

Skiing is believing

Story by Charlotte Huntley

They spin, they flip, they fly. These are the Lauderdale Aqua Skiers and they love to ski.

The uniqueness of this group of skiers is that they are all ages, all talents and all fearless. So they fall once in a while. That doesn't deter them from getting right back up to go another round.

Ten-year-old Jessica Martin sits on 15-year-old Colt Christofferson's shoulders as he leaves the dock on skis. As the towed pair follows behind the boat, she leans back, head down, her hands hitting the spray that spurts from behind his skis. Then she straightens up and waves to the crowd. A real pro. She's been skiing half her life.

A quartet, of skiers behind a boat face the ramp set in the middle of Elkhorn Lake. Two go up the ramp and become airborne: two stay on the water and pass under the flying skiers.

Amazing skill. Amazing talent. And guts.

The Lauderdale Aqua Skiers started in the 1950s when a group of kids who lived on Lauderdale Lake decided to get together to put on a skiing show during the regatta that was held on the lake.

Tony Cecola is the show team director. He started with the group in the 1970s. Dues were \$7 and members supplied their own skis and towrope.

"We didn't know anything about show skiing," said Cecola. He said their outfits were jeans, each with a red star sewn on the rear. After the show, Dan Seymour from Sterlingworth gave them a prime rib dinner as thanks for their performance. This went on several years.

In 1978, they competed in their first tournament and they found out that there were other teams like them. They started practicing every weekend at Leubke's and put on shows there. To keep out of the way of other boaters, they moved to the Biagi property. "It turned into a year-round project." And with that came expenses.

During the week Cecola works for the Department of Aviation in communications at O'Hare in Chicago. On weekends, he's into skiing. "It's in my blood. I love the program; I believe in our program. I love these kids."

Cecola admires the bravery of the kids. "Some of the things they do are incredible," Cecola said. "It amazes me after all these years."

He has been involved with every aspect of Lauderdale Aqua Skiers and he wouldn't hesitate to do any job. "I don't ask people to do what I couldn't or wouldn't do myself."

He puts together the program that the team will perform at tournaments before anyone sets ski into the water. The program involves music to go with each act, patter to explain the acts, to introduce the skiers and the order of the acts.

Now the skiers compete each year in the regional tournament, a requirement for a chance to go on to the nationals. Wisconsin has so many ski teams that it is an entire region. This year, regionals were in Wisconsin Rapids.

The Lauderdale Aqua Skiers have done very well. There are three divisions, and in 1990, they won first place in the No. 2 division, so in 1991 they moved up to the No. 1 division, the hardest competition. There generally are 24 teams that compete in that division and Lauderdale group is always in the top 10. They work very hard for that right.

The Lauderdale Aqua Skiers recently placed 10th in Division I, with a score of 1369 at the Wisconsin Rapids competition, which was held July 20-21.

"We have 34 ski members; I'm skiing about 25. Some of the clubs we're skiing against have 175. There's no way we can keep up or possibly beat them. All I want is respect," Cecola said.

He explained that when things go well at a tournament, that's fulfilling. And when things don't go so well, "and they still want to carry on," he said, "that builds character."

Cecola emphasized that one of the goals is for the team to have fun. And that seems to be the theme of the team.

Don Baird has been skiing with Lauderdale Aqua Skiers for seven years; daughter Jill is a swivel skier and son David is a jumper. Both also do pyramids. "We love to ski, and it says so on all of our shirts," Baird said. "I plan to do this until I'm 80," he said. "My mentor is George Blair, the 87-year-old competitive barefooter." He performs in the barefoot pyramid, the human pyramid and doubles.

"It's a big family thing," Amy Diehl said. "I joined and then my cousin joined, my sister joined, my other cousin joined and my parents got involved. My dad was president for a total of six years. My mom's a judge now. It doesn't go away."

Jessica Winkler said, "There are very few sports left in the world that you do with your family. They took my 2-year-old daughter skiing," she said.

There are several parents who drive the boats while their children ski. "It's really unique to watch families get along so well." The group teaches cooperation and how to receive rejection and success gracefully.

Alan Meike's grandfather, Frank Hoch, skied with Lauderdale Aqua Skiers. Meike's grandfather and brother skied at tournaments; his grandfather was 60 years old and his brother was 7. Meike started skiing at the same age. His son Payton, 4, has been out on skis already. "He really liked it."

Meike was a pyramid skier until this year; they needed someone to drive one of the boats. "He'll go where the team needs him the most," Baird said.

