

Caution: "Wake Crossing"

By Steve Bush

Whether you are a novice or pro water skier, the wakes give cause for concern. Poor wake crossings have resulted in neck, rib and ankle injuries. Reg Wheeler and Clint Ward, a couple of Canada's finest veteran skiers, have the sorriest looking ankles I have ever seen. They skied when the wakes and skis were huge. Kim DeMacedo of our National Team underwent surgery a few years ago to remove bone in her ankle (rear foot) that caused pain when she crossed the wakes. I know everyone who slalom skis has had a bad experience with the wakes at some time. The boat manufacturers are continually improving boat designs to reduce the wake and spray to make life safer, but adjusting the body in most cases is probably the best solution.

The wakes mean something different to a novice or intermediate than an advanced skier. The novice just wants to get over them safely while the advanced needs a strong wake crossing to make a proper turn. For the novice/intermediate skier I use a drill that builds confidence and makes wake crossing safe.

Novice Wake Crossing Drill

This drill helps skiers understand the wakes (men have more trouble than women with this drill – the rule “an ounce of touch is worth a pound of brawn” applies here). Proper body position is a must, ankles and knees flexed (weight pretty much evenly distributed over the ski, 55% rear and 45% front foot, hips ahead of shoulders and chest and head up (with the chest up the hips automatically come up.) The handle should be kept low at the bottom of the ski vest.

Have the skier start about 5' outside the right wake with the boat speed 37-46 km/hr depending on the size and ability of the skier. Have the skier (very slowly) tilt their left shoulder down a few inches and point the ski towards the left side of the boat. By tilting the shoulder it ensures the ski is on edge. It's better to ski more with the boat, than trying to get right angles to it. Remember we are skiing very narrow. It's important when crossing the wakes that the knees and ankles are working (up and down) and they are not in a static position. Have the skier stop 5' outside the left wake, regroup, and do the same drill in the opposite direction. With skiers that are anxious it is best to not link turns together as it tends to have a snowball effect. Once the skier is competent with wake crossings, link the turns together and move the skier out from the wakes a few more feet. In many cases it is best for the skier to remain at their comfort level before progressing wider. The ideal situation to complete this drill is be able to ski the inside buoys of the slalom course. This will also help with rhythm and timing and help prevent those big hard turns that end in disaster at the wakes. By controlling the distance the skier starts from the wakes there is less room for error and more important – less chance for injury.



Advanced Wake Crossings

At this level strong wake crossing is extremely important. A good turn can only happen if the skier has maintained their position through both wakes. Slalom styles, techniques and equipment have changed considerably, but it still comes down to angle out of the turn and being able to maintain that angle to the other side of the wakes. Similar to the novice drill, the body position at the start of the turn is a key factor. The skier that starts the turn hard and gets into a “lean lock” usually has a more difficult time maintaining intensity through the wakes and there is a tendency to be ‘maxed-out’ early and subsequently the boat wins the war of the wakes. The photo of Drew Ross just prior to the wakes shows that he is in a strong leverage position and not in a ‘lean lock’. Drew wants to be his strongest 10’ before the wakes and maintain that position rather than trying to be the strong just behind the boat. The handle is low to the bottom of his ski vest and his knees and ankles are flexed which puts him in a good position to cross the wakes. (Notice how forward the water is breaking on his ski – this gives him more area to leverage against than if he was on the tail). A little trick to make the crossing smoother is to push your ski ahead slightly before the wakes – to make this effective the skier must have good angle out of the turn and be in position to apply leverage. To achieve good angle the skier must be patient at the turn and allow the ski to come around – then go. A common fault is to be impatient and start leaning early (getting ahead of the rope and cutting off the turn.) Another fault is to come off the edge when they reach the first wake rather than being strong through the second wake. Whether you are free skiing or in the course, it’s good practice to be aware of where your ski is after the second wake. Ideally you should be on, or land on, the cutting edge (slightly on the tail) still maintaining angle with the ski pointed to shore.

If you are preparing for a major tournament it is advisable to practice behind the tournament type boat for a couple of sets to get used to the wakes. The wakes vary with each boat and at different speeds and line lengths. The wakes can be soft or ankle-breaking hard, have a deep or wide trough and can be unequal in size. A full tank of gas

will also increase the wake size. If the wake is bigger or more turbulent it can sometimes help, only because the skier tends to focus more on staying strong through the wake crossing.

If you are beginner out for a morning free ski with a friend or a tournament skier preparing for a meet remember it's best to know how to deal with the wake rather than letting the wake deal with you. Good Skiing!