



Controversial Classix

Modern windsurfing freestyle has evolved at a terrifying pace. But has the Euro Pro Tour's latest format hiked up the handbrake and thrown the sport into a most un-vulcan-like U-turn? Nosey parker **Brian McDowell** stuck his sizeable snout in to find out more...

The modern freestyle discipline has shot so far off the intensity and accessibility scale that it's an unrecognisable animal from the one that made its debut at Podersdorf back in '98 or wowed crowds inches from the action at Lake Garda. Unlike wavesailing, most freestyle tricks these days are almost guaranteed to remain unachievable for the average windsurfer, who would be forgiven for perceiving it as a totally different sport.

But for all its hardcore unattainability, freestyle's misty-flipping, kono-switching, one-handed burner-style wizardry has injected new life into the sport by luring fresh young blood away from skateparks and BMX tracks. These days flat-water backwater windsurfers under 20 years old can at last look cool again

without needing to wait for freak wave conditions to roll into town. Or race.

For the budding young pro, the European Freestyle Pro Tour (EFPT) has acted nicely as a feeder tour to the PWA. With its looser 'overall impression' judging criteria and smaller prize pot, it's proved easier to find lower profile sponsorship support to run events. The string of summertime contests has served a positive purpose by giving many top sailors vital international level experience before moving on out to the PWA big-time.

Let There Be Light

Both tours have suffered the same problems of perspicacity. Impartial observers continually ask: "What the hell is going on? Why is that guy better than the other? Who

actually won? Did they deserve it? They both looked pretty amazing to me..." In 2008 the PWA tried to counter this confusion with its 'Big Moves' format, limiting the amount of tricks riders would be judged on during heats - bigger, bolder, crowd-pleasing stunts were pulled that helped everyone involved get a grip on who was the better rider in the ring. Previously, up to 40 tricks per sailor per heat had been recorded, with the results often seeming hard to comprehend due a tricky set of criteria being applied. By opening up the format no-one is playing it safe anymore. The monster moves are flowing and both the fans and the judges look slightly less brain-dead and a lot more entertained at the end of the day. Not only that, but heats can now be run in what the pros, organisers and

So the aim is to give an even playing field for on-water duals where marks are for timeless and classic style rather than invention or difficulty. Thinking about it, yes, a Naish against Gollito head-to-head, or a local giving a legend a hiding would certainly be something to savour, even if the tricks were just planing 360s or willy skippers. But don't you think that it's a bit akin to a wave contest where only forward loops and regular aerials are allowed? In fact one current top pro reckons it'll be *"about as exciting as watching Beetles race Ferraris that are forced to stick in 2nd gear"*.

Form vs Function, Flow vs Go?

Don't get me wrong. I can appreciate how the style rather than complexity of the sailing might be appreciated by the crowds, particularly older windsurfers who grew up watching the 'masters' in action – and especially when the wind is a bit iffy. But I just can't help thinking that – despite the fact that freestyle should be, well, 'free' for a start – the old-timers will enjoy a sizeable bias in the minds of judges and crowds in terms of expectation for flowing moves and non-aggressive tricks. Yes. The geriatric fans are bound to want to cheer on Angulo, Seeger, Naish, Polakow or Pritchard as the 'underdog' against Kiri Thode or Brawzinho. But if you are of a certain 'vintage', ask yourself this: do your kids really want to see their idol Gollito doing duck-tacks when they'll actually see him warming-up for the heat performing a variant that's five steps on – the burner – which he's then not allowed to perform during that five-minute period? I think not. And come on now, I suspect deep down that you don't really want that either.

I know freestyle's complicated and an underground discipline. But it's undeniably cool. It's loved by that minority. It feeds new life into the sport, and I'm sure the older chaps would actually prefer to follow the more 'mature' pros on the wave or slalom tour where they still have a real chance of victory at a truly elite level. And what of building the stars of the future? Robby Naish won his first title at 13, and I'm sure he of all people wouldn't really want to leech any limelight away from new generation. 'Robbing' the tour of vital prize money in a cash-strapped industry in tough times is radical to say the least. In Austria the slalom fleet will scrap it out for 30 grand; the Classix comp offers just 10 grand – 5k less than normal, with the extra going winner-takes-all style to the victor of the combined disciplines along with the dodgy-sounding title of 'Royal Captain of the Lake'. And the good news? Well at least they've not counted this towards the 2009 EFPT

rankings points, although they very nearly did before rider uproar put paid to that idea.

No Dumb Down!

To me the PWA have answered the problems of contest comprehension by actually improving the performance instead of dumbing it down. And in my mind, when only the officially published tricks will count it's almost impossible – and actually wrong – for the EFPT to call it freestyle when the entrants are as far from being free as Houdini being held-under in a hemp sack at Ho'okipa. There I've said it. I'm sorry. I just can't help myself.

Fighting my impartiality for a minute though, surely this old vs new showcase is a strong demonstration-only opportunity to be rolled out more regularly at certain events and particular times. Perhaps as a way of showing-off the mentor / prodigy relationships that exist between, say, Naish and Lenny or Goya and Juban. It would be great for the established to introduce the new wave to the public – just without denying the youngsters a chance to make a living and earn some cash. In fact many youngsters need more education on how to conduct themselves around the public and media anyway. And as a low-level grassroots-up way of holding events easily and cheaply then perhaps it's got more legs than I give it credit for. Austria is actually a perfect event to trial this. It's on a lake. The wind's fickle, and there's a bunch of PWA slalom racers in town competing side-by-side with an EFPT comp. It might even make someone like Seeger or Naish enter the racing. Cool. Something for everyone as they say.

I know what you're going to ask next. Who do I think will win it? Well, the more I examine this the more I reckon that neither an old master nor an upstart will come up smiling. Just think of the riders that could bridge the gaps of time and humiliate both young and old and easily become 'Royal Captain' – such as Tonky or Taty Frans for example, who are also both experienced racers. Actually, no. It's impossible surely? But I think I'm possibly, maybe, just a little bit, coming round to seeing how it could work.

Let's see how it pans out, eh? [boards](#)

The Format

Riding moves: 360, backwind gybe, bodydrag, duck gybe, duck tack, heli-tack, push tack, reverse duck gybe, sail body 360, slam gybe, speed gybe, upwind 360.

Air moves: Back loop, cheese roll, chop hop, front loop, high jump, jump one-handed, one-footer, spin loop, table top, wymaroo, shuv-it.

Rotation moves: Aerial gybe, air gybe, spock, spock 540, willy skipper.

All manoeuvres will have the same degree of difficulty. The judges will judge the overall impression with a big focus on the surf style. The riders will have to show a variety of manoeuvres out of all three categories.

Tonky Frans spin loops at PWA Podersdorf '08

PHOTO: PWA

sponsors have previously found to be infuriatingly fluky and stop-start conditions.

However, the EFPT has gone one step further with a surprisingly controversial and Marmite-like move for 2009. By adding a 'Freestyle Classix' format event to their schedule they're effectively putting a golf-like handicap system on competition in a bid to draw old-school style riders from past and present to compete against new-skool top names. The most complex trick allowed will be a spock 540, with any newer moves not counting towards each heat. *"It's not a masters' event"*, claims EFPT Tour co-founder Gerhard Polak. *"We just 'freeze' the level so that youngsters and masters can achieve the necessary level in a short time. The format should fill up the gap between the locals and the professionals... and is a perfect solution for low prize money level events around strong local scenes. For example, we have about 20 dedicated freestylers around Lake Neusiedl, but we have no-one at the top level."*