

Our *Best of British* series has been surprisingly long-running – we do indeed have a lot of very talented competitors here in the UK. But we've been sailing the best till last. Over to **Brian McDowell** for a profile of the most successful British windsurfer of all time...

NIK BAKER



Ho'okipa '94



Cabo Verde '07

BEST OF BRITISH

Nik Baker isn't just Britain's most famous and successful windsurfer. Since cresting the new wave of young guns in the shape-shifting generation of Josh Angulo, Francisco Goya and Jason Polakow *et al* in the early '90s, he has grown massively in stature and become a real legend – especially after famously winning the Aloha Classic in 1999. He's been world class in WWave, Race, Slalom, Freestyle, Super-X and – of course – made the Indoor arena his own with a whole stack of World Championship titles. And he just keeps on doing it, year after year.

Nik's all grown up now and a family man, but with his seasons of accumulated experience and guile he's still fending off the latest crop of whippersnappers and next-big-things – at the same time as entering the upper environs of windsurfing business with a serious job as Mistral's Product Manager.

It will be a long time (if ever) before another Brit emulates his success on the Professional Windsurfers' Association (PWA) circuit. He's a

true worldwide windsurfing star – indeed, more recognised in many other countries than here in the UK. And this is just as much to do with his instinctive understanding of the media as well as his phenomenal competition ability. Well aware that maximum exposure is crucial for his career and the sport he loves, he's featured in countless interviews and articles the world over, and while some are naturally about self-promotion, one theme runs through all of them in an almost annoying fashion – his relentlessly diplomatic and measured responses, and consummately professional conduct.

Can he really be this pleasant and this polished? Surely he must have some skeletons in the closet or wild incidents kept under wraps? If he hasn't, can he really be human? Do we really want to see him in the same light as Tim Henman or Steve Davis? Time to get inside his head and find out what makes him tick...

On hearing that I wanted to feature him in the mag, Nik predictably gave me a speedy

positive response and an invitation to his home. However, I hadn't told Nik that this wasn't necessarily going to be an easy interview. I wanted to test him, push him and, well, yes, provoke him into some deeper, darker answers. On the way to his house I plotted how I could possibly do this to one of the nicest and friendliest guys I've ever met.

Pulling up at his pad I noticed the pair of BMW X5s on the drive and the pro footballer-style gaff. Not bad for a windsurfer. OK, it isn't Beckingham Palace, but it's certainly the home of a boy-done-good, and befitting of his achievements too.

Not wanting to blunder and block any of the posh motors in, or risk dinging one with my old banger, I reversed straight into his wall and badly bruised my bumper as Nik laughed from his sumptuous entrance porch. Not a good start to my hard-man approach! Mentally off-balance, all my pre-planned tactics disintegrated like the front of my car, so to give myself time to regroup, I went for the old cliché

of asking him to tell me how he started out in windsurfing. I must admit I had trouble trying not to picture Nik in a sailor suit as he explained how, as a Sea Scout, he got into canoe racing... But thankfully he saw someone windsurfing while on a family holiday in Greece, decided to check it out, and was instantly hooked. Having acquired the taste, it wasn't long before his competitive streak kicked in.

"Like most kids I was well into football. I was good at it, but I hated losing, and I got really frustrated if someone let the team down and there was nothing I could do about it. Saying that though, I never wanted to be the guy who bitched about whoever it was that made a mistake or didn't do their job. So, after being competitive in slalom canoeing, and heavily influenced by the image of personalities like Robby Naish in windsurfing, I felt only I could be responsible for losing. After my dad gave his job up and started a windsurfing shop I was instantly on the RYA coaching schemes and racing longboards on the then British Funboard Association [BFA] circuit."

