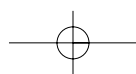
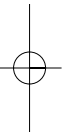
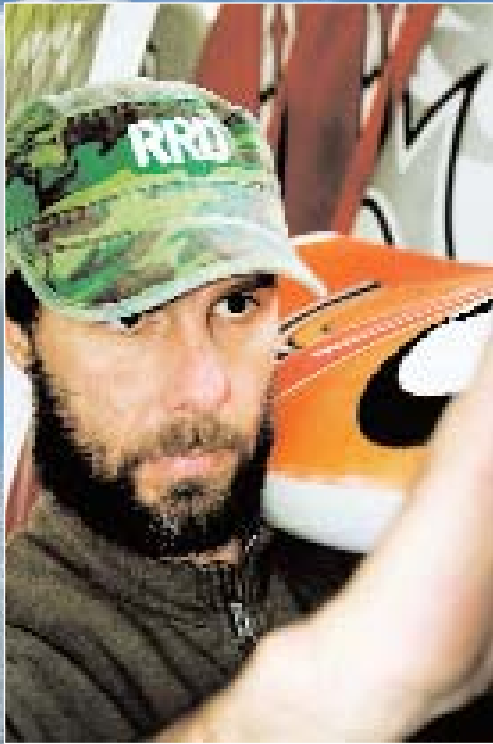




Roberto Ricci's brand has been doing increasingly well in the UK of late, and with RRD sponsoring the kite section at the excellent Wight Air extreme sports event last autumn, its founder came over to have a look at things here for himself. **Brian McDowell** took the opportunity for a chat...

Roberto Ricci





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World over, the natural Italian flair for design is recognised by all, and windsurfing has its very own latino designer label in the form of iconic board brand Roberto Ricci Designs. Despite having been around for over a decade, the RRD brand is still controlled entirely by its namesake and founder, and has maintained a reputation for stylish, individualistic products that regularly feature among the test winners of magazines around the world, despite not following the usual path of sponsoring loads of top sailors and committing to the World Cup scene. One of a number of things I was keen to talk to Roberto about...

It certainly makes for quite a contrast today. There's nothing quite so grey and unstylish as a British bucket-&-spade seaside location out of season, so what did our Italian style magnate make of the chilly, windswept Yaverland Beach? Fortunately, he seems pleasantly impressed, both at the quality of the competition and the quantity of spectators. He comments on the large number of younger sailors too – our youth schemes are the envy of the rest of Europe, and he's seeing for himself the healthy benefits. *"What strikes me above all is the amount of young sailors here who are really interested in the sport. I mean the spectators too, not just the competitors."* Which is a good point – considering the White Air event's many other street-based sports on offer to tempt the youngsters away. Maybe at last we're closing the generation gap between those on the water competing and those on the beach spectating...

Watching him getting a feel for the event, was he possibly wishing he'd sponsored the windsurfing instead? Well, you might too if you'd seen the UK's best bashing logo-high Compton to pieces; all while the kites slogged around and got dragged up cliffs downwind of our grinning slalom racers. However, RRD haven't really been that heavily involved with the windsurfing competition scene at international level of late. There were big names in the past: Anders Bringdal. Josh Angulo... So why did RRD change their minds and lose interest in the PWA in recent years? *"We transferred our budget into things that brought more direct benefit to the market"* comes the tactful answer. *"But now they have Formula 42 we're going to review this issue..."*

So he sees the PWA's move back to slalom racing with the production-equipment-only Formula 42 circuit, as of significant importance for the market?

"People can relate to the results," observes Ricci, comparing first-past-the-post with the subjective decision-making of the wave and freestyle arenas. As a contest judge myself I couldn't agree more; impressive as freestyle is, not many spectators can work out just what the tricks are, how difficult each one is, and exactly who should be the winner. Whereas with slalom racing it's clear from beginning to end exactly who's winning. Roberto reckons there's huge end-user value there too. *"It will mean a lot to customers to walk into a shop and buy exactly what the winners are using, not just some detuned version of an original prototype."*

So will this mean Roberto will move back towards sponsoring a big international team again? *"Yes, we will maybe be looking for some new talent. But you don't need to have top sailors to do well with a brand. We've won tests world over using our trusted team of national riders and other sailors."* →



I scan my mental database of riders and sponsors. Years wasted reading magazines and watching competition have embedded gigabytes of names, brands and their histories together in my mind. RRD, let me see... Competition-wise there is EFPT Champion Mateo Guazzoni, and high ranked EFPT rider Andrea Rosati. Further afield there's Tony Garcia from the Dominican Republic – he's in Maui a lot with Fabrice Beaux and Yann Sorlut of France,

"OK... I think specialist sailors, especially new-skool riders, can only really help develop specialist equipment for their own needs. I don't think you really get the best results with this type of sailor, as it's more difficult to focus their needs alongside those of the market place. I still test all our products myself, and our team are used to giving feedback on a really wide range of equipment, not just the specialist boards."

conditions. What's wrong with riding waves on your back-hand? It's one of surfing's greatest skills, and windsurfing's most underrated. I'm sitting with a man who's seen the styles of the great waveriders over the years too. Would he agree that some of them look better riding back on traditional boards, both in down-the-line and onshore waves? He doesn't think for long...

