

'The Battle of Don Jean Bay'

Wisconsin water-ski team pits locals against vacation-home owners, who want the youths to take their 30-year tradition somewhere else

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Some Chicago-area residents expected to be relaxing at their vacation homes at Lauderdale Lakes this summer over barbecues and sunsets, but instead they are engaged in what one called "the Battle of Don Jean Bay."

Their foe? The Lauderdale Aqua Skiers, a youth water-ski team whose members hurtle over jumps, create pyramids and perform stunts while music blasts every Saturday night.

Locals have long seen the water-ski shows as a quaint diversion. For weekend vacationers, they're a major irritant. Chief among the detractors is William Kochlefl, a lawyer from Winnetka, who, after getting no satisfaction from local officials, did some research and discovered that the skiers could be violating an environmental law.

Now the community, about 15 miles north of Lake Geneva, Wis., is in an uproar.

The feud has pitted neighbor against neighbor, and to understand it, one must know that water-ski teams in Wisconsin are like NASCAR in North Carolina. National enthusiasts refer to Wisconsin as the "show ski capital of the world" for its 35 formally organized teams--about three times the number found in most other states.

Underlying some of the disagreement is the feeling that outsiders from near Chicago are trying to change the local flavor.

"The ski team has been there 30 years and these folks are relatively new," said Scott Mason, chairman of the Lauderdale Lakes Lake Management District board, which owns the land used by the skiers.

But Rhonda Kochlefl, William's wife, said all area property owners should

have the same rights.

"We purchased this property in 1998 as a dream come true and hoped to have it in our family for generations," she said. "I want to know why the ski team is above the law."

The Kochlefls say that for several years after they bought their home, the ski team was based largely at a neighboring lake, so they weren't prepared for the heavy use that resumed on the bay in 2004.

The Kochlefls and several neighbors complain that the team now dominates the bay, leaving little space for them to leave their piers. They question the safety of the ski jump, and say the skiers regularly cross into the 100-foot, no-wake zones--a claim the ski team disputes. Opponents also complain that the ski towboats, each of which is equipped with two 200-horsepower engines, are damaging the shoreline as they stir up the lake's floor.

About 20 other families--a large portion of those who live nearest to the bay, many of them weekend visitors--signed a petition stating they share similar concerns about the ski team.

William Kochlefl discovered the ski team launches off land that is zoned by the county for conservation because it is a wetland. He presented extensive documentation to officials and demanded that the ski team's annual permit be revoked.

Officials with the Lake Management District told him that they believe the ski team activities fit with their mission and do not violate zoning law. The LaGrange Town Board turned him away, saying the team supporters outnumber the opposing neighbors.

But Kochlefl found a more receptive audience when he appealed to Walworth County. A county zoning official agreed that the ski team is violating a law by using the land, which also contains a set of bleachers.

Officials told the team they have a year to find a new launch site.

Meanwhile, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources is investigating the Kochlefls' complaint to see if the ski team needs to apply for additional permits.

Team's fans plan to fight

Ski-team supporters plan to put up a fight, with area organizations lobbying county and state elected officials to intervene. The next step is

for lake management district leaders and county officials to discuss options, such as rezoning the property so the ski team could stay in Don Jean Bay, Mason said.

"If he's successful in getting rid of us, what's the next group he'll go after?" said Greg Twelmeyer, 50, president of the Lauderdale Aqua Skiers. "The personal watercraft? The 4th of July fireworks? It's a slippery slope and we're in the bull's-eye."

About 80 people from 55 families participate on the current ski team, leaders said. Skiers come from the local Lauderdale Lakes communities as well as Illinois.

Supporters describe the ski performances as a wholesome tradition supported by generations of family members since the 1960s. Team members age 6 and up sew costumes, cut ropes and raise money year-round.

Louise Meike, 60, stood near the water-ski site recently and described four generations of family involved with the team.

"While my children were in it, I made the costumes. My husband was the driver," said Meike, whose three grandchildren are among the youngest newcomers on the team.

"This is family."

At the pier, the Meike grandchildren, ages 7, 4, and 1, all wore life vests as they watched older teens and their parents practice their moves.

Jeff Asbach, 40, of Spring Grove, Ill., hoisted his 6-year-old daughter, Kayla, on his shoulders while on skis.

"I've made lifelong friends here," Asbach said.

Troubled waters in the bay

Most agree the turbulence began last summer when the Lauderdale Aqua Skiers started practicing three to four hours a day, four days a week, at Don Jean Bay. Because the 900-foot-wide bay's waters are calm and shallow, it is a popular spot for recreation on Lauderdale Lakes, a chain of three lakes north of Elkhorn.

In 1999, the ski team cut back on its use of the bay when the private landowner who provided them with a launch site and pier sold his property.

The team moved most of its operations to nearby Elkhorn Lake, practicing and performing at Don Jean Bay only for holidays and special events.

Then in 2000, the Lake Management District bought the team's old launching site, a 7-acre parcel, for \$100,000. The team continued to split its time between both sites. Then in 2003, the Elkhorn City Council voted to stop allowing motorboats on Elkhorn Lake in a decision unrelated to the Lauderdale Aqua Skiers, a parks and recreation official said.

By July 2004, the water-ski team resumed all of its practices and performances at Don Jean Bay, Twelmeyer said.

That caused a stir immediately, said David Sturms, a lawyer from Hinsdale who has a home on the bay.

"They pull out this big ski jump and start maneuvering around the area. It just blocks off the area," said Sturms.

The LaGrange Town Board now permits the team to practice from 4 to 7 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays. The skiers return to practice about 3 p.m. Saturdays before holding the hourlong show at 6 p.m.

The shows attract dozens of spectators, most of whom watch from their boats, which fill the bay and anchor near the homeowners' docks.

Ski-team leaders said they thought they had resolved the problems by agreeing to stop practicing on Sundays, said Anthony Cecola, 42, team fundraiser.

"We're not doing anything we haven't been doing for 30 years," Cecola said.

Most hope for a compromise.

"I personally don't want them out," said Karen Zamin of Hoffman Estates, who supported the Kochlefls at the LaGrange board meeting. Her family bought a home on the bay with hopes of retiring there.

"I just wanted them to cut back to a reasonable and fair amount of time," Zamin said.