If you ask anyone who knew Nik as a nipper they'd tell you the same thing – he was full of energy and just loved winning, no matter how much work it took (and that's just as true today as it was 15 years ago). I remember Nik from my days working at Gaastra when he

worked with Nik he recalls his endless drive and obsessive competitiveness. (*"Particularly with Jason Polakow. Those two would even try to beat each other to see who could get to the bog first, or out to the car, or be the quickest to the beach!"*)

“ Bjorn walked past me on his way back up the beach and just winked and said: 'Not this year mate' ... ”

came into the team from Fanatic / ART. He's never been a 'sponsor slut', chopping and changing brands for more cash – instead the pattern shows he's always worked a deal in which he's instrumental in developing equipment to his particular needs.

Willy Blauw was one of Gaastra's sail designers back then, and like everyone who's

Willy is a great judge of character, and as a former colleague of Nik's (and these days a mate and fellow road-cycling nut) he didn't hesitate when I asked him about where Nik's get-up-and-go comes from.

"Nik approaches everything in life with the same level of dedication, passion, enthusiasm and professionalism. It doesn't matter whether →



Cabo Verde '07



BEST OF BRITISH

Sylt '06



Paros '98

it's windsurfing, motorbikes, cars, golf, cycling, family life or business. He enjoys working hard – and he plays hard too. He puts 100% into every aspect of his work and play, again to a point of almost being obsessive. For example, if he buys some golf clubs he won't just buy any old set – he'll research all the different products and playing styles and get one that best suits him. Same applies to everything he does.

"I met Nik for the first time in the Canaries when he was 15, and he tried hard to convince me he was the next best thing after Robby and Bjorn! You wouldn't see him out drinking too often, but when you did, it would be nothing stronger than a shandy. He was like a German in his approach to work – very anal! From my side, that certainly made it easier to do my job.

"The difference between Nik and a lot of the other guys is that he never took risks beyond his capability or with the style of his equipment, and this impacted on his success. Some guys are happy to take new gear, even if it's untried, but not Nik."

Indeed, in our discussions Nik mentioned that he was still kicking himself for taking a twin-fin he hadn't fully tested out in a heat at Guincho this year, and subsequently getting knocked-out early.

Nik was one of the first really professionally-minded sailors to emerge on the British

Funboard scene. The late 1980s was a great time to be on the circuit; it was full of larger-than-life characters who partied really hard, and rarely raced without a hangover. However, Nik was not to be swayed...

"Yeah, I remember Mark Woods came to open my dad's shop when I was just 14. Woodsy rocked-up outside the store and just leant against his car and handed me a beer. My dad would have freaked, and I didn't take it, so I guess that was a key point in how I'd approach windsurfing from then on. I knew then that I wanted to be like Bjorn, who was really committed to winning, or at least an outward personality like Robby."

But it seems that, despite being incorruptible, Nik seemed to revel in the older company he kept, and reckons his competitiveness comes from being the youngest and having to keep up.

"When I was racing canoes it was a constant battle to compete and keep level with the older racers. I just felt there was no reason why I couldn't do as well as them. A lot of people say I'm competitive because I have two brothers, but my big brother is four years older than me so we led different lives, and Ant was four years younger, so we didn't have that traditional rivalry. What I really loved and still do about competition is the 'fight.' That's

what attracted to me to racing and the battle involved in being top dog."

So where does this all this energy come from? Nik jokes and says it's a bit like talking to a shrink, and I begin to feel I've got more of a handle on the situation now. (Maybe he'll pay for my paintwork since he put a low garden wall in such a stupid place?)

"Actually, I wonder what it's like to go to counselling?" says Nik. "Maybe I should visit a sports psychologist?"

"Maybe I should visit a panel beater," I reply. We laugh about it (the shrink, not the car – that's just not funny), but Nik then says that he honestly can't think of anything traumatic that might have caused him to be so driven. Traumatic, no, but...

"I did feel guilty about all the time I spent in Hawaii while my parents spent their lives supporting me – especially when they went bust and then, through thick and thin, provided everything I needed. I remember I had to borrow money from my grandad for two Thommen custom boards once. I really needed them and actually broke into the top 10 for the first time on those boards, which allowed me to pay him back. But by then I was pretty motivated about where I wanted to be."

If you ask Nik's mum and dad, Maria and Herbie, what Nik was like as a child, they'll tell you how they had to work a shift system as he only slept two hours a day for the first few years of his life.