I think windsurfing's in great shape. The gear's great, we enjoy sailing a lot more than past years and it's easier to learn than ever before...

"I think the very top riders are so aware of their own style, and how to improve on it whatever they ride. Sure there was hype by the pocket-wave / stubby boards, as they let sailors make short turns on small onshore waves. But this led to that limited back-footed, snappy style and – yes – some riders have forgotten their old attack, using smooth, fast, and powerful turns."

and the radical young Hawaiian-Italian rider Francisco Porcella. Some good freestyle talent, but no real 'big hitters'. Yet this cluster of competitive and non-competitive sailors has provided a well-functioning system for the brand for some time now; they clearly have some good R&D brains, know-how and processes that seem to work and sell boards. So what does this say about RRD's competitors and their significantly greater outlay on the big names?

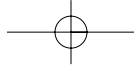
"I think spending big on big name riders gets you some publicity, and therefore sales. But you can get pictures in the magazines without big names!" Tactful again – so I push him further. Is he really saying that top level sailors aren't that important in the R&D process?

Moving on, I want to talk to Roberto about waveboards – a subject I have a bit of a bee in my bonnet about. We've seen some interesting developments in the world of waveboards lately, with the new generation of "Onshore Riding Boards" (ORBs) changing the look of this whole area of the sport. There's no doubt that these boards have made waveriding easier and more accessible for the average joe, but I have to say, after watching competition at national and international level, that in my view, riding these ORBs has had a seriously detrimental effect on the style of many of the top sailors. All the emphasis on riding rubbish onshore waves frontside isn't necessarily doing the sport any favours at top level. I'm convinced there must be a return to more directional shapes, for all

So does this worry Roberto, that the industry's emphasis on producing boards for more onshore conditions has ended up having a detrimental effect on some pro's style as they've developed these boards? *"We like to think our modern pintails will have taken the positives from stubby boards, and melded with the directional boards to work everywhere."* Another suitably tactful answer...

At the other end of the spectrum, what's his take on the general healthiness of the sport at grass-roots level?

"Personally I think windsurfing's in great shape. The gear's great, we enjoy sailing a lot more than past years and it's easier to learn than ever before. There is a need for growth, but in a controlled way."



I agree completely. As a small niche sport – one of the things people like about being a windsurfer – I don't think we should just expect it to rival mainstream stadium sports. So what is RRD's path towards 'controlled growth'?

"Well, apart from offering easy to use widestyle boards like a lot of other brands, we've found that offering cheap, simple rigs makes a large difference to uptake of the sport. Our distributors worldwide have reported increases in sales from this offering."

That sounds good. There's absolutely no doubt that good quality lightweight rigs make a lot of difference for beginners, particularly women and kids. It can ensure that the all-important take-up ratio (between those trying it and those sticking with it) improves. However, better kit alone doesn't bring more people to the sport in the first place. What is his brand doing to actually help market the sport?

"We did a campaign with Alessandra Sensini our Italian Olympic medallist. We made a video showing off our great sport, and got it into every school in Italy for the kids to see. We got a large benefit from that effort. Anyone who makes this sort of effort will get a benefit from it."

"Also, last year we did a promotion with Opel who sponsored our kite and windsurf team. Now we've been approached by Nissan, who're going to launch a RRD branded pick-up truck. It's going to be supplied with RRD paintwork, neoprene seat covers, a special roofrack we designed for them, and a lockable roof-box. I think there has been a trend of social change in many countries where people and families are interested in

many types of outdoor recreation together. The popularity of vehicles like this reflects that and our sport fits right into the brief. Outside sponsors are good for the sport, they attract interest to windsurfing, and make people want to try it when they see it in promotional material."

All good stuff. Admittedly we aren't going to see much benefit from these initiatives here in the UK, but if every brand got involved in marketing the sport at grass-roots like this in their own country, the sport couldn't fail to benefit as a whole. Unfortunately, the windsurfing industry is too fractured and diverse to realistically coordinate any sort of global marketing campaign. However, Ricardo reckons that it's not just up to the industry to spread the word about how great the sport is. *"If every windsurfer introduced a new windsurfer we'd be looking at a different sport."* I think he's got a solid point.

Roberto genuinely thinks by growing the base of new windsurfers, that in 5 to 6 years time we could see much bigger numbers. He talks with enthusiasm of the new generation growing up, who're interested in lifestyle-sports, and are someday soon going to leave school, earn money and look away from cheap alternatives like skateboarding. *"The end result will definitely mean more development, better gear for the average windsurfer, and a better time on the water. What more could you want?"*

What more indeed? Let's hope that this enthusiastic and likeable man is still around in the industry in another eleven years' time to continue pushing it forward. **C**

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