

# THE NEXT WAVE

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THE FUTURE ARRIVED AT THIS YEAR'S  
WAVE KITING NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIPS.



**A** 50-STRONG CREW of kitesurfers has blown in to Logans Beach at Warrnambool in Victoria's south-west for the Australian Kite Surfing Association's (AKSA) Wave Kiting Nationals. They're in the right spot: this is an unforgiving stretch of coast scattered with shipwrecks and revered for its swell. There's just one essential ingredient missing: wind.

In fact this windless, waveless calm is the state of play for nearly two of this competition's three days. There's the breaks in this game ... But when the wind finally arrives, it comes at full force, frogmarching towards the beach from the south-west, blowing a bruised-looking cloud bleeding sheets of blinding rain ahead of it. The kitesurfers know what's behind the raincloud on the warpath: wind. And not just any old wind, but a cross-onshore sou'wester, coming at us at around 20 knots. They scramble to inflate their kites, lay out their boards, clamber into their wetsuits and harness up.

Kitesurfing and its lake-loving cousin, flatwater kiting, have largely taken the wind out of the sails of what was the spectacular growth of windsurfing

(sailboarding) a decade or so ago, due in large part to the transportability of the gear. A kiter needs just a short surfboard or wakeboard-style craft, wetsuit, harness, inflatable kite and pump in their kit, and it all fits inside the car – no more strapping an unwieldy mast and longboard onto the roof. But unlike competitive windsurfers, kites don't race; they execute moves in pursuit of points, like pro surfboarders.

Like surfboard riders, kitesurfers only get to do their thing with the right combination of wind and waves. Conveniently, though, they're not looking for the same type of weather. Surfers start frothing when offshore winds even out a swell, smooth out the face of a wave and turn mush into barrels, but kitesurfers avoid the offshores; why risk being blown out to sea? Onshores? Don't bother: you'll likely end up back on the beach where you started. It's the cross-shore

winds that kick-start a kitesurfer's adrenals and turn them into surfers who can fly.

Beginners will always have to learn on flat water, but once a degree of proficiency is acquired, most will be tempted to venture into surf conditions like our competitors today: it's simply irresistible. The same thrill that surfers feel with a wave blurring past under their feet is, if anything, magnified by the extra power available to a kitesurfer. They are able to catch a swell often hundreds of metres before it even looks like breaking, and their aerial manoeuvres are of another magnitude entirely. Its other major advantage over surfing, of course, is the excitement of catching a wind-powered ride back out beyond the waves, while surfers flail and grope their way through the surf's impact zone powered only by their arms ...

Kitesurfing is scored much like a



Australia's kite-surfing scene is pumping.



Michelle England hangs on tight. ABOVE Men's winner Keahi de Aboitiz causes a splash.



freestyle surf event, with each competitor catching as many waves as possible – and riding them with as much flair as possible – in a limited time. Today, the kites have 11 minutes. Each wave caught is individually scored out of ten by four judges; at the end of the heat the top three wave scores are added together to create a potential top score of 120. Each heat is a knockout, rapidly whittling the field down to the final four.

"We're looking for degrees of difficulty

in a rider's entry and exit into the wave," explains senior judge Ivan Salmon. "We want to see critical moves. Barrels, vertical turns and aeriels score highly. But aeriels aren't scored if the rider lands on the back of the wave; they have to land on the front or face of the wave."

Salmon was one of the first to introduce kitesurfing to Australia after seeing the sport in its infancy in Maui in the late 1990s. Back then, kiting – on flat water or in the surf –

was considered the world's fastest-growing extreme sport. Kites were going through technological puberty; like the mood swings of a teenager, they were up and down, all over the place.

"The first kites that came out had a two-line system with absolutely no way to depower on the bar," recalls Salmon. "Once you hooked the bar in, it was full power, all the time. The only way you could depower your kite was by having extremely good board skills to slow up your kite."

"In those early days we all had heaps of hairy experiences," he says. "I remember getting lofted over 60 feet into the air over the yacht harbour. I got carried through yacht masts and landed right next to the pier; me on one side and the kite on the other."

Others aren't so lucky. Rick Iossi, director of the Florida Kitesurfing Association, has been tracking kitesurfing fatalities around the world since 2000. He has recorded 127 deaths in that time; 60 pre the big technology changes that came about in 2006, and 66 since. On the surface, those figures don't bode well for the new technology, but dig a little deeper and it's a different story. "Kitesurfing numbers have increased dramatically each year, so when comparing the early years ▶

to more recent times, the data suggests that the fatality rate is dropping," Iossi points out. He also notes that kitesurfing's median fatality rate of 2.2 per 100,000 for 2010 [data is for USA only] compares favourably with other so-called extreme sports. In 2009, scuba diving deaths numbered 13 per 100,000; motor racing 15; paragliding 80. And the chart-topper? Sky diving, with 95.

In Australia there have been four kitesurfing deaths. The most recent was in November 2005 when an experienced kitesurfer died of head injuries after hitting rocks at Phillip Island in Victoria. Like the others, he was using the old equipment.

"Kiting is about understanding and minimising the risks," says former AKSA president and competitor Mike Walker. "It's like driving a car at 100km/h down the road – if you're adjusting the radio at the same time, you're just asking for trouble. But you don't have to do that. You don't have to kite upwind of rocks; you don't have to test your big kite on days where there are strong winds.

