

Sergeant Daniel Casera (left), former member of the U.S. Army, learns to wakeboard at the Wounded Warriors' clinic with Jordan Kathe of the Aquanut Water Shows of Twin Lakes, Wis. To learn more about Sergeant Casera's experience with the Aquanut Water Shows Organization, [turn to page 32.](#)

# Giving Back

## USA Water Ski members and affiliated clubs have a knack for giving back to charities and communities

Written by **Scott N. Atkinson**

**W**hen it comes to helping a community or a charity, don't expect USA Water Ski's members and clubs to get cold feet. That is evident by the number of members and clubs that annually host special events – clinics, tournaments, ski days and more – throughout the United States that benefit others. It also is evident by the number of members and clubs that like to ring in the New Year by taking to the water. No matter the weather conditions!

One of the first USA Water Ski-sanctioned events of 2011 was the 17th annual Eskimo Escapades Shut Up & Ski, a winter water ski charity event in Knoxville held in support of the Dream Connection, the Patricia Neal Innovative Recreation Cooperative (PNIRC) and the Adventure Amputee Camp. This year's event was held on Jan. 15 at Volunteer Landing in downtown Knoxville. The beauty of it all is the fact that the weather – be it rain, snow or heat wave – does not affect the event one bit. If you can ski, wakeboard, barefoot, kneeboard, slalom, etc., and you register for the event – providing at least \$50 in donations, you can participate. Participants ski one lap (1/2-mile) starting and ending at Volunteer Landing. "When people hear about our event, they think it is just a bunch of crazy people skiing in cold water in the winter," says Kelli Thompson, a board member for the Eskimo Escapades Foundation. "But the people who do this have wonderful hearts and a passion for helping others."

The Dream Connection is a not-for-profit organization, which benefits regional children who hold a dream and are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. The Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center is the largest rehabilitation facility in Tennessee and surrounding states and provides treatment to individuals who have suffered injuries resulting in physical or mental disabilities. The Adventure Amputee Camp is a camp for amputee children from all over the United States where the costs of the camp are paid for with donations from Eskimo Escapades and other sponsors.

The Eskimo Escapades Foundation was formed by John Cox, David Bernheim, John

Tillett and Buddy Coomer, and held its first event in 1995 at Ned Ray McWherter Park in Knoxville. It continued there the next year, and then in 1997, the event moved to its present location at Volunteer Landing. The first year at Volunteer Landing goes neck-and-neck with the 2003 event as the coldest on record. That year the water temperature was a particularly chilly 37 degrees and the air temperature high was 28 degrees. It was painfully cold and there was a big drop in the number of skiers, but the event still did well. 2003 was extremely cold again, with a high temperature of 27 degrees.

This year's event drew 51 skiers and raised \$15,000. Since 1995, the Shut Up and Ski event has raised more than \$365,000. "Not bad for an all volunteer organization," says Thompson, who adds that the Eskimo Escapades Foundation members also volunteer in the summer for the Patricia Neal Rehabilitation Center water ski clinics, and they provide a water ski day on Fontana Lake for the last day of the Adventure Amputee Camp. "When we go out and teach disabled people and the amputee kids to water ski in the summer, it is a life-changing experience for them," Thompson says. "They tell us what a blessing we are for them, but we know it is so much more of a blessing for us to watch them enjoy something they could not otherwise do, and that is such a big part of our lives. We love it!"

And they are not alone. Each year, hundreds of USA Water ski-affiliated clubs and members donate their time to worthy causes. In this issue of *The Water Skier*, we highlight some of the members and clubs that give back through the sport of water skiing and its respective disciplines.

**RIGHT: Ryan Price** (second from left), who was a member of the 101st Airborne in Iraq, rode in this 38-foot Hustler boat during the 2010 Catalina Ski Race with **Lori Dunsmore** (center, skiing), **Gene Weston** (second from right, driving) **Darrell Nottke** (far right, navigating) and **Lauren Dunsmore** (far left, observing). "It was a very overwhelming, emotional and rewarding experience," says **Lori Dunsmore**.



Lisa Neal

Daren Van Rytte



Scott N. Atkinson



ALM Photo

**ABOVE:** *In His Wakes* provided "A Day to Remember" for children from Edgewood Children's Ranch last October at Lake Grew in Polk City, Fla. **TOP RIGHT:** Matthew Porterfield participated in the 17th annual Eskimo Escapades Shut Up & Ski on Jan. 15 in Knoxville, Tenn.

#### Feet First

One of the largest events to ring in 2011 was the 33rd annual Lake Norman New Year's Day Barefoot Challenge in Sherrills Ford, N.C. It is one of the longest-running barefoot water ski tournaments in the world. About 30 contestants from the Carolinas and surrounding states participated in the New Year's Day event. Sherrills Ford resident Terry Cody founded the tournament in 1978. Sanctioned by USA Water Ski and hosted by Lake Norman Marina and the Carolina Show Ski Team, the tournament helped raise awareness and funds for the plight of impoverished children who suffer needlessly from foot borne diseases and infections due to a lack of shoes.