What if someone doesn't know how to ski and wants to join the group? That doesn't seem to make any difference. Take Ryan Goebel, 17, who said he was "just barefootin' " out on the water. He looked like he had been at this a while, but he said, "This is my first year" He learned to ski at the end of last winter and is already beyond most recreational skiers. "I like barefootin' a lot."

Even if a person doesn't want to ski, they join. Diehl said, "There's plenty of other things to do."

Besides skiing, members are needed to drive the boats and haul and set up the ramps, run the safety boats, prepare costumes and roll the ropes.

Winkler and Diehl began with Aqua Skiers when their neighbors begged them to come to practice with them. Winkler didn't know how to ski, but she learned quickly. One time she sprained her ankle and they put her on music. "You don't leave the team, you just move to something that's not skiing," she said. Winkler, a special education teacher, is in her eighth year of announcing; once she got involved, she never looked back.

Diehl said that when she and Winkler started they were rolling ropes. They would watch the other skiers and wish they could be out there, too. After instruction and plenty of practice, they were in the show.

Diehl knew how to get up on skis, but admits, "I was petrified of going in and out of the wake." Now she fearlessly skis on one ski, turning around on the ski and holding onto the towrope with her toes. She loves to do tricks. "That's my favorite thing to do in the whole wide world." Acts she likes to watch are the barefoot pyramid, the 360, where a skier goes completely around the boat and the ballet. "They're all cool when they make it." She was show director four years ago and during the week works as a graphic designer in Elk Grove, Ill.

Diehl and a few others conceived Future Team about 10 years ago. "It's for anyone who wants to try new things," Winkler said.

"It's just a better place for them to learn. There's no age limit," said Diehl.

She explained a few acts. One is the ballet line. "It's like a chorus line." A line of girls comes off the pier on one ski; each puts the towrope around her leg; then she puts it on her ankle and does arm movements. "Lots of practice," laughed Diehl.

The gang line is a line of guys starting out in the water on one ski; as they gain speed, about 42 mph, they step off the ski and ski barefoot into shore. "It looks like a gigantic wall of water because you get so much spray," Winkler said. Her favorite act is ballet. "Probably the most solid act in the show."

One act leaves your mouth agape. All the skiers start off from the dock, each with a towrope, but not all have skis. They start out in a row, and soon some have climbed to the shoulders of those in the middle. Next, two others have climbed on top of their shoulders, and last, there is a person on top of those two, waving an American flag. Four tiers of human skiers.

Dismantling the pyramid is just as interesting to watch. When they come into shore all come in together, and make a line on land as they bow to the appreciative audience.

The group has been a stepping stone for at least a dozen pro skiers. "Makes me wish I didn't teach them as well as I did," Cecola said with a straight face.

David Hamilton, 21, finance and marketing senior at UW-Madison, began skiing at age 5. His parents had a cottage on Lauderdale Lake and he joined Lauderdale Aqua Skiers when he was 12. He left the group to ski pro at Indiana Beach, but this summer he returned. He likes the barefoot pyramid, but he explained that as part of the show in Indiana, he took a boat through fire on the ramp, "and everything's a little bit calmed down here."

"We're glad to have him." Cecola said.

The Lauderdale Aqua Skiers is completely supported by donations, and just this year has declared a nonprofit status. They buy two new boats each year. "We talk the manufacturer into selling it to us at cost, we purchase it, use it for the season, keep it immaculate, and then at the end of the season, we sell it," Cecola said. Any profit is put back into the club.

Cecola said donations collected during a Saturday evening performance usually aren't enough to pay for gas money. The powerboats have two engines per, and they do run through a lot of gas, about 35 gallons per boat. There are three powerboats and two pick-up boats, or safety boats, to pick up skiers in case of injury.

"It's an expensive sport," Cecola said, "but our dues are only \$115," Cecola said. "And \$75 goes right to insurance." When the group began, they didn't worry about insurance, but that is a priority now. The members are covered going to, during and coming from an event.

They have two fundraisers during the year and they man the food concessions at Alpine Valley. They are also supported by well wishers who give larger donations.

Diehl and Winkler encourage anyone who thinks they would like to ski to join. "It's different; there's nothing that you've ever experienced like it, it's just so unique," said Diehl.

"You're not going to learn everything in one weekend," said Winkler. "It's something that you've got to give a little time to, but we guarantee that you will find your niche."

The skiers still practice and perform on Lauderdale Lakes on Don Jean Bay, but many performances are on Elkhorn Lake in the Babe Mann Park in the Elkhorn Industrial Park east of Elkhorn. The lake is close to the size of a tournament site, and the site have a natural slope that is perfect for viewing the show.