BETTER TO PREVENT THAN TO REPAIR!

Amongst extreme sports and activities that I have had the chance to experiment in my life, little have given me the amount of adrenaline that windsurfing brings me on a day when I ride my 4.5m on a raging lake.

There was my motorcycle at some point but by the end of my first summer I had already had two accidents including one that broke my leg in two places and put me in a cast for 6 months. The bike was sold and the first board was bought. Finally came the first fun boards and trips to Champlain. During one of those infamous days at Champlain, I broke my harness hook, which made me drift far from shore. I eventually ended up on a private property, where I politely asked if I could leave my equipment while I would go get a replacement hook, permission granted, I went. When I came back, the owner simply could not believe how or why I wanted to go back in. This fair lady could easily remember the days when fishermen would go out in stormy weather and never come back… Me on the other hand, no problem, no doubt, no fear only fun and adrenaline.

Obviously too many windsurfers adopt an “I’m invincible” attitude but not to encourage them but the prevalence of deadly accidents in windsurfing is quite low. Nonetheless, we must be aware that there is potential for danger and that a few basic safety rules can make the difference between a happy or not so happy ending. Therefore, we will take time to look over those elementary safety rules.

Before leaving the house

Always check your equipment. Worn lines, cracked universal joints, or any unhealthy pieces. Those are all places to start looking. Moreover, certain special pieces are there to help prevent any possible problem, so check if they are intact. Amongst these are safety ropes to keep the mast and board together in case the universal joint failed. Also, some mast feet like the Extreme Proline have an added ring which prevents it from sliding out of the mast track in case it ever got loose.

Let your relatives, friends know where your are going and when you will be back… Being in good shape and knowing how to swim are also practical qualities. As for all extreme sports, you need to be in shape to do it not get in shape while doing it. Finally, being aware of the weather forecast is always a plus (you can look this up on our web site www.auventfou.com in the forecast section).

On site

Windsurfers have a tendency to hang out in groups on a designated beach and there is a very good reason for it. On the contrary, your favorite spot can be deserted on other days, giving you the perfect clue that the winds are not favorable at that spot on that day. Windsurfers travel in packs in order to follow the golden rules of our sport, so here are the two golden rules of windsurfing: NEVER WINDSURF ALONE and NEVER WINDSURF IN OFFSHORE WINDS. Some world renowned sites do have these winds but they are strong and there are always rescue boats available. Please avoid offshore winds if there is no surveillance.

The way you dress is also an important factor in windsurfing safety. Hypothermia is a real risk, often with the excitement, the physical activity and adrenaline we do not feel cold or the true water temperature, it is when we stop that we get hit with cold. In consequence, you have to dress warm enough to be able to stay motionless in the water for a certain time. In autumn or spring, the use of a hood decreases heat losses from the head which is well known as being the area which loses the majority of the body’s heat. On hot days, wearing a lycra, applying sunscreen and staying hydrated can help decrease the chance of a heat stroke. At vacation spots like Margarita, they say that the windsurfers worst enemy is… the sun. Moreover, an approved lifejacket (ideally) remains an indispensable accessory and mandatory by law. A few claim that the life jacket prevents them from swimming fast enough to catch their drifting board, that it prevents them from diving under an oncoming boat or that it ought to be avoided in large breaking waves due to the inability to dive under an oncoming break. The bottom line still seems quite clear, in most cases your lifejacket will save your life, end of story. The helmet is gaining popularity especially in heavy winds when there is greater probability of being knocked unconscious. It is even more important if you do not wear a lifejacket.