Sara Rubens, a Davidson, N.C., resident and director of development for Charlotte-based Samaritan's Feet International, saw an article in the *Charlotte Observer* about the tournament. "When I read the article I thought it could be a perfect opportunity to partner with some of the contestants," Rubens says.

Each partnering contestant in the tournament was provided a personal Web site by Samaritan's Feet. Friends, family and colleagues could go to the Web site to make contributions. In addition, Lake Norman Marina contributed \$5 for every minute each barefooter stayed on his or her feet.

#### 'A Day To Remember'

In His Wakes, a Florida based non-profit water sports outreach founded by former world slalom record holder Kristi Overton-Johnson, provided "A Day to Remember" for children from Edgewood Children's Ranch last October at Lake Grew in Polk City, Fla. Edgewood Ranch, located in Orlando, Fla., is a residential facility for young boys and girls. Its mission is to rehabilitate youth-at-risk and their families. This "A Day to Remember Event," which was held in conjunction with Fluid Ski and Sports, was the final event of In His Wakes' 2010 D2R National Tour. In His Wakes hosts more than 50 events annually in the United States and it has touched

international waters and hearts through events in South America and Europe.

"A Day to Remember" is an outreach of In His Wakes that has introduced more than 7,000 at-risk children to the sport of water skiing since its inception in 2003. The goal of the program is to provide children with a safe risk-taking opportunity on the water so as to provide an opportunity for the children to overcome their fears, develop trust relationships, and experience success at a new and challenging activity. There are many types of D2R events. In the past, In His Wakes has used the "A Day to Remember" to provide outings for abuse shelters and group homes. In addition, the "A Day to Remember" has served as an opportunity for children to be adopted through its parent/child matching events. The events have also been held as memorial events, field trips for local schools, and events for mentors and their "children" to attend together and bond through the experience of water sports. "In His Wakes is an awesome organization, and K.C. and I jump at the opportunity to do days with them," says U.S. water ski athlete Brooks Wilson, who along with his younger brother, K.C., volunteered to help with the "A Day To Remember" event at Lake Grew. "We got involved several years back and try to do an event each year. It is such an amazing day teaching kids to ski that have never had the chance. The joy in their eyes and smiles on their faces is unforgettable. The kids are so grateful for the opportunity to be on the water that it makes me wish I could give more days to In His Wakes. I encourage everyone to try to get involved."

#### 'Cause For Paws'

Patt High and the Lake Wedowee Air Junkys initiated two grassroots water ski and wakeboard events in 2008 and 2009 to benefit the new Randolph County Animal Shelter in Wedowee, Ala. More than \$9,000 was raised from the two grassroots events, which included water skiing, wakeboarding, hydrofoiling and a performance by the Colonel Biggs Alabama Show Ski Team. "We're a small county and there's not much funding for the animal shelter," High says. "To thank the public that donates about three-quarters of our needed supplies and labor, we have jamming lake events with entertainment and music. We let everyone in free and build a lot of goodwill as we provide family fun and competition."

One of the main reasons for success was that

the club's "Cause For Paws" revenue streams provided value to sponsors and participants. "People like knowing all the 'pay' things go directly to the shelter," High says. "Our contestant entry fees are low, the five-dollar plate lunches fly off the grill, and our event T-shirts with animal themes always sell out. Advertisers get value for their buck. These high profile events earn us a favorable public opinion, which leads to increased usage of our facility, and especially adoptions, which is our No. 1 goal. So we have a blast, meet new water fun friends, and the shelter makes money."

#### 'Vision 2 Victory'

Lori Dunsmore says the experience was far better than any race victory she has earned in four decades of water ski racing. That says a lot, considering Dunsmore, 52, is ranked among the top U.S. women's water ski racers of all time. During last year's Catalina Ski Race, Dunsmore had a special passenger on board her race boat serving as one of her navigators as she skied across the Pacific Ocean.

Sergeant Ryan Price of the 101st Airborne Infantry was severely wounded in May 2008 while serving in Afghanistan. He lost both legs and incurred other injuries. The following year, Sgt. Price was awarded the Bronze Star for his actions in combat. Last July, Dunsmore agreed to team up with the Vision 2 Victory project in support of Sgt. Price. Vision 2 Victory is a non-profit foundation that reaches out to those that have returned home after being wounded or that are facing challenges. In filming a segment for Vision 2 Victory TV, in which Purple Heart recipients can fulfill dreams in various motor sports, Sgt. Price served as the navigator in Dunsmore's boat in the 62nd annual Catalina Ski Race. "It took an hour to get the smile off his face," says Jeremy Staat, the host of the television show who also served in Iraq as a member of the Marine Corps. "And to me that is worth more than all of the money in the world. I am very excited about our continuing to support all of our veterans."

Sgt. Price met Dunsmore and her crew three days before the race in Huntington Beach, Calif., to work out the seating logistics and to ride along on a Catalina practice run. "It was all smiles, no problems and a lot of fun," Dunsmore recalls. "Darrell [Nottke] even let him drive the boat when we were done. Ryan had been in the VA hospital in San Diego for a year-and-a-half before this, at 24 years old, recovering and learning to walk with his new

prosthetics...not even driving a car for two years let alone driving a race boat in Long Beach. He was so excited."

