

FEET

by Jenny Parma

Photos by Brian Erler

Plugged from the X Games, skysurfing stands as a fledgling sport poised to reinvent other parachuting disciplines. Pro skysurfer Stefan Klaus recounts his flight as a world competitor for an uncertain sport.

In a morphing sporting industry – where sports are endorsed by the public as abruptly as they're expunged – an athlete's popularity can plunge as quickly as poor TV ratings. For skysurfer Stefan Klaus, the harsh reality of the business hit him before he had time to land.



After winning the 2000 X Games SSI Pro Skysurfer event held in Sonoma, Calif., Klaus of Switzerland and teammate Brian Rogers of the United States celebrated a bittersweet victory. Before handing the team the largest chunk of the \$75,400 purse, ESPN announced that the event would be pulled from the X Games' roster in place of BMX biking. To add to the team's dismay, their two-year contract with Yahoo! expired.

According to ESPN marketing and communications manager Maria Elles Scott, the decision to plug the 6-year-old event came after analyzing three parts that came up short, including TV ratings, audience following and competition. A broken link to Yahoo!'s skysurfing page spells its own despondency about the decision.

Top seeded after only four years of training as a skysurfer, 28-year-old Klaus poses as a young icon for a young sport. He and handfuls of other skysurfers blaze through the sky each day in hopes of receiving something tangible but quite content with something effervescent. For now anyway.

Although Klaus admits that the sport is more of a lifestyle than a hobby, he and his contemporaries also believe that skysurfing will reform parachuting disciplines into more acceptable pastimes - and maybe more profitable ones.

A YOUNG SPORT

Skysurfing, like most aerial sports, evolved from skydiving. In 1980, California skydivers experimented with Styrofoam boogie boards, using them as equipment to lie on while performing the typical freefall pose onto a landing strip, called a drop zone. Thereafter, the form and function of the board changed many times. It went from skateboard to wake board to what is today known as the sky board - a carbon, lightweight board with a loop and rings for foot bindings. The size of the board reflects the surface-to-weight and surface-to-height ratios of the skysurfer. In addition to using a board, beginning skysurfers need at least five pieces of equipment:

–BOC (Bottom of container) main deployment system



- Square reserve
- Sit-suit or large baggy sweatshirt with Velcro cutaway handle attachment
- Tight-fitting pants with a cut in the left or right leg for a cutaway handle
- Low-top running shoes with laces
- Optional webbed gloves

For athletes skilled in accelerated free fall (AFF) and courageous and disciplined enough to try skysurfing, most skydive organizations and drop zones impose strict requirements for learning the sport. First, hours count. Even skydivers with 1,000 jumps under their belts might need more practice to begin skysurfing. The second requirement includes good heading, vertical and horizontal control so the skysurfer won't over-compensate when trying to command a board shaped like a lightning rod.

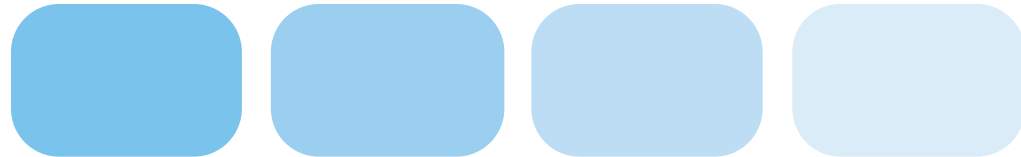
To adjust to this beginner board, which has a wide surface designed for stability, skysurf instructors use many training methods. For example, some master skydivers instruct students to practice head-down, 3-D and vertical flying techniques. Another method involves the proper performance of 360-degree pirou-



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ettes in each direction while the student is in a sit position, a standup and layout loops. Although instructors use different techniques to learn the sport, they all advocate comprehension and confidence.

Lastly, trainees must demonstrate basic knowledge of the board and diving equipment



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MARIA ELLES SCOTT

ESPN Marketing & Communications manager

to learn skysurfing. This includes proper use and execution of board attachments, the release system and equipment safety checks. Emergency procedures are also practiced.

SURF'S UP

After passing the preliminary stages of practicing on a beginner board - which consists of almost 25 jumps - would-be skysurfers receive an intermediate board about 11-inches wide. During these training sessions, the athlete learns the fundamentals of centrifugal forces of nature that can leave a skysurfer dizzy and tingly without delight.

When the surfer remains upright during a



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jump with the board underfoot, the air pushes upward, sometimes inflicting pain and lightheadedness. Deployment can be difficult and injury might occur.

Klaus contests that risk develops from lack of common sense and over-estimation such as packing a canopy that is too small. But un-

like skydiving, the danger in skysurfing intensifies with the board.

A skysurfer's body is aerodynamically different with a board during freefall than without one. The board acts as a guide for skysurfers to literally play with the wind. That's what makes all the turns, twists and tricks possible. However, the wind can conversely work in peril. If the board and wind meet at certain angles - such as when the surfer's body is inverted - the force of the wind can catch the diver's body and board, inducing a spinning action, also called a helicopter spin.

