

Old and New Windsurfers by Ted Avellone

One summer day back in 1980 while I was on a family trip to the Florida Keys, as we were driving down US-1 just before reaching our Islamorada destination, I was looking out over the water and my eyes flew open when I suddenly saw a couple of people standing on what looked like big white surfboards holding brightly colored triangular sails attached to the boards. This immediately piqued my teenaged interest. Later that day I convinced my dad to drive over to find out what those things were. Thankfully he obliged, and we pulled up on the little crushed-coral side road by the water and there was a van and a couple of the boards-with-sails contraptions next to it, and standing by the van was what some would affectionately refer to as an "old hippie" couple. My dad started talking with them, and we learned that their names were Kent and Barbara Bleakley and that they were giving lessons to people on how to operate these sailboat-surfboard hybrid inventions they called "Windsurfers."

Next thing I knew I was on a "simulator," a middle section of a Windsurfer board with a sail rig on it, following Barbara's instructions. "Move the sail forward to turn the board downwind, back to make it point upwind." I remember learning that quickly. The next thing I remember was that I was in the water on a "Star" board and rig, a wide, stable learner version of the Windsurfer. I recall learning the basics quickly. It seemed straightforward and almost natural. Happily, my dad decided to buy a Windsurfer then and there, figuring it would be a fun thing to have for the family at our weekend/vacation mobile home in a little trailer park at Mile Marker 101.5 on the bay side in Islamorada.

He was right.

Our Windsurfer had a teak boom that tied onto the one-piece mast, a metal U-joint with a teak mast base that friction-fit into a slot in the board, and a big daggerboard that fit into another much larger slot. The board itself was 12 feet long and covered with a tough white semi-pliable plastic that reminded me of Frisbee plastic. While my sisters and dad sailed around on it some over the next few weeks,



I took to it like a dog to a bone and was on it constantly. After only a few weeks it felt like the most fun and natural thing you could do on the water. With just a light breeze you could go any direction but straight into the wind, and in stronger breezes the board would plane, a sensation that was positively exhilarating.

Over the next couple of years I spent hundreds of hours sailing around the grass flats, mangrove islands and marl-bottomed channels in and around Little Basin and Shell Key Channel in the area behind our Islamorada place. I'd occasionally go on long excursions as well--one summer day I sailed from our

place all the way out to Alligator Light on the ocean side and back, a round trip of 18 miles.

A little while after getting my Windsurfer I got a "high wind" sail with a stiffer mast that I used on many occasions when the wind was too strong for the stock sail and mast. A little after that



I also installed foot straps onto my board from a kit I got that was advertised in the back of Windsurf magazine. The kit consisted of three straps, six long hexagonal nuts with six screws, and a Xeroxed instruction sheet. Installation was done by figuring out where you wanted the straps to be, marking spots on the board, carefully drilling six big holes through the plastic of the hull into the foam core to a certain depth for the nuts, wrapping resin-soaked fiberglass cloth around the nuts, and shoving them into the holes. After curing the excess was trimmed from the edges of the holes and you screwed the straps onto

the newly installed nuts. Somehow everything turned out perfectly, and it opened up a new dimension of being able to ride fast in rough water without waves knocking your feet off and being able to lean way back into the wind without your feet suddenly flying out from under you.

Back then, a couple of hundred yards down from our place was a sail shop called Freedom Sails run by a guy named Dave Calvert, and there were three or four employees who also had Windsurfers, and in the late afternoons they'd often sail around Little Basin as well. They were more experienced than I was, and I distinctly remember being out there one afternoon sailing around with them and this one guy sits down and pops his board with his foot and the next thing I know he's sailing along standing up on the side edge doing a rail ride. To my teenage mind this was the ultimate freestyle act of legends that I had only seen in magazines, and here was this guy in front of me nonchalantly doing it. He showed me how to do it, and for a few weeks it seemed impossible every time I tried it. Then one day I finally did it, and after that, heck, it was easy!



In those days Windsurfers had daggerboards, which were huge compared to the thin retractable centerboards of modern times. With those massive planks you could really eat the eye out of the wind, but that great upwind performance came with a price--as soon as you were on a reach in decent wind and were just about to plane, it acted like a hydrofoil and the board would annoyingly flip up 45 degrees on its side. The solution was to quickly reach down and grab the daggerboard's strap, yank it out and hold onto it while you continued sailing. And you'd better hold it right or it would swing all around and the edge would nail you in the shin--or worse. As you'd plane along with the daggerboard out a fountain of foam would shoot up through its empty slot. It was like a speedometer--the higher the foam fountain, the faster you knew you were

going. Another solution to the big daggerboard issue was to get the "high wind daggerboard," a much smaller, rearward swept affair that looked like the wing of a tiny jet fighter. You lost some upwind performance, but it eliminated the hydrofoil effect. Another major downside to the big daggerboards were if you ever hit hard bottom at speed, it would pivot rearward and act like the jaw of a giant pair of cutters and slice into the bottom rear edge of the daggerboard slot, creating a fatal waterlogging breach into the foam core.

When we weren't at our idyllic vacation spot in Islamorada, I'd sail out from the beach in my home town of Hallandale, Florida, situated between Miami and Ft. Lauderdale. Sometimes I'd go so far out I'd have to concentrate on which water tower was the Hallandale water tower when I'd head back in, as the numerous high rises and water towers looked all the same from that distance.

The gulf stream runs very close to the coast in that part of Florida and the water would change from green to a deep blue maybe a mile or two out once you reached it, and it was full of flying fish and other deep water pelagic species. More than once I nearly passed over a shark or some girthy teleost that didn't hear my silent approach and shot away at the last second. On brisk rough days out in the deep blue, whenever I'd hold onto the boom a fraction of a second too long and get thrown and then find myself a dozen or so yards away from my board, I would break swimming speed records to get back and yank my feet up, imaging some massive brown leviathan just behind me. When conditions were just right, on the way back in towards the beach I could surf for long distances on the sloping forward faces of the big Atlantic rollers. Such fun days in the sun, it seemed like it would never end.

Then, college, marriage, my father passing away and the Islamorada place sold and my mother moving to north Florida, kids, jobs. The blur of the passing years took me down other paths. I don't even remember what happened to that old board and rig.

Fast forward to the fall of 2022. My 16-year-old son Thomas had just come back from a summer camp beach event where there was a SUP board the group was playing with and that he had surfed on. He described the sensation of riding a wave to an epiphany or revelation, an opening of his mind's eye to something utterly fantastic and exhilarating. It reminded me of my early Windsurfing days. So I started telling him about how I used to windsurf all the time in my teens, told him stories of sailing in the Keys and surfing the big foam-streaked blