



Personal Watercraft: The Wave of the Present

By Andy Houghton

My first post-abled-bodied personal watercraft experience was in Jamaica in 1988, a year after my motorcycle accident. Glued to a lounge chair, with a Jay protector under my butt and a trusty transfer board at my side, I admired my able-bodied amigo as he rode a rental craft. He jumped wakes, did 360s and sped across the bay. I thought, How could I ever get on one of those things, and if I did manage to mount one, how would I balance it? Everyone would be staring at me. Forget it. Bring me another mai tai.



Five years later—*sans* transfer board—I finally tried my first PWC. I was surprised at how stable it was—a smooth transfer was no problem. I fired it up and was gone. I started out slowly, feeling the turns and testing the acceleration, but it wasn't long before I was doing those same maneuvers my friend enjoyed in Jamaica. Then I made that high-speed quick right. My butt slid off the edge of the seat and my left leg was contorted into a position I'd never seen before. Someone could have mistaken this for an elaborate trick. No such luck.

I gathered my senses, checked for bro-

ken bones and remounted the beast. I continued riding, feeling confident enough to venture into rough water. What a mistake. I thought I crushed a couple of vertebrae that day. Overall I had fun, but I was battered.

But now there's a new kind of personal watercraft that's becoming increasingly popular among people with disabilities. The new PWCs' universal design is ideal not only for beginners like myself, a T6 para, but also for professional racers like Shawn Grey, a T4 para from San Diego. You don't even have to be a supercrip to enjoy these machines. Upper body strength and balance are a plus, but when aren't they?

The craft are adapted with custom seats and leg supports that add enough control and stability even for low quads. "The seats give you the ability to ride personal watercraft at peak performance without being thrown off," says Grey.

Grey manufacturers the seats and will be making them available for purchase in June. He hopes the seats will be available in PWC rental agencies nationally within a couple of years. Dan Larson, a frequent participant in a program run by Grey's Aqua Sports Association in San Diego, is an enthusiastic supporter: "There is no comparison riding a craft that is adapted versus a normal craft," he says. "You have total stability."

Last year, 200 people participated in the program, and Grey is banking on a grant from the state Department of Boating and Waterways to sponsor 25 race clinics this summer. Grey teaches safety skills and riding techniques and, after instruction, people can ride with the program or rent a PWC for

a weekend trip.

The program is also getting some national exposure: The U.S. Department of Education and Kawasaki Motors have provided funding and PWC equipment to National Handicapped Sports for a program called Operation Challenge—a three-year, 12-city tour designed to promote adaptive watersports programs around the country. Call NHS for information about tour stops in your area.

Resources

- Aqua Sports Association, Shawn Grey, 619/298-1690 or 619/692-1373.
- California Handicapped Skiers, Big Bear Lake, Big Bear, Calif., July 16-18, July 19-21, Aug. 16-18, Aug. 20-22, Aug. 23-25. 909/585-2519, ext. 269.
- Operation Challenge: Seattle, June 21-24; Minneapolis, July 30 to Aug. 3; Jackson Gap, Ala., July 12-15; and Cleveland, Aug. 23-26. For more information, call Katherine Hayes at National Handicapped Sports, 916/581-4161.