A skysurfer is also more prone to rolling when using a board, again launching the athlete into a spin.



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In most cases, a skysurfer regains control during a spin by extricating the release handle - usually located on the left-hand side of the leg - called the cutaway. Once the handle of the release system deploys, the skyboard separates from the surfer and falls to the ground.



As with skydiving, the fear of packing a bad canopy also factors into the sport of skysurfing. Klaus, however, downplays this occurrence and uses logic to simmer his fears. "I haven't had any extremely dangerous moments," claims Klaus. "Once the canopy didn't open, but that can occur during all jumps. When that happens, use common sense and open the reserve canopy."

The reserve parachute is opened every six months and inspected by a specialist. In addition to the reserve chute, skysurfers wear a computer that gauges the air pressure of the environment. If at a certain altitude, the athlete hasn't disengaged the chute (which can occur when a surfer faints or collides into another diver or cameraman), the computer activates the chute to open automatically.

TAKING IT TO THE X-TREME

Skysurfing, unlike freefall, freefly canopy formation, formation diving or any other parachuting discipline, involves a team of two athletes: a skysurfer and a cameraflyer. The skysurfer spins, twists, and freefalls on a skyboard while the cameraflyer records the



STEP 4:Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit in voluptate velit esse cillum

event through a helmet-mounted digital camera. To add to the performance, the photographer also provides his/her own set of tricks and techniques.

During the 2000 X Games skysurf event, Klaus and Rogers won the gold due to their symbiotic acrobatics during 13,000-foot freefalls at about 180-mph.





For basic training, skysurfers practice alone. However, a more advanced skysurfer trains with a fellow cameraman, in anticipation of competition. Finding a cameraman requires know-how in the skysurfing field and a thick Rolodex of contact names in the industry. Without a cameraflyer, the surfer would appear as nothing more than a black dot in the sky to spectators on land. Therefore, a team must endure arduous practice to function in unison. It took team Yahoo! almost 300 jumps to collaborate.

Filming begins from the time the team jumps from the plane to the time they land on the drop zone. The footage is then transferred onto tape and handed over to jury members, who review the documentation two times. After six jumps, team Yahoo! averaged a 95.5 score based on artistic expression, difficulty, technique and style.

DEFLATABLE WINS

Because skysurfing demands rigorous practice and discipline, skysurfers often turn their passions for the sport into full-time jobs. "You can't learn skysurfing in two or three weeks," says Klaus. "If you want a hobby, choose freeflying. For skysurfing, you need at least 800 jumps until you can control the

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STEFAN KLAUS

Professional Skysurfer

board the way you want it."

Klaus and Rogers won \$18,000 in proceeds from the competition. Although the physical size of the check (it stood about as tall as 6'2" Klaus) almost seemed more alarming than the actual dollar amount, Klaus and Rogers still hold the biggest monetary purse awarded for any skysurf competition.

So how do skysurfers finance their passion? For many, they're not competing for money or fame. In addition to the addiction, thrill, and skill, surfers compete to cover costs and in hopes of finding a sponsor.

To succeed as a full-time, expert skysurfer, the aspiring athlete must spend most of his/her day in the air and on the plane. But skysurfing conjures up many costs: the plane, drop zone, pilot and equipment - to name a few. Every jump - after a surfer receives certification - costs from \$16 to \$20 before avail-

able discounts from drop zones are figured in. Expert skysurfers need at least five jumps a day to hone their skills. Add the charges of camera equipment and graphics programs to the toll, and skysurfing expenses exceed more than a small loan can repay.

Until Klaus won his first SSI title in 1999, his total debt tallied \$90,000. Thereafter, his main source of support came from sponsorships and commercials that covered his equipment and drop zone expenses. Because the X Games offered the biggest - and in most cases the only - cash prize award to skysurfers, athletes' searches for funding span high and low.

Since Klaus' victory in the 2000 X Games, he has competed at the 2001 Red Bull Anti Gravity Festival in Poland and the European Championship in Spain. Meanwhile, he and a few of his skysurfing comrades started Futurefly, a video production company in Interlaken, Switzerland. Klaus and his fellow workers film tourists and aspiring skydivers jumping from planes or strapped to bungee cords over the Swiss Alps and sell the footage back to the participants. The company also creates demo tapes for adventure companies in the area. Although Klaus' future is more grounded than in the past, skysurfing remains a part of his life.

"I want to enjoy life and flying," says Klaus. "I'm not the type for really crazy things. I want to perfect my moves in skysurf rather than move on to another (skydiving) discipline."

So what about the future of skysurfing? ESPN spokeswoman Scott comments: "We always strive to stay on the cutting edge of what people are doing and what they are interested in. Regarding adding skysurfing back in, that is something that I can't really comment on either way. I'm sure that just as things are removed from the event, they are considered for reentry as well."

Feeling: Priceless