A whistle functional in water could be of use in precarious situations to attract attention in case of distress. An extra piece of rope for the down-haul and/or out-haul (many sails have a pocket in the base of the mast sleeve), a small knife, and a screwdriver for the fin are all sure bets for ultimate safety. An overview of your equipment (about 10 seconds) should be done before going onto the water. Is the mast foot screwed in tight, is the mast well fitted in the latter, is the fin

The Extreme Proline mast foot offers a safety ring which prevents the sail from separating from the board if the mast foot was to loosen.
AUTO-SAFETY PROCEDURES

Broken fin

There is a way to ride without a fin, the board of course will not want to remain on track but there is a way to head towards the beach. This consists in riding with one foot in front of the mast foot and the other behind. Another good solution is to attach your harness or your lifejacket under the board going through the rear foot-traps. This will create drag and make the board a little easier to maneuver but much slower. In the case of a Us fin box, chances are only the area where the screw attaches the fin will be broken so there is the possibility to insert the fin up-side down in the box, this should hold for a while, enough time for you to head to shore.

Broken mast

Here the solution lies in re-rigging your sail on a smaller mast. If you have the slightest bit of luck in your misfortune the tip of your mast will be broken (above the wishbone) as it is often the case you end up with three pieces: the intact tip and the bottom in two. Get rid of the broken tip, take the intact upper piece and stick it into the mast sleeve up-side down, stick your other piece into the latter and push it in, then down-haul a little. In some cases you might have to de-rig the sail to insert the mast. If you have an extra piece of rope or an adjustable head you can tie the tip of the sail to the wishbone to stabilize the rig.

Broken wishbone

The solution consist in using the piece that is still partially intact and install it in such a way that you can come back to shore. For example, if you break one side of the wishbone you flip it over and use the side that remains to head home.

Broken universal joint

The solution is to tie together the remaining piece of down-haul rope to the starbase, possibly under the latter. Be aware that the base of the extension will have a tendency to scratch and/or bump the board near the mast track.

properly installed, are the out-haul and down-haul ropes in the cleats?? With knotted ends? Still have 5 seconds? Are the harness lines well placed, is the tip of the mast joined with the head of the sail. Have an up-haul? Wishbone solid? Battens tight?...

Finally be aware of dehydration and drink lots of...water of course not bear! Like any other sport, a warm-up at the beginning and a little stretching session will help prevent muscle cramps and soreness (do this again after your session). Last but not least, know your limits, if in doubt take a break or abstain.

On the water

Essential rule, do not go too far! For some this is easier said than done. If the open ocean or lake attracts you, be sure that you do not go alone, go with at least one buddy and always wait for each other. Moreover, try to avoid any risk of collision, stay away from other windsurfers and slow down when you come to shore. Respect the priority of other windsurfers and always give way in a direct and obvious way. Remember you have priority if your right hand is in front on your boom. Nonetheless, you should not rely on this rule entirely because lots of riders forget it...

In case of a problem, even if major, never leave your board behind. Even if you need to release your sail in order to swim back to shore faster. Learn the simple tricks to help get you out of a rut (details are on your left in the column). Use the international sign for distress which consists in waving your hands up and down on each side.

Remain calm and take time to think about the situation before wasting precious energy by fighting the elements. The sole occasion which requires you to act quickly is if your sail detaches from your board, the sail will drift away much slower than the board so go after the latter and hurry! After all, best be stuck at large with your board than your sail eh? When navigating glance around to see if anyone is in trouble. A quick thumbs up confirms that everything is alright.

Keep in mind that one day it might be you needing some help out there. Some windsurfers have reported being in distress for hours while others just rode by without ever seeing them.

Along another line, watch for hypothermia symptoms. Shivering, white finger tips, poor coordination are signs that your session should come to an end. Also, keep an eye out for the weather if the wind goes up or down (especially if your board barely supports you), in this case stay close to shore. Moreover, if there is thunder or lightning, it is not recommended that you be in the water; it conducts electricity very well!

In conclusion

Even if safety in windsurfing is a boring subject and fatalities are low; it is probably one of the only adrenaline driven sports in which safety is not taken seriously.

There are few circumstances which could prevent you from coming back to shore without the help of an emergency vehicle except a serious injury or a board broken in half. Statistics show that in 99% of cases those who needed rescue are at fault. Either it is incompetence (you’ve failed to scan your gear before riding), ignorance (you haven’t learned the basic techniques to rescue yourself) or stupidity (you left on an offshore wind). Safety is key, have fun!