"Yeah, the doctors all said I was a little bit hyperactive, but I wasn't naughty or anything – I just had to be on the go the whole time, and didn't take much time to recharge. I still don't need much sleep and work a lot at night, and I'll happily get up at 5am and start over again. On RYA training camps with Wemmsy and Cribby when we were kids we'd be out on longboards training for hours, and in the breaks I'd go out on my shortboard and practise cheese-rolls and get told off by the trainers for being cocky..."

Even when he hired coaches – such as Olympic trainer and Team MPG founder Scott Sanchez a few years ago – Nik was always pushing, always looking for even more from himself. Apart from his wife, Sanchez is the closest thing Nik has to a shrink, and the American conditioning guru certainly shed some light on the situation when I quizzed him.

"Nik's success continues to come from his love of competing. It's that simple. When

intense focus now that our respective wives' and young children's needs are interwoven with our work. In a nutshell, apart from physical training we have conversations that lead to agreed agendas for delivering results."

Of course, everyone has something nice to say about a nice guy, and I admit it's hard to think of any enemies Nik might have. But would it be so hard to say that, with his level of ability and motivation, he might actually have under-achieved? Other than his Indoor Windsurfing dominance, he's finished so many seasons sooo close to the top – 3rds, 4ths, 5ths – but never quite that oh-so-sweet top spot on the Tour. Ironically, if there had been an Overall Champion he'd have been 2nd (behind Kevin Pritchard) on quite a few occasions, years when he was top 4 in Waves, Freestyle and SuperX. So – being this ambitious, does he feel satisfied?

Nik swallowed before answering so I knew I might have touched a nerve...

"I do really wish I'd brought the Wave title home. Twice I was in with a shout and lost out at the end. The worst was when I'd left Brazil in '98 after coming third there and was leading the

“ Can he really be this pleasant and this polished? Surely he must have some skeletons in the closet or wild incidents kept under wraps? ”

others around him have exhausted their drive he continues to reinvent his passion to excel and showcase his skills.

"He originally came to me with an existing skill-set and podium results, so my relationship with him has always centred around stimulating his appetite, to enhance his abilities, and give him a perspective that perhaps he hadn't considered previously. Over the years our relationship has expanded into our family lives, and we have to maintain

World Tour. Everything was looking good, but at the Aloha Classic I went out first round and then watched Bjorn – who'd admit himself that he wasn't sailing well – managing to get through heat after heat and into the final against Matt Pritchard, who sailed a shocker. Bjorn only got two waves, and I sat there and knew my chance had gone. Bjorn walked past me on his way back up the beach and just winked and said: 'Not this year mate.' But the reason we do this is because we love it and we love competing. Put it this →



Guincho '07

way, it's not for the big bucks! As you get older you have to learn to take it on the chin, no matter how painful it can be."

Prompting Sanchez to review Nik's career got an immediate and clear response.

"I wouldn't have changed anything from his past. I feel he came into our programme at the right time for him and his desires. His history speaks volumes about his constant pursuit of excellence right from the early days of meeting Robby, to living with Jason, and all the while his parents gave literally everything they had – and then some – to see both Ant and Nik follow their dreams. In turn, Nik's worked over the years with his parents in a real-estate turnover system that has rewarded and challenged everyone. Michelle [Nik's wife] is his anchor and biggest fan. She's earned worldwide acclaim in her own right as a model, yet when she comes to, say, Pozo, she hangs in the dust and salt and never once whines about anything. With her on his side he thrives, and when he was offered new responsibilities, such as his position with Mistral, he dove in head-first.

"Personally, in the future I'd love to see him on the slalom course for a season, but his



current responsibilities are so substantial that something would have to be deleted from his agenda, and it's unlikely that Mistral would go for that. Maybe when Brandon, his son, is old enough to help him carry all his gear through Heathrow and can caddy for him as well he'll think about it – you just never know!

