the wind.

It's a perfect tool for the beginning windsurfer trying to get accustomed to the windsurfing kit before adding the element of water. I don't know how one learns without it.

I was brilliant on the simulator. James shouted words of praise as I hit every practise mark, still dry as bone though.

It was time to finally hit the water and get serious about the sport.

We stayed close to the beach to start. I hopped on, then fell off almost immediately. Hopped on the board, splash into the water. I did that for a good ten minutes while James used a wave runner to pull Dale and his gear to an ideal spot in the water about two hundred and fifty yards from the coast.

By the time James returned for me, I was exhausted, but his words of encouragement gave me a much-needed second wind. I dragged my overweight and out-of-shape body onto the back of the jet ski and off we went.



INTO THE GREAT WIDE OPEN

Out in the open water at around 11am, every wave and gust of wind is like your father. It rules your life -- every aspect. It's demanding yet fair, if you abide by the rules. But if you get out of line, it will spank your behind (and you will curse it accordingly).

After another few minutes of failure, I had enough going for me that I made it to my feet on the board. I was up! And I tried to recite the order of where to put my hands, feet, arms, legs, stance, everything.

I pulled the line, picking the sail out of the water and quickly grabbed the carbon pole. Right hand over left, I grabbed the boom and pulled it with way too much force towards me. So, I was dumped into the water before I had time to even figure out what I did wrong.

As I dragged myself out of the water, grinding my knees and shins onto the sandpaper-like grip of the board, I noticed that Dale was up and riding the wind. Son of a gun, I thought. My body had barely been out of the water in the last 20 minutes while he's up and riding.

"Things just started to click together," said Dale.

He was off into the great wide open water, cutting through the waves while staying on his feet. James followed him, so I was left all alone to fend for myself.

I found this liberating. In no time, I was up on my feet, yanking the line, popping the sail up, hand over hand. I shuffled my feet to the rear part of the board. I pulled the boom in. I was up, again! This time, I was determined to stay up.

I drifted only a few feet before the accomplishment caught up to me, and the wind caught my sail, so I was back in the water in no time, trying to avoid hitting my head on the falling pole.

And this became the routine for the next half-hour. Up, down, scrape legs, up, down, a little more blood, up, down, the most fun you can have on the water.

WHEELHOUSE

I became too exhausted to pull myself out of the water anymore. So, I traded equipment with James. He was now windsurfing while I tagged along on the wave runner, watching closely for clues to success. By this time, Dale had switched to a different board and rig, one that he was purchasing from James. He was off on his own, getting a feel for his new gear.

James was absolutely seamless on the water. He was maneuvering around the board with no problem, tossing the boom back and forth from hand to hand, skipping around the surface like a pro. He did all of this while telling me what he was doing.

Even in hardly any wind, James was up and riding. He turned with ease, came back to the wave runner, gave directions, rode farther, turned, came back on the other side of the board.

He claims that his current ease on the board came from years of practise.

"I spent 14 years learning how to loop and then cracked it in three days of tuition during a vacation in Vassiliki, Greece," James said.

We decided to call it a day -- we were on the water for two and a half hours at that point. It was midday and I was completely exhausted. I could barely move.

I watched James sail in on the back of the board, just holding on, letting the wind carry him back to the beach. I envied him. It looked like he was in pure bliss. He had a small smile on his face, wind in his hair, not a worry in his mind. This was his wheelhouse -- on the water, not a care in the world.

When we reached the beach, James hosed off Dale's new board and rig -- the sand and salt water can ruin the sail. James explained all the necessary components.

"I love it," said Dale. "I can see it being this great adrenaline fix."

One thing James said stuck out. Regarding the equipment, he told Dale, "If it looks right in the sand, it will be wrong on the water. And if it looks wrong in the sand, it will be right on the water."

Dale paid him, and off he went, merrily with his new windsurfing gear.

James told me later that Dale was a particularly gifted student and his surfing experience gave him fantastic balance and a great stance.

"He has now experienced planing," James said. "It must have taken me two years of windsurfing in the 80s before I planed for the first time."

Something tells me that it will take me a little bit longer than that.

NEAR THE END OF THE LINE

Bruno Schermuly was one of the early Cayman windsurfers. He owned part of the original Cayman Windsurf, which eventually sold to Red Sail Sports. He started off in Bermuda, where the waters are a lot cooler, spending six and a half years there.

He's been windsurfing now for over 25 years, but he's been out of the water recently.

"I'm on a slippery downhill slope because of a bad knee," he said.

He says it's a lot easier for beginning windsurfers now compared to when he first started in the 80s. The equipment is lighter than it used to be, especially the boom -- the pole that's attached to the sail.

The core of windsurfers on Cayman stays strong with their passion for their sport. When I hear someone like Bruno talk about the sport... when James talks about windsurfing... when Dale, a beginner like me, talks about the sport, I know what they're saying.

"The buzz comes from helping people of all walks of life to succeed in a challenging sport," said James.

The buzz, for me, was the challenge.