

TRAINING AS A TEAM...



In the last few years windsurfing has become much more professional at top level – the pros now have personal trainers and are starting to look at windsurfing as a job rather than a way of life. Having finished his first year on the World Tour, European Freestyle Champion **John Skye** realised he was going to have to follow a similar path to improve his performance and hopefully his results, so he enlisted the help of top coach and BOARDS Test Team member **Jem Hall**, in order to identify what he has to do to reach the next level. Here's how it went John...

The 2001 Wight Air Festival was blessed with a guest appearance from Francisco Goya, not only competing, but also helping coach the kids during the youth week. As well as a friendly open manner, what was also apparent was his professional attitude to the Tour. He is part of Scott Sanchez's Maximum Performance Group (MPG) team and that's what started me thinking. Reaching the next level of competition is not only about improving your sailing, but also improving fitness, equipment and mental state. With all this in mind I set out to find a coach...

I'd first met Jem Hall in Vassiliki. I was 16, on holiday with my family, and desperately trying to learn to forward loop. My technique involved wearing a crash helmet and a large buoyancy aid, then whilst sailing flat out, I would jump up, dig the nose in and catapult face first into the water. I wasn't having a great deal of success but then Jem approached me on the water. He was working for a different centre but still had the time to come over and give me some valuable pointers. With his help I was soon discarding the Nurofen and sailing away from my first ever loops.

Jem is now a level 5 RYA coach with 7 seasons' experience and has been working all last summer at West Wittering, coaching all levels of sailor, from uphauler to looper. Recently he has become a BOARDS magazine tester, which has added greatly to his knowledge of equipment. He is also a fitness instructor with a degree in sport science. With his background in all these areas he was obviously the right man for the job and after talking things over during the Wight Air event, our professional relationship began. With the final event of the British tour taking place it was a great chance to find out how we could work together and how effective it would prove to be. Jem also wanted to continue working with David Swift (JP/Pryde) and thus had a sailor in both fleets.

Sitting in the front of his van I highlighted the problems that I saw stopping me reaching the next level in competition...

Technique: There is always room for improvement.

Fitness: Appalling. I could sail for hours and not feel tired, but put me in a 10 minute heat and by the end I was exhausted.

Equipment tuning: Francisco had obviously spent hours tuning his boards and sails. His rig, footstraps, mast foot and fin were all perfect for him to get the maximum performance for whatever conditions he had to sail in. I had to admit I just threw it all together and went sailing.

Stiffness: Following a good day sailing I usually went to bed shattered and woke the next morning feeling like I had aged 40 years. This often led to one good day being followed by a bad day. Not good for competition.

Mental approach: Something I didn't really have a clue about.

So, just a few areas to work on! Now it was over to Jem to try and sort it all out...

NUTRITION

The first thing Jem asked me was about my diet. As I took a swig from my bottle of Coke and had another bite of my Chunky KitKat, I explained how I started the day with cereal, finished the day with pasta and in between I filled myself with chocolate. A fairly typical windsurfer's diet!

Unfortunately, as most people know, this is very bad. Too much sugar creates highs and lows in blood glucose which results in the sailor feeling frantically energetic for a while, but lethargy soon ensues. So, I now get my energy from fruit throughout the day which does not give the same yo-yo energy levels due to fructose being the energy source. The benefits of hydration were also pointed out, so I now take on a lot more water so as not to become dehydrated. Other areas of my diet were also addressed, with the benefit of high carbohydrate/low fat/sufficient protein being highlighted. Oops, looks like my sponsorship from the local kebab shop might have to be postponed...

STRETCHING

The importance of this had been brought home to me a while ago, on my first proper windsurf trip in Fuerteventura when I started to suffer from a form of tennis elbow. As the weeks went on it became unbearable and I had to stop sailing. However, just 30 seconds stretching each day before I went on the water meant that not only could I start sailing again but also the problem quickly vanished. Since then I have been stretching my whole body before I go sailing, concentrating on all the major muscle groups after mobilising them. However, as I was to find out, there is more to it than that. It is equally important to stretch after sailing. This is the key to reducing stiffness the following day. Holding the stretches for 20 seconds before and after sailing goes a long way to preventing both muscle injuries and stiffness. I'm now working on developmental stretches where the

TRAINING AS A TEAM...

stretches are held for longer, progressing towards an actual increase in flexibility. A yoga style stretching workout can not only help prevent muscle soreness but can also improve your sailing – like adding oil to that rusty bike, the muscles are no longer working as hard to overcome a resistance. More tweaked aerials, better table tops, planing through gybes or nailing that first waterstart. Windsurfing is a sport involving a fair amount of counter rotation, ie: your legs and hips twisting the opposite direction to your upper body. Therefore, if you are more comfortable twisting then all moves begin to look and feel better.

FITNESS

Windsurfing in general is about relatively long periods of low intensity exercise interspersed with occasional moments of energy – for example, during a gybe or waveride. As a result, you rarely get out of breath when windsurfing for fun. Competition is altogether different. From one move straight into another, jump followed by ride followed by jump. I remember my first ever wave heat. It was 8 minutes long and after working hard to get my jumps and rides, I took a rest in the shallows. Totally exhausted and out of breath, I looked at my watch. Only 4 minutes had gone by and I had to get out there and carry on. My fitness had definitely improved since then but I still considered it to be my biggest weakness.

