

Eyes on the Prize

A&M students secure top positions at national wakeboard competitions

By Nishat Fatima
THE BATTALION

Two years ago, five Aggies piled into a four-door Ford Explorer and embarked on a 22-hour drive to compete in the Super Air Nautique Collegiate Wakeboard National Championships in Wisconsin. With little more than their equipment and a passion for the sport, the group was up against recognized teams who had corporate sponsors and support from their universities. But once the competitions began, all that mattered was who had the talent. They landed third place in the team competition.

At the 2003 national championships, their success story was a little different.

After a year's hiatus, the Aggies returned and took second place in the team competition.

Hunter Croan, who had secured third place in 2001, took first place in the men's title, beating out professionals such as the representative of the United States at the World Wakeboard Competitions, Loren Levine.

Despite their lack of external help or formal professional training, the Aggies conquered the championships on the basis of sheer talent, passion and years of wakeboarding for fun.

"I really wasn't expecting (to win) because I wasn't riding well that day," said Croan, a senior marketing major. "I went second off the dock, which is one of the worst places to be. All of that cleared my head and helped my performance."

Paul Sonnen, a junior industrial distribution major, said although the group had apprehensions about the competition, that it still felt confident.

"We knew we had a chance because we did well the first year (in the competition)," he said. "We just didn't know what to expect (there)."

Kristal Wright, a senior special education major, was one of the riders on the wakeboarding team. Wright said the team had to bite the bullet and step up to the challenges of the competition.

"You have to go all out. You can't be afraid," Wright said. "Even though we were a little nervous, it was a lot of fun watching everybody do their tricks."

Paul Schaller, a senior industrial engineering major, said aside from competing with other riders, wakeboard tournaments have other enjoyable aspects.

"Tournaments are stressful but they're fun because you are playing for the team," Schaller said. "It's also a lot of fun to get everyone together and go down (to tournaments)."

Croan, who has been wakeboarding for more than 12 years, said the sport can be defined as snowboarding on water. Croan said he became interested in wakeboarding because he spent his childhood near a lake.

"When you grow up on a lake, you want to learn as many water sports as possible," Croan said. "When you are doing tricks and get a lot of air under you, it feels like you are defying gravity. It all has to do with individual style. With each trick you try to add a new grab and add your own style to it. Five riders can do the same trick but you wouldn't be able to tell because they all have great individual styles."

Croan said wakeboarding is one of the fastest growing watersports.

Wright said the growing popularity of wakeboarding is due to the pace at which it can be learned.

"You can progress very fast, which is what people love about it," Wright said.

Wright, who grew up skiing, said she started wakeboarding because she wanted to try something different.

"Of all the watersports, you can do the most tricks on wakeboards," she said.

As with all sports, wakeboarding comes with its own risks. Schaller said holding on behind a boat going at high speeds with water drops spraying everywhere can lead to falling in the water, which is not a pleasant experience.

"It can be painful sometimes because you can hit your head in the water and get up and not know where the boat is or how to get home," Schaller said.

Croan, who has spent his past three summers show skiing for World Entertainment Services, has taken his love for wakeboarding one step further. In June of 2003, Croan set up his Web site, www.waanawakeboard.com, and began offering private wakeboarding lessons. Since the summer, word about his service has spread, and Croan opened up his own wakeboarding school called Wanna Wakeboard in Bryan. His clientele has expanded to include a variety of riders, including Texas A&M construction science professor Kim Carlson.

"I was teaching a 7-year-old boy the other day, and his mom



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUNTER CROAN

Senior marketing major **Hunter Croan** does a mid-air trick at the 2003 Super Air Nautique Collegiate Wakeboard National Championships at the Aquaplex in Austin. Croan scored 68.89 points, placing first in the men's competitions. The Texas A&M team placed second in the team competition, with a score of 155 points.

was really nervous about it. Then Kim (Carlson) convinced her to give it a try. Now both the mom and the son love wakeboarding," Croan said. "The people who have the most fun are the beginners. They always have a smile on their faces."

Joe Jagers, a senior computer science major, said preparing for the competitions is more of a fun event than anything else.

"We don't really practice — we just ride. We don't think of wakeboarding as practice because it's fun," Jagers said.

The team members hope to repeat their current success next spring, when they compete at the 2004 World Wakeboarding Association Collegiate Cup.

"The best of the best will be there but we feel ready. It's all about our radical maneuvers that are tubular and gnarly," Sonnen said with a laugh. "You have to use old surfer lingo to describe it."

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