"I like the extreme image," he continues, "but it's not extreme. It just looks that way. The injury rate per hour of time spent kitesurfing is actually very low compared

to football, netball and other popular sports." It was in 2006 that kite technology matured into adulthood, with the introduction of safety-focused innovations like the "depower" and "chicken loop" systems. Depower enables a kiter to quickly re-angle and reduce power in the kite, while the chicken loop provides a final, quick-release system in an emergency situation to immediately dump the wind out of the kite.

Improvements to relaunching systems have made the sport far easier for beginners, too. It used to take months for a novice to string together anything more than a single run. Those initial idiosyncracies meant surfers weren't particularly interested in the sport. But as technology improved, so did the take-up, and many of the competitors

at this weekend's event are surfers who have developed a preference for kiting. Like reigning women's champion Michel Blinkhorn of Byron Bay, who has been surfing since she was 22; she was instantly hooked when she first tried kiting seven years ago. "I punished myself going through the learning curve in what was a very windy summer that year, but I had a great time," remembers the wiry 45-year-old. "I still surf, but I'm a lot fussier. The waves have to be really nice and there have to be not too many people out. When you kite, you get spoilt. There are no crowds and you can have any wave you want."

Back at Logans Beach, the storm is whipping the waves into a frenzy and lifting the rain to a horizontal squall. "Finally, here



BELOW Dave Sorenson toes the line and [RIGHT]... just shows off.



Surfers have caught wind of the kite craze.

comes some puff!" one competitor grins cheerfully as we shelter under an awning. "With kiting, it's not good until it's bad," he adds philosophically.

Yeah, right. First out on the waves are the grommets, a four-pack ranging in age from nine to 16. They have huge support from senior competitors and the crowd as they take on the choppy waves, and it's 16-year-old Tom McGregor of Queensland who comes out on top, with wave scores of 14.8, 15.8, and 13.0.

Despite the sport's growing popularity among women, just seven compete this year. One, 35-year-old Kris Graham, has kited on flat water before but has never even tried the surf. She wipes out twice, once in the rip and once by snagging her ropes. But no matter – as with the groms, the tight-knit crowd is supportive and gives her a whooping dose of encouragement from the viewing deck.

Others, like Lisa Hickman, Michel England and Holly Haldenby, have been around

for longer and are serious contenders for the title. But it's seasoned pro Blinkhorn who leads the women's pack. In the first heat, Blinkhorn misjudges the wind and puts up an 8m kite: the wrong size, as it turns out. She is overpowered and can hardly keep her kite on the water. "There were waves and chops everywhere," Blinkhorn recalls. "It was like being in a washing machine." So with three minutes to go she switches to her 6m kite and gets one wave in the last three minutes; enough to get her through to the final, where her three top waves score 12.5, 13, and 12.9, compared with Hickman's 6.0, 8.0, and 7.5. "I don't do a lot of technical moves," she explains. "I was just trying to pick the best wave and do as many turns and forehand re-entries at the critical section of the wave – that's the section closest to the breaking part of the wave where you get the highest points – as I could."

By the time the men get in the water, the wind has mellowed and the consensus is that the grommets and women bore the brunt of its force. With 27 male kites, 16 heats and the winners and losers finals to get through, things are moving at pace. ▶

Brodie Adlington  
boosted. BELOW  
Windsurfing seems  
so yesterday.



The winners final pits veteran Mike Walker against 18-year-old Keahi de Aboitiz, who has been surfing since he was five years old and kiting – both freestyle and wave – since he was 11; he's competing in the Open division for the first time this year. His technical, trick-laden style of riding sets him apart from old-school kitesurfers like Walker, who chase the big sets out the back of the waves, and is expected to win him the title.

De Aboitiz makes it look easy, pulling floaters and barrels, reverses and re-entries off the lip, airs and shove-its and earning top wave scores of 15.0, 19.3, and 17 in the final. Unlike most of his fellow competitors, de Aboitiz doesn't use straps to keep his

feet attached to his board; even though the frothy, slippery conditions make them strategically sensible, this extra freedom of movement opens up a range of tricks impossible for the strapped-in set and adds a major degree of difficulty to his aerial manoeuvres that the judges appreciate. "I never use straps," he says. "That's part of what I like to do; I want to make kite surfing look like surfing. It's all in the way you move the board."

Part man, part fish, de Aboitiz represents a new generation of kitesurfer. He has earned the admiration of his seniors, with several joking they wish he was still a grommet. "I'm really stoked," says de Aboitiz of his victory. "The conditions

were pretty tough and the standard of competition was really high ... but I had fun."

"Keahi is kiting on a whole different level," comments Salmon. "He was a clear winner, right from the start. We were impressed with the conviction of his turns, with the amount of spray he was kicking off the water. He gets out on the water every single day; he's perfected a few moves, and then some."

One thing is clear, among the chaos and chop drummed up in Warrnambool: kitesurfing has come a long way since its emergence from late last century's primordial sporting soup, and young riders like de Aboitiz are pioneering its evolution. "He's a freaky athlete," concludes Walker. "He's got a huge future." ■

