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Windsurfing a breeze, even in Bellingham

BEN FLETCHER - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A lifetime on the water, 55-year-old Jeff Davis has a favorite sailing pastime and it doesn't even seem close: Windsurfing.

"It is my favorite form of getting pushed around by the wind and I've had a lifetime of opportunities to try that in almost all its forms," said Davis, who works as the program manager at the WWU Lakewood student center on Lake Whatcom and oversees summer classes - including windsurfing - offered to local youth as part of the WWU junior sailing camp.

Davis, who first took interest in the sport of windsurfing as a teenager in the 1960s, said the weekly windsurfing classes, which continue through Aug. 22, have filled up completely.



It's not too tough to understand why.

The most obvious references of windsurfing are probably images played over TV screens, Davis said, with riders, standing on what looks like a surfboard with a mast attached, catching big air off waves and wind and wrestling their vessels back onto the blue.

But the allure comes in many forms, Davis said, including the sport's physicality, simplicity and minimalism, depending on who you ask.

Of course, there's the simple thrill of speed. Windsurfers have the ability to cut across a body of water on adrenaline-boosting runs that can top 30 knots. Windsurfers have been known to approach 50 knots and consistently contend for world sailing speed records.



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And, perhaps the best part, anyone can learn to do it.

"If it's somebody that's willing to take lessons, it's just that," Davis said. "It's more fun than it looks and the better you are the more fun it is."

NOT A LOT OF OPTIONS FOR LESSONS

The windsurfing hey-day of the 1980s and 90s is long gone, making lessons hard to come by, especially for those living north of Seattle. WWU's Lakewood facility, Davis said, is the only place in the area he knows of that offers lessons.

At the WWU classes, which are also offered to college students as well as faculty, alumni and alumni friends in the fall, spring and summer months, riders are up and on top of water on the first day.

"That's accomplished with the use of a simulator," Davis said. "We put a sail on it and teach them how to maneuver and get it going before they're falling in. And if the wind is light enough when they first start they're out and back right away."

It's a matter of technique, using body weight and large muscle groups instead of just arms and working through a taught progression. Trying to muscle the vessel will give a rider fits.

"It really is a sense of being able to work with what would be an overpowering force with finesse and harnessing it, so to speak, and that's really where the speed comes from," Davis said.

Davis remembers a time when he saw the sport everywhere, even in far away and land-locked places like Nebraska. That was when the sport was at the height of popularity.

But the sport's membership dwindled. "Why," is a question old-school windsurfers still debate, Davis said, though the business end of the sport certainly played a role.

Fortunately, local competitive windsurfer Andreas Macke said he's noticed an influx of youth rediscovering what all the fuss was and is still about to those still actively riding. His own 9-year-old daughter has taken up the sport.

Macke, who has windsurfed for 30 of his 39 years, said he'd eventually like to share his love of the sport, possibly starting a club that could offer additional opportunities for interested youth.

"We have a lot of kids that learn the basics over at Jeff Davis' program and then afterward there's really nowhere for them to go with it," Macke said. "It would be a nice to provide them a place to come to after school, you know, some community, some instruction, some competition to allow them to pursue the sport further."

LOCALS KNOW WHERE TO FIND WIND IN WHATCOM

In Bellingham, Davis knows of a few die-hard riders, including Macke - a San Francisco transplant - who still love to tackle the sea standing up.

Macke, technically an amateur rider who competes in several competitions each year - including the U.S. Windsurfing Nationals in Hood River, Ore., that start on Thursday, July 23 - moved to Whatcom County six years ago and brought his passion for the sport with him.

"For competition I have to travel, but there's actually a fair amount of really good windsurfing around Bellingham and around the Puget Sound," Mackie said in a phone interview from Hood River, where the Columbia River Gorge-base nationals take place. "We get pretty epic winter storms. And our winters aren't that cold so we can really sail all year round. Down by Post Point, Marine Park on a really, really stormy, south-easterly - you know the pineapple express type storm - you'll probably see a half-dozen, dozen people out on really big days. It can get pretty intimidating down there. But it's also really fun."

Traditional high-wind areas, places like San Francisco, Hawaii and the Columbia River Gorge still serve as windsurfing meccas. But Davis agrees that the Whatcom County area has a unique combination of wind and water access.

"It's a great place if you're willing to cover a little territory," Davis said. "When it's stormy,

there's a bunch of different places to go. You can actually surf waves on Whidbey and sometimes out at Point Whitehorn you can have Gorge-like conditions; at Post Point; at Marine Park; you can learn how to do it at (Lake) Padden. You can sail on Whatcom. And different times of year and different places are good."

Many of those who have windsurfed for years, also have taken to kite-boarding, which similarly uses wind for power and looks a lot like wakeboarding behind a giant kite.

THE WILL AND THE WAY

If the will is there, then the way to becoming a windsurfer will cost some money. If purchasing a board and gear is the goal, Davis compares it to the cost of a small sailboat.

"Put that boat on a trailer and you get a whole lot more gear and it doesn't even compare to a boat and a slip in the harbor," Davis said. "At the same time, it's a little more than a bicycle, so it's kind of like what's your frame of reference to say that it's expensive."

There's always the cheaper option to take lessons, provided people have the appropriate ties to WWU or want to fork out \$35 to earn friend access, to find out what the fuss is about first.

It seems that those who invest time and money into windsurfing realize the water, wind and sky seem to be the limit.

"To me it's the purest form of sailing," Macke said. "Your body is an integral part of the whole set-up. When you're sailing boats, you're a driver. When you're wind-surfing, you are sailing. You are actually a part of the whole get-up. You are transmitting force. You feel the wind, you feel the water. It's probably also the closest thing to flight that you can get. The sensation when your board pops onto a plane and you're screaming along at 30, 35, 45 m.p.h., the sensation is unbelievable."

The 39-year-old also noted: "Frankly, while it's really exciting to be out there racing in 35-45 mph wind ... it's just as rewarding to go sailing with my 9-year-old floating around on the lake with hardly any wind at all."

Local to compete in windsurfing nationals

Local windsurfing product Andreas Macke will compete in the U.S. Windsurfing Nationals in Hood River, Ore. next weekend, starting Thursday, July 23, through Sunday, July 26.

Visit g-42.blogspot.com to read Andreas Macke's windsurfing blog.

For more information visit the U.S. Windsurfing Association at uswindsurfing.org

How to get involved Windsurfing classes at the WWU junior sailing camp just filled up, but college courses also take place in fall and spring terms, and they're open to more than just students.

To be eligible for the class, a person must be a student, faculty, alumni or alumni friend. Friend memberships can be purchased for \$35 per year. Program director Jeff Davis said the best way to find out more is visit the Lakewood facility. Visit vu.wvu.edu/Lakewood to check them out on the Web.