

Boardsailing : Yachting's new Olympic event

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Yacht racing is known as the sport of kings but in the early 1960s it became also, and very definitely, a sport for the masses when small yachts, known as dinghies, were produced in large numbers at reasonable prices. This was the tip of the iceberg ; more was to follow.

A number of surfers in various parts of the world had experimented with putting sails on their surf board. In 1967 Hoyle Schweitzer marketed an elongated surf board with a pivotal rig consisting of a mast, sail and wishbone boom. Windsurfing or Boardsailing was born.

A year or so later the sport was introduced in Europe and over 10,000 sailboards were sold that year. One year later there were 100,000 on the water !

In concept sailing a surf board seems to be incredible. It has no rudder to steer by, you

have to stand on the board and there is no room to duck under the sail when you tack the board so that the wind is on the other side of the sail. Nevertheless boardsailing has become the world's fastest growing sport. In Europe by the end of 1981 there were nearly 1 million boards on the water. In the USA that year 50,000 were sold.

Board sailing has been likened to skiing and there is no doubt that the two sports are in many ways very similar. Like skiing it is best to start by going to one of the thousands of schools which exist throughout the world and within about 5 hours, of which the majority are spent on a simulator on dry land, you have learnt the basics of boardsailing. From there on your progression is very rapid and this builds your enthusiasm. Every day you can achieve better results, feel more confident, yet there are always more challenges ahead. The



The author



"At the age of fifty-five, I enjoy competing..."

wind may increase, the waves get bigger and even if they do not there are always tricks to be learned. The logical progression once you have a little more confidence is to begin racing sailboards. Sailboards easily adapt to the Olympic course used for more traditional sailing. So you can see it was not long before there were scores of enthusiasts appearing in

races on lakes with small winds, to seas where the winds blew hard and the surf piled up.

World Championships in various classes were held, beginning in 1973 and each one broke all records for numbers of countries and competitors participating in any previous sailing event in history. In the mid 1970s the International Yacht Racing Union, the International Federation which governs all sailing, began to take an interest in the sport. I was asked to make reports to our Class Policy and Organisation Committee, and as a result of those reports a Board Sailing Committee was established in 1977. As soon as the sport received the official backing of the IYRU, it received the backing of the National yachting authorities and the "brush fire" of board sailing became a roaring inferno.

In 1979, two of the most popular boardsailing classes achieved international status. These were the Windglider and Windsurfer. They are "one-design" classes which means that the sailboards and their equipment are identical thus giving equal opportunities to those who sailed them.

Competition in a one-design class is person against person, not a combination of person and equipment against person and equipment.

At the same time the IYRU realised that it needed to give guidance to assist this new sport and started to develop rules which would allow sailboards to be built at home or by other manufacturers at the same time as allowing some controlled experimentation. (These were developed until, at the present time, the IYRU has three different sets of rules. Division 1 for the flat boards which are fairly simple to sail,



popular and versatile: Division 11 for the displacement boards which are built for racing round the buoys and Division III for tandems, ie boards with a crew of two and two masts).

The IYRU has also given international status to a third one-design class, the International Mistral Class.

In 1980, the IYRU thought it was time to approach the International Olympic Committee in order to have this new branch of the sport granted Olympic status. The IOC was quick to react and at its July 1980 meeting boardsailing was granted Olympic status, not one member of the IOC voting against it. This was the fastest time in which any sport has ever gained Olympic status and the strongest vote of endorsement ever for an Olympic sport, 74 members voting for it and one abstaining.

The IYRU was then faced with the task of selecting the equipment used in the Olympic board sailing event. This had to be done by November of 1980 because of the requirements of the IOC Charter and the IYRU annual meeting. Factors which were taken into consideration by the IYRU were that the Olympic equipment should be available to every country as cheaply as possible, that it should not favour a particular size or weight of competitor and that the equipment be as identical as possible so as to make the contest between the ability of the athletes. We did not want an armaments war ending in the Olympics being won by the competitor who chose



as the Olympic board. Although this choice has caused difficulties it was the only possible choice at that time which could meet the criteria. Within a short time, countries from all over the world were sending their national boardsailing teams complete with coaches and trainers to all major Windglider championships.

Why has the sport gained such a following ?

The simple answer is that boardsailing gives one of the greatest thrills of all sports. It begins with the environment of the sport, water and air, both of which are completely natural and abundant. It is the total control of movement over water and through the air through balance and technique. It requires a very short time to prepare the board and put it on the water.

There is no great strength requirement but there is a high priority on good technique, balance and fitness.

As you get better you naturally want to compete with and against the others and show off your skills, thus racing a board becomes a natural follow on to initial learning. Racing combines the tactical ability of chess, the sense of balance of skiing, the endurance of long distance swimming as well as the running and agility of basketball. You have to have a very complete variety of abilities to win. No wonder testing has shown that the top surfers are among the top allround athletes in the world !

Now as to age. Personally I am 55 and enjoy competing - and there are plenty of others older than I am and competing with great skill



the best equipment, which was so sophisticated and used such exotic materials that it could only be built in one or two countries. The IYRU overwhelmingly selected the Windglider

and enjoyment but it must be said that to be the best you have to be young. Surfers these days start at about the age of 8 and are probably at their peak between 18 and 23. So it is definitely a young man's sport at the top but in many events we have special prizes for the veterans (that's the over 40s) and we have special prizes for the girls. In some of the classes, particularly those which are more weight sensitive, we have prizes for the heavy weights and prizes for the light weights. The sport is therefore fun with plenty of competitors and plenty of prizes which engenders enthusiasm and enjoyment.



Thus the sport has already created many interesting personalities.

What of the future? First of all, earlier in the article I said boardsailing was like skiing. One must appreciate that in skiing there are various different disciplines ; the downhill and the different slalom races and so it is in boardsailing. So there is an enormous future in both separate types of event and a combination of types of events. For the present moment the most popular events are round the buoy racing, slalom, freestyle and races through the surf called "ins and outs". Thus it can be seen that the future of the sport lies in



The sport is also great fun to watch and it is really photogenic for all types of visual media.

On a starting line all the boards jostle together to find good spots in order to get ahead early.

During the race the competition is normally very close and the lead is often changing. Sail boards move much faster than normal yachts and to see a group of them skimming over the water at close quarters in acrobatic fashion and constant movement is very thrilling. Major events are already receiving more and more attention from the media and television. This is particularly noticeable in the USSR, West Germany, Brazil, USA, the Netherlands, France and the UK. Most important however, is that sailboard racing is a very high quality competition ; to win and reach the top the competitor must constantly train on and off the water, and

he must spend hours and hours practising to gain tactical and strategic experience and develop technique. In order to obtain this the top surfers appear in many events throughout the year in order to try and stay at the top.

the ability of its administrators to harness its current enthusiasm and cater for the requirements of the competitors. The IYRU is delighted that the IOC has accepted the round the buoy racing as an Olympic event. We are now requesting the IOC to allow us to put on a short demonstration event during the 1984 Olympics which will show the other disciplines in this side of our sport on the International Windsurfer Class. We hope that there will be a possibility of the IOC, in the future, considering the inclusion of one or more of these other disciplines in the Olympics.

N. H.