"All I know about Nik is that he's a funny, interesting dude, and he has a desire and need to relate to others. If I was ever to get stuck in a lift or a closed airport or something, Nik's the guy I would want to be in my company. He can make a two-hour story about standing in a queue comical."

One thing that's always struck me about Nik and the company he keeps is that he can, on the surface, appear to be a bit of a show-off and perhaps a bit flash. He's certainly got some pretty impressive mates. Tabloid headliners Katie Price (Jordan) and Peter Andre are close friends, not to mention the long list of windsurfing buddies. But ironically Nik is also quite a shy and reserved character, and this seems to have come a little more to the fore as his responsibilities have grown.

"Yeah, I used to be addicted to buying the latest and greatest toys. I was gadget-mad really and wasted so much money. Polakow and I used to be permanently in battles to see who could out-do the other on the best van or motorbike or whatever. But what no-one realises is all the years I spent watching the pennies, sleeping under trees or in tents and generally roughing it to go to events. When the cash finally came my way I reacted, and I regret that now. I know what a buck's worth. I'd hassle you for a tenner hard now if you owed it to me. [Zero chance of anything towards the car then.]

"My dad had motorbikes when we were kids, and he also had a Porsche 911. But I used to make him pick me up from school a few blocks away as I didn't want other kids to see

me in it. Those cars on my drive are because I've always said that, as soon as Michelle was pregnant, I wanted the biggest, safest car for her and Brandon's safety. Yeah, they've got 22-inch rims on them and they're the top model, but it's because I like them. In a way I'm embarrassed about this kind of thing. I'll hide stuff or keep a low profile among people who might think I'm a bit wide.

"The truth is that if I wasn't a windsurfer I'd be doing something manual like landscaping or building, as I like to work with my hands and could never sit in an office all day even if I earned big bucks. It's been said before that I'm arrogant and that I've not said 'hi' to people at the beach or whatever, but in reality what people don't know is that I've worked and worked at being more approachable and I do try to say hello more and chat.

"Yeah, I've been in the Katie and Pete TV series a bit, and that embarrasses me too. I got left behind with the cameras the other day while they were out and I was looking after the kids. We're also having Junior over to stay this week while Katie has her new baby, and we go out to dinner with them and that sort of thing. Their life is hectic, but they're just like you and me really and very normal once you get to know them. It's the same with Jason Polakow. I first met him at the Aloha Classic trials event, where I got second behind him. There were no 'I ams' or 'check me outs' with him – just fun. We've got on like a house on fire ever since. I still see old friends like Jamie Hawkins, and I also think about Andy Funnell a lot too. I wish I'd remember to call his old man Trevor more – especially now I'm a dad, too."

Polakow laughed himself stupid when I asked him about those days.

"My first real memory of Nik would have to be going against him in the Aloha Classic trials. I was this small kid from Australia and Nik was →



➤ Pozo '07

the young hotshot from England. I remember that I was wearing booties in the water and wondering how a kid from England with such big ears could be sailing so well in the surf here in Hawaii.

"We got on straight away as all we were concentrating on was windsurfing every day. We eventually moved in together and Nik was my first and last roommate. We lived together in Maui for at least 10 years, moving from place to place until he met Michelle and got married. There are many stories I could tell, but most are definitely not for the press!

"Nik's career in my eyes has been pretty much flawless. His sailing style is super-refined and he rarely makes a mistake. He's great on both tacks and is nearly always in the top five at every event. People sometimes

forget how good he is at Ho'okipa, also. He's a former Aloha Classic winner and I would hate to go against him at any event. He's very strong for his weight so he has a lot of power on the wave. You could never say that he didn't put in 100%, and that's the main thing. He put a lot of effort into Maui when he was young and this reflects in his sailing ability now. I suppose the only thing I can think of would be that, in the last five years, Nik hasn't spent much time in Maui, but that's understandable as his priorities have had to change now he's a family man. I guess I just miss the good old days when all us boys were young and only thought about one thing. Oh, sorry, two things: windsurfing – and girls."