So was Dunsmore. She finished the 62-mile race in 1 hour, 18 minutes, to finish third among women and 34th overall. "It was very inspiring and rewarding to me to have Ryan in that boat," Dunsmore says. "For all that he has done for our country and gone through in his young life, I just loved seeing his big smile at the end of my 220-foot rope watching over me during the race to see if I was still skiing in those big swells. I was going to keep skiing no matter how tired I got."

### A Passion For Teaching

Chuck McPherson of Santa Rosa, Calif., is passionate about water skiing. He is a competitive barefoot water skier, a certified boat driver and safety coordinator for USA Water Ski, and he is a member of USA Water Ski's Waterways Committee. But more than anything, McPherson simply loves teaching people how to water ski in his free time. For the past eight years, McPherson has donated a "learn to ski day" for auction with all proceeds going to the Greater Bay Area Make-A-Wish Foundation. Winning bids have typically ranged between \$800 and \$1,200. McPherson, with the help of some friends, donates the boat, gas, and coaching, as well as the private ski lake. "For us, it's all about teaching the kids," says McPherson, who learned about the annual Make-A-Wish-Foundation auction from his business partner, Scott Ormerod. "The adults have a lot of fun because it gives them a chance to recapture their youth. But the kids have an absolute blast."

The auction is hosted each May by Sonoma-Cutrer Vineyards in Windsor, Calif. McPherson says the day of water skiing is usually paired with a

dinner package or basket of wine. "The first time I attended this amazing event I couldn't believe the number of items available for auction," McPherson says. "I just said 'wow,' and knew immediately that we had to put together a learn to ski day. It draws people from all over the Bay Area. We did it the following year, and it's been very, very popular. We let the bid winners choose the discipline, whether it's water skiing, barefooting or wakeboarding. It's a lot of fun."

### Sharing With Others

On The Edge Children's Foundation and the Lake Heritage Ski Club are two organizations from Gettysburg, Pa., who like to give back to the community by hosting learn to ski clinics for people with both physical and mental disabilities. Bob and Dianne Kasper are the directors of the non-profit children's foundation focused on bringing the love of the sport of water skiing to the public. "Our mission is simple – share with others what we take for granted every day," Dianne Kasper says.

This past year the organizations hosted several successful grassroots events. For one event they brought in professional show skiers from Cypress Gardens and amateur show skiers from the Sarasota Ski-A-Rees to help teach members of the Lake Heritage water ski team new show skiing skills, and then hosted a ski show. The money raised went toward the community children's playground equipment. The ski show was free to the public to attract people to buy food, which was donated by On the Edge and cooked by volunteers in the community.

The organizations also hosted a day at the lake for the local home for mentally challenged residents to enjoy a picnic at the lake, a boat ride, and a ride on a tube or a ski ride with the assistance of an adaptive ski guide. The volunteers established a

friendship and one-on-one interaction that was a life changing experience for most. "It was a most rewarding experience," said one volunteer, "what we take for granted." One of the residents had tears in his eyes on what an uplifting experience he had. "No one treats me just as me being me like you did today," he told Bob Kasper. "You gave me a chance to enjoy life."

The organizations also hosted a picnic with children from Big Brothers & Sisters and Free Air Kids (a group of inner-city children). The children got to ski, tube and swim. Wounded Warriors also visited to check out the adaptive ski program and provided insight to the team on the needs of our men and women. A man who lost both legs in a snow skiing accident was encouraged to try water skiing. He loved the freedom and soon he was crossing the wakes with ease. "In many cases these events are a life changing experience for the first time skiers and the volunteers," Bob Kasper says.

### Introduction To Water Skiing

In 2011, the Missouri Water Ski Federation and Water Mill Lake Ski Club will be offering an "Introduction to Water Skiing Day/Basic Skills Clinic" for any and all kids that wish to participate this summer. Last year at the Missouri State Water Ski Championships, which was held at Water Mill Lake in Ulman, Mo., the federation was able to raise approximately \$4,000 from its tournament auction in which it sold many donated items from its local community. "I can't tell you how wonderful the community of Lake of the Ozarks is," says Rob Ward of the Water Mill Lake Ski Club. "There were so many businesses that stepped up to the plate and graciously donated items to the Missouri Water Ski Federation for Junior Development. That is why we are having an Introduction to Water Skiing Day/Basic Skills Clinic."

The event is entirely free to any child that wishes to participate from the local area. The Missouri Water Ski Federation will be picking up the tab. The federation's junior team will be the instructors who will help and work with the kids to get them familiar with the sport. "Like any type of training class or clinic, we will have onshore training, safety lessons, proper hand signal lessons, lunch, learn about the proper equipment to be used for skiing, and finally some water time," Ward says. "We feel that this is an excellent way to give back to the community and build the sport."

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Bob Kasper