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TOP TIPS FOR DRIVING WAKEBOARDING & WAKESURFING

I learned to drive because I wanted to help out my club. This was a while before a wakesurf wave could be made with the push of a button and make it transfer without having to move 13 barrels from side to side!

Boats and their technology have come a long way since then. These technological developments have made it much easier and less stressful for the driver but, more importantly, they have vastly improved the rider's experience.

THE BASICS

There are many things that will be covered when you qualify as a driver and which you always need to consider:

- Corners and how far from the bank you need to be, considering the line length.
- The pull up
- Dock starts
- Picking up a fallen rider
- What to do if a rider gets injured

And that's before we get into the intricacies of being a sympathetic driver reacting to what you see in your rear view mirror.

The driver/rider relationship is key to the rider's development. Safety is paramount and that is a constant. The straight line is also important, whether you are driving through the slalom course or towing a wakeboarder, but it goes much further than that.

DRIVING THE WAKE

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BOATS / A ROUGH GUIDE

A boat is driven by a propeller underneath the boat, connected to a hand-pushed throttle lever. This has a little collar on it which needs to be engaged to stop it being able to be knocked into drive accidentally. There is also a kill cord which is worn by the driver so if the driver moves too far away the boat can't keep moving.

The first position is 'in gear', a slow speed of about 3 to 4 miles an hour. This is the position in which we perform all manoeuvres when not towing, docking and returning to a fallen rider. People are still shocked when they hear that the boat does not have brakes. The boat needs to push its way through the water to gain speed. The forces acting against this are so strong that when this push isn't there the boat slows down quickly.

BALLAST

A boat makes three main waves when it travels. Most new boats have internal tanks to take water on to make the boat heavier and the wake or wave bigger. It enables us to create a monster wave to surf or wakeboard on. This affects how the boat handles. In general, the heavier a boat the slower it responds.

Until I have watched a rider and know their skill I always err on the side of caution. A big wake is scary and can knock a rider's confidence. I can always make the wake bigger after I have seen how they deal with it.



BOAT SETUP

Many modern boats have a factory setting for riders/surfers. This is great for a quick set up but often it will help a rider to have a set up tailor-made for them. Malibu/Axis boats tend to use a power wedge pulling the stern of the boat down in the water plus the ballast system. They also have paddles that move out of the side of the boat, depending on which side of the wake you are surfing. The Nautique and Supra use a ballast system plus plates on the stern that move to make the wave steeper or less steep, ensuring an easily malleable wave for most riders.

WAKESURFER BEGINNER

- Ballast Mid Level
- Surf Wave Mellow

First time surfers can struggle with the start. It's a strange thing to grasp: the board floating in the water as you work out how to get on top of it and stand up.

Low speed is key. Beginning to gently roll the throttle on allows the board to be pushed up onto their feet and really helps. I would also encourage the surfer to wear a buoyancy aid rather

than an impact vest to help sit them higher in the water for the start.

Before they get proficient enough to let go of the rope there aren't many things to change as a driver. If they keep falling towards the back of the wave (not keeping up with the boat), you can take some speed off to reduce the jerk they get from the rope.

Once they begin dropping the line you can slow down slightly if they are losing speed and falling out of the back of the wave. Sometimes a little turn towards the rider also helps with this. When a surfer doesn't struggle with the start and is to a good standard the driver has much less input.

The nose of the boat will sit higher for surfing than for wakeboarding so it's important to keep an eye on where you are in relation to the end of the lake and where you want to make a turn, if the lake allows.



WAKEBOARD BEGINNER

- Speed 12/17mph (depending on size of rider, some little ones may need less)
- Ballast Empty

To begin with, low speed is the rider's friend, especially when first learning to use the board's edges. The slower you travel the deeper the board will sit in the water so it will be physically tougher but will minimise the slaps from a bad edge.

Always ask the rider if the speed is OK to ensure they feel comfortable. As they become more accomplished the speed is raised but can be dropped again for new exercises or drills that they aren't confident with. There's nothing worse than a good face plant to discourage them from trying new things.

Over time you will get to know your rider so you can more easily gauge when they need your help, eg if they are getting out of shape on a jump. I always ease off the throttle to make the landing more manageable.

WAKEBOARDER INTERMEDIATE & ABOVE

- Ballast Mid (more if requested)
- Speed 18/22mph

Riders at this level will more than likely be hitting the wake, so the main thing to consider is keeping the boat in a straight line. Any deviation will pull the rider as they are approaching the wake or will add/release tension in the air or on landing. This can be useful when applied correctly. For example, turning into them on blind landings helps release the tension and allow them to focus on keeping the handle where it should be. Simply, a little back off the throttle on landing can help, but this is trick dependent. Some tricks need that tension throughout to help land so any adjustment from the driver will not help (eg a scarecrow).



APPROACHING A FALLEN SURFER

The surfer has just tried a fire hydrant and fallen. I would back off the power and turn away from the wave. So left foot forward, turn right. Right foot, turn left. This push of the surf wave they were riding helps to push the stern of the boat around to pick them up. The bigger boats nowadays take a while to respond which makes slow manoeuvres a bit of a test.

The pick up is performed in gear. As a rule, try to pick the rider up looping around them on the driver's side so you always have a clear view of them. Sometimes this isn't possible if they have fallen in shallow water. In this case the rope should be pulled in and the boat manoeuvred close enough to them so the rope can be thrown to them once they're in a safe position to be pulled.

APPROACHING A FALLEN RIDER

The rider has fallen on their grabbed 180. Back off the power and, depending on the ballast levels, you may have to reapply the power to stop your crew getting soaked. Then turn and allow the wake to help push the stern of the boat round to return to the rider. Approach

the rider in gear and look to keep them on the driver's side as you loop the rope back around them to pick them up.

After checking they are OK - and meant to do what they just did - creep the boat in and out of gear until the line is tight. Once they clearly shout that they are ready to ride, slowly add the throttle pulling them gently out of the water. The same applies here as with surfing: if the rider can't be safely picked up, pull the rope in and throw it out when they're safe to ride.

KEY POINTS

Always speak to your rider/surfer. It's their time on the water so feedback makes their experience more pleasurable. Some riders like an enthusiastic pick up whereas others a more gentle one. Is the speed around the corners OK for them? Obviously, where they ride influences this heavily. On the outside of the corner it feels quicker and on the inside they may feel as though they are sinking. As a rule, I'll ask them to follow the boat. Finally, shoes off in the boat, stay hydrated, bring snacks!

For me, driving the boat began as a way to help out a hobby I enjoyed. It has become so much more. Thanks to British Waterski & Wakeboard, Wakeboard UK and Wakesurf UK for all their support. I look forward to seeing you all on the water soon.

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