

WAKEBOARDING IN THE RAF

Words : Sarah Partridge

Sergeant Sarah Partridge is a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer in the Royal Air Force. She is also a member of the GB Boat Wakeboard Team and won bronze in the Masters Women category at the 2022 IWWF World Championships in Italy. She explains how she combines life in the military with competing at a high level.

I was introduced to wakeboarding in 2010 shortly after arriving at my first unit, RAF Cranwell in Lincolnshire. A lovely Sergeant called Tony Winstone and his wife Mandy were both qualified coaches and boat drivers and were running a wakeboard taster session on the RAF Nautique 210 boat at Tattershall Lakes near RAF Coningsby.

I reluctantly signed up, knowing I had a very real fear of anything water-related but with the alternative being to stay behind and cover the office – it turns out one will do anything for a day out of work!

We spent the day in the sunshine taking turns riding and supporting (heckling) each other from the boat. I'll never forget that feeling of standing up on the board for the first time, the sense of achievement and feeling as if I was flying so fast on top of the water. With the claps and cheers of my workmates ringing in my ears - and my jaw hurting from smiling and laughing all day - I was instantly hooked.

Photos : Mark Osmond





/ Sarah Partridge - World Championships, Italy

Getting the Competitive Bug

Fast forward 7 years, I've entered my first UK Nationals competition and am stood on the dock next to the Team GB Ladies in absolute awe of how confident and talented they are. That first competition sparked a competitive flint that I hadn't ever noticed before and I came away from it with a real drive to progress and improve on my last place ranking that year.

Those years in between were filled with RAF Championships, numerous overseas wakeboard training weeks to Spain, Thailand, the United States and Turkey. All were partially financially supported by various RAF funds and charities, and with the time afforded by the great bosses I've had over the years enabling me to realise my sporting potential.

Team GB

I was first selected for Team GB after the UK Nationals in 2017, however, as I had already been notified of a deployment, I was unable to attend. I deployed to Kabul in Afghanistan for 6 months from June 2017 until January 2018. On my return, I was invited to attend the World Championships in Buenos Aires in Argentina in March 2018, where I placed 3rd in the Masters Women's Category. Needless to say, I was over the moon.

RAF Elite Athlete

In 2019, I was given the opportunity to train full time for the Wakeboard World and European Championships via the RAF's Elite Athlete Scheme. The scheme is designed to support individuals who have been selected to represent their country by providing time for them to train to achieve their full potential. I was able to come away

from my primary role, which was a 9 to 5 office-based position, and train full time in the lead up to both the European and World Championships in 2019. It also meant that I would not deploy during that period either.

Having this time meant that I could put in the training hours on and off the water, add new tricks to my competition run and really focus 100% on putting myself in the best possible position to be competitive.

I have to thank the RAF for not only introducing me to wakeboarding in the first place, but also for supporting me year-on-year both financially and with the time to realise my true potential in the sport. Before joining the RAF, sport was not a big part of my life and I didn't understand the importance of it to physical and mental health. The camaraderie among all involved and the incredible way sport can bond people and nations has opened my

eyes to how important it is. The RAF and the military place a real importance on sport and it is an integral part of Service life.

Work-Sport Balance

Having been in the RAF for 13 years, my current role is in People Operations, a role that can be compared with an HR Manager. I work from home and at HQ Air Command, RAF High Wycombe. I currently look after the promotions, assignments and deployments of around 800 personnel spread across varying RAF trades. This can sometimes be like a game of chess when it comes to balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the Service.

I absolutely love my job and I have been fortunate enough to be able to balance my primary role with wakeboarding. Even now after finishing on the Elite Athlete Scheme, I am given time to train and can work around my training schedule. The RAF, and the military generally, have a 'work hard, play hard' mentality. So long as I work hard, I will always be supported with the flexibility to be able to balance both. With a laptop I can work anywhere and, when I was recently

at the World Championships in Italy, I managed to catch up on emails and work in between supporting the team and riding myself.

Financial Support

As well as allowing sportspeople the time to train, the RAF provides financial support through many charitable organisations such as the RAF Central Fund which gives grants for all levels, from grassroots participants up to National Representative.

The RAF is incredibly fortunate to have two clubs, both with Nautique 210 boats, one near RAF Benson in Oxfordshire and the other near RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire. The cost of riding is heavily discounted to around a third of the usual price of a set and there are trained coaches and equipment available. It really is 'no ordinary job!'

Getting Started

The RAF Waterski & Wakeboarding Association has a competition pathway which introduces beginners to competing at the annual RAF Championships. At the 2022 event, one-third of the 50 riders were new

to the sport. The 'rookies' are coached and given the opportunity to compete at the end of the event. From here, the best team is selected to compete against the top riders from the Royal Navy and Army at the annual Inter-Services competition and riders are encouraged to compete at the UK National Championships.

To date the RAF has had the following personnel (as well as myself) selected to represent Team GB for Boat Wakeboarding: Sgt Ross Phillips & Sgt Rich Phillips – both of whom had two years on the Elite Athlete Scheme - AS1(T) Matthew McCreddie, Flt Lt Emma Phillips and Sqn Ldr Natalie Sumner.

This goes to highlight the great work that the RAF Waterski and Wakeboarding Association does with regards to recognising and harnessing upcoming talent. For anyone who would like more information on a career in the Royal Air Force, visit www.recruitment.raf.mod.uk

Finally, a huge thank you to my amazing sponsor, Supra and Moomba Boats UK.

Photo: Rory Kirkham



Photos: Mark Osmond