Those days of high-living, high-paid notoriety introduced Nik to the glamorous circles that led to him meeting Michelle and some of his more famous friends. Nik still goes to Formula 1 and Superbike events as a guest of Red Bull, and manages to move seamlessly between the worlds of niche watersport, big-league motorsport and showbiz. He readily admits that he would have struggled to stay focused if he'd been successful in, say, motorbike racing with its bigger financial rewards.

"My dad helped me think more about what I'd do in 10 years time as Ant and I had real problems, obsessions even, with buying things that were just a waste of money. With the young generation of windsurfers, like Brawzinho on our Mistral team, I want them to make the most of their situation, their talent, their choices and their chances."

This wise, responsible sentiment makes me ask him how he'd describe himself. Relaxed in his living room stroking one of their miniature handbag dogs (called Rossi, after the Moto GP rider, Valentino Rossi), he responds instantly: "Determined. Conscious. Aware." I think of what Sanchez said about his need to relate to others, and it makes a lot of sense now.

The fact is that, despite his clean-living nature, Nik is undoubtedly a compulsive and addictive character. He's certainly addicted to adrenaline-based activities, and speed in particular – his most recent fad is fast road cycling, which is a passion he shares with Willy Blauuw, Jason Polakow and Robby Swift, and he's also been into motorcycles in a big way for the last 14 years.

"Actually Whitey [Dave White] is motorbike mad as well – I got him into them four or five years ago and we do track days together whenever we can get the time. Whitey's a loony, but like me he's competitive and gets obsessed and absorbed by things – we both love our superbikes. We don't like to do anything slowly!

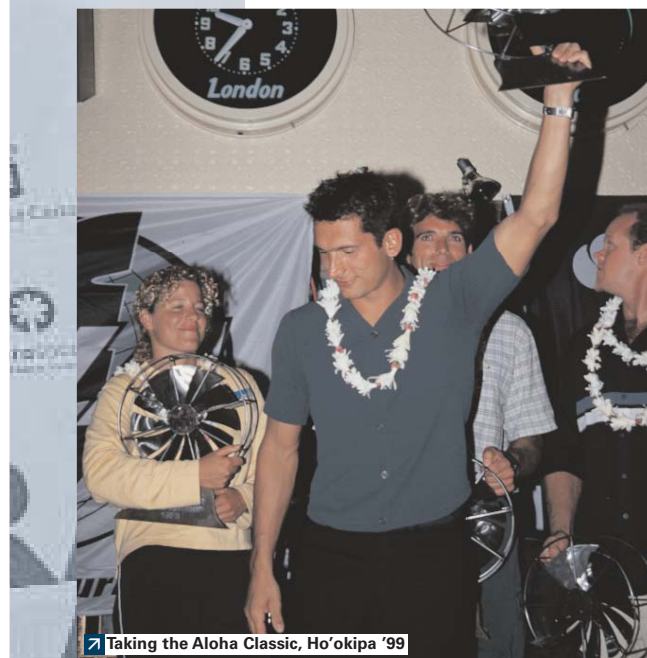
I nod in agreement. As Hunter S Thompson put it: "Being shot out of a cannon will always be better than being squeezed out of a tube. That's why God made fast motorcycles, Bubba..."

"Yeah – I get bored easily and I'm surprised by where this takes me mentally. It's fascinating instead of being exciting, simply because it's dangerous. Don't get me wrong – after all the effort put into making a session happen, there's nothing like a day at Brands Hatch, or taking the drop at Jaws, but pushing it at either of those places will kill you."

That measured approach, coupled with his desire to please and make people feel happy, sums Nik up for me.

As I prepare to leave and wonder just what carnage I might cause in the drive on the way out, I pause to reflect on the last few hours, and the lasting impression Nik has made on me. He's a true hero, a real sportsman, and an exceptional athlete who's surpassed himself and always done the right thing. Britain should be proud of the way he's represented his country on the Tour all these years.

As a living example to his sport and family on what it takes to enjoy life and be successful, Nik Baker is the perfect specimen... ☺



➤ Taking the Aloha Classic, Ho'okipa '99