This is easily improved – all it requires is the simple application of hard work. Running, cycling, swimming and, best of all, rowing all improve cardiovascular fitness. Additionally Jem put together a weight training schedule. In the past I have trained in the gym, but this was whilst racing. Weight gain and strength are obviously beneficial for the racer, but I didn't think there was much to be gained for wave/freestyle sailing. Goya however proved this wrong, training regularly to improve his strength. The advantages include more power in waveriding, more strength to hold landings and more speed for higher jumps. Overall there was much to be gained.

To start with, the training schedule was aimed at overall strength, with 2 general workouts. The first was for legs, back and biceps, with the second covering chest, shoulders, and triceps. The core, abs and lower back were also exercised. This results in total body fitness and allowed the necessary time for the muscle groups to recover. Ongoing development splits the workout up further and focusses on any weak areas.

EQUIPMENT

Francisco's boards lay on the floor outside the Whiteboarders van. Picking them up I studied the rails, the outline and general look of the boards, learning precisely bu**er all. Jem came over with a tape measure and, noticing that Francisco's mastfoot was a long way forward, asked where I usually put mine. I had to tell him the truth – I had no idea, always sticking it roughly an inch from the back on all my boards. After he found out I did the same with the footstraps he made me experiment. During the contest wasn't the ideal time, but now every time I go sailing I experiment to make sure my boards are tuned correctly, trying out different settings. This has enabled me to tune my equipment better, whether to emphasise power or control and adjust accordingly for different/changing conditions.

Also on the equipment side was competition preparation. I tend to rig quite a lot of my sails during a competition, but Jem had me rigging everything! The wind was blowing 15-18kts perfect 6.4 weather, but Jem had me rig everything down to a 4.5. At the time I thought he was just making my life difficult, but later when the wind started increasing, I was relaxed whilst other competitors scrambled to get rigged. I didn't need anything smaller than a 5.3, but it definitely brought peace of mind being prepared.

TECHNIQUE

This is where Jem's coaching came into its own. During each heat Jem filmed every move. Then, each night he would spend an hour debriefing me, discussing heat strategy, breaking each move down and identifying areas for improvement. I didn't realise how good an aid filming was. He could slow a Spock or loop down and pinpoint why I had (or hadn't) made it, and then highlight what to concentrate on for successful completion.

After the contest during a windy day at Witterings we had a proper training session. Not



only was he able to sail with me, watching me, telling me what I had done wrong, but he would then proceed to do the move in front of me or drop in to the water to discuss it. Jem is a top sailor in his own right, which really helped me absorb his advice. I must admit that at first I found it hard to take his points on board – “What does he know?!” After this session however, I took on every word he said!

MENTAL PREPARATION

Mental preparation is, in my opinion, the key to success and is an area we worked on during the contest and will be developing further. Confidence came from making sure everything else was prepared. If I know that my diet is good, my body is warmed up, my fitness and technique are as good as they can be and all my kit is tuned up waiting on the beach, then I am reducing the number of factors that effect my performance. During the competition this helped me relax and kept me focussed.

THE CONTEST

So – the acid test. How did this new approach pay off? Very well indeed. Fortunately, David in the Silver fleet was competing at a different time to me, so Jem could really focus on us one at a time. The results were excellent. I unfortunately came up against Nik Baker in the semi-final, which put an end to my contest. Nevertheless, going through the heats that night I was able to see why I had won the early rounds and why Nik had beaten me. It was a great learning aid.

And David won his fleet. In the very marginal wavesailing conditions, Jem had him go out on his biggest freestyle board with accompanying big rig. With strict instructions to get out back before the heat started, David was able to gain valuable points on the larger outside waves whilst his competitors struggled on the inside with more fickle wind.

THE FUTURE

Following the Isle of Wight contest there was a lot of interest in what we were trying to do. Chris Audsley, this year's British Champion, is going to be joining me this winter to train as a team. Having also competed in his first year on the World Tour, Chris is in a similar position to me and therefore a great training partner.

Unfortunately Jem can't travel the world with us, but he has set training schedules and general training practices. Our winter training this year will be more focussed, more constructive and aimed more at improving our competition results. Hopefully one day I will be able to pay Jem to be my personal trainer, but until then I will have to rely on my own discipline, which will be a lot harder!

Much of this advice applies to all levels of sailor. Your sights may not be set on winning a wave competition, but your goal may be to simply plane out of a carve gybe. Either way, improving your fitness and ensuring your equipment is tuned correctly can only be beneficial. Coaching is always important too: Jem has definitely taught more people to carve gybe than to push loop. So whatever your level, if you want to progress it is worth getting some professional help!

This isn't just a feature about a top sailor elevating himself further into the levels of the stratosphere. Whether it's nailing your first gybe or landing your first loops, feeling fit with your kit tuned correctly and receiving feedback on your sailing will enable you to sail longer, both more effectively and efficiently. And most importantly of all, your enjoyment of the sport will increase. So if you want to improve your sailing, why not take a few of these training tips on board – and, indeed, consider some professional coaching? In sports like golf or tennis, it's common practise to go for a lesson with the club pro. So why not in windsurfing?

Jem Hall offers coaching weeks guaranteed to improve your performance. He coaches at all levels from beginners to winners so if you are keen to see massive improvements in your sailing then book up...it's money well spent!

John Skye is sponsored by F2, Arrows, North Sails, Helly Hansen and Team Fakefish
Jem Hall can be contacted for individual coaching sessions or overseas courses on 07762 664077 or visit www.jemhall.co.uk