

Be the best boat driver on your lake by Gerry Whittaker

Have you ever wondered why water skiers are so fussy about their boat drivers? A boat driver has a direct influence on a skier's performance, enjoyment, and safety. What makes a good boat driver, anyway? The good driver delivers a safe, steady, and consistent pull. This article will briefly discuss some aspects of good boat driving.

Safety

Safety must be a priority. Take the time to do everything in a safe manner. Aside from liability issues, the possible pain and suffering caused by an accident should be more than enough motivation to pay particular attention to the safety of the skier, observers, and all others on the water.

A good place to start is an evaluation of the equipment, including the ski boat, the towropes, and the skier's equipment.

Check the overall condition of the boat; the steering and throttle should be tight and smooth, to provide good control of the boat. The tow bar in the boat must be firmly secured, and the boat must also have safety equipment to meet Coast Guard regulations:

- Fire extinguisher
- Bailing Device
- Whistle or Air Horn
- Paddles
- Life Jackets (note: many ski vests are not D.O.T. approved)
- Throwing/rescue device
- Fire extinguisher
- Heaving line
- Flashlight
- Flares

The driver should be familiar with the handling of the boat before pulling a skier. Plan ahead, and move slowly and deliberately when operating the towboat near shore, docks, other fixed objects, or water skiers.

The towrope, including the skier's own handle, should be checked for fraying, which indicates broken strands, and a potential

break. A shock tube will minimize the recoil of the rope into the boat.

The use of an observer is mandatory. The driver, observer, and skier should review the signals used between the boat and skier. Discuss what signals are going to be used, and what they mean. This includes signals from the skier to the boat (such as speed up, slow down, stop, home), and signals from the boat driver to the skier (turning around, pull out here).



Always make sure that no one can come in contact with the propeller. When people are moving in and out of the boat from the water, the driver must shut the engine off. Then there will be absolutely no chance of accidentally putting the boat in gear when a skier is in the water or on the swim grid. Ensure the skier is clear before starting the engine.

When operating a boat around a skier in the water, manoeuvre it to keep the skier on the same side as the driver. This allows the driver to always keep the skier in sight while maintaining a safe distance from the skier at all times.

Drivers should constantly be aware of the weather and water conditions, and return to shore if conditions deteriorate. Underwater obstacles can also pose a serious threat to the safety of the water skier and boat. The water depth should also be checked before towing a skier if boating in an unfamiliar area.

This is only a partial description of some of the potential risks and preventative actions involved in water ski driving.

Skier Starts

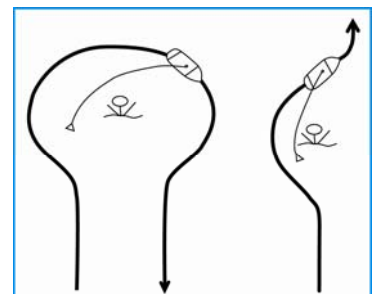
Experience and judgment are needed when starting the skier. The boat driver must be aware of what is happening behind them with the skier as well as what is in front of the boat. The boat path needs to be clear and safe before throttle is applied. The driver must always look ahead, and use the observer to help them time the start.

How fast to accelerate is dictated by the size of the skier, and type of ski used. Small skiers require lighter throttle, as they don't have the strength to resist too strong a pull. Heavy skiers require more throttle, but the beginning of the start must still be gradual. Jump, wakeboard and trick skiers do not need as much throttle, as the larger surface areas help the skier get up on the water quicker. Slalom skiers using wider skis will also need less throttle than those on conventional skis.

Retrieving a Skier

When picking up a skier after a fall, the boat driver should manoeuvre the boat so that the rope is brought to the skier, without coming too close to the skier.

Approach the skier keeping them on the driver's side of the boat. As the boat nears the skier, the boat should turn away slightly to the left, until the boat is almost beside the skier. The boat should then turn back to the right, which will drag the rope sideways across the water, and back to the skier. When the skier has the rope, the boat can either then continue in a right turn, until a 180 degree turn is completed, or turn back to the left to straighten out to head back in the original direction (see diagram below).



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Wake Management

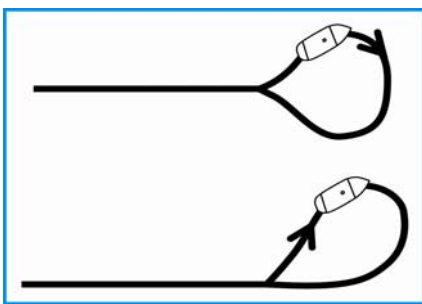
One of the best ways to make skiers happy is to give them the smoothest water surface possible. Boat drivers should plan ahead to reduce the effect of the boat wake.

Avoid Idle Rollers

Most towboats will produce rollers when travelling at idle speed. To avoid this, the boat driver should go in and out of gear, coasting periodically. The boat driver can then check behind them to see if any rollers are being produced.

Keyhole Turns

Backwash from turnarounds can be reduced by using a keyhole turn to bring the boat around. When it is time to turn, the boat driver should signal the skier, and then make a gentle "pre-turn". The boat can be turned in either direction, depending on the local site and conditions. When the boat has turned about 30 degrees, the driver then turns back in the opposite direction in a tighter turn, until a full circle is completed. As the boat re-enters its own wake, the boat is straightened out to follow its previous boat path. The path that the boat makes resembles a keyhole (see diagrams).



Courtesy on the Water

Unless you're lucky (or early) enough to be the only boat on the lake, you'll need to share the water. Manage your wakes and you'll establish your reputation as a good driver:

- drive in a straight line – driving in circles can rough up the entire lake
- cooperate with other boats, and plan your driving to minimize the interference of your wakes with other skiers
- if you need to drive across a slalom course,

cross at right angles, and drive slowly enough to leave no rollers

- when driving by a slalom course (as opposed to across it), stay parallel to the course, and go by as quickly as is safe. This will ensure your rollers are as small as possible, and that they will clear the course as quickly as possible
- alternating with other boats is a good way to make sure everyone gets the best conditions possible.

Slalom Driving

The goal in slalom driving is to maintain a constant boat speed and a straight boat path.

When the skier turns and pulls, the speed may drop. As the skier crosses the wake, and changes edges for the next turn, they stop pulling, and the boat speed may rise. The driver can compensate by slightly increasing the throttle when the skier pulls, then decreasing the throttle to keep the boat speed from rising. Keeping the boat speed exactly on the actual speed would be ideal, but a minimal variation in speed (1 km/hr) is fine. It is better to compensate too little than too much; using fingertips to move the throttle will provide more precision. The driver should try to pick up the rhythm of the skier and synchronize the compensation in throttle with the pull of the skier.

The driver needs to also compensate for changes in boat path caused by the skier. As the skier turns and begins their pull, the rope pulls the boat to the side, moving the boat towards the skier. The driver can counter this by turning the boat slightly away from the water skier, using just the wrist to move the steering wheel. Make many, small, quick corrections, rather than large movements. As with the throttle, the driver should pick up the rhythm of the skier, and match the counter-steering to the skier to maintain a straight boat path.

Trick / Wakeboard Driving

Trick/wakeboard driving requires a lot of concentration to keep the speed constant. Trick skiers and wakeboarders are very aware of changes in boat speed, as it has a large effect on their performance. Another important part of trick or wakeboard skiing is to adjust the boat wakes so that they are even. The driver can adjust the level of the boat using ballast in the stern of the boat. The extra weight in the stern will also help make the wakes a bit larger. People in the boat can also change the

wakes by adjusting their position in the boat.

By taking boat-driving responsibilities seriously, and using common sense, boat drivers can provide a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone. You are encouraged to talk to other skiers and boat drivers, you will learn a lot!

Water Ski and Wakeboard Canada has available a 34 minute instructional video, entitled The Art of Tournament Boat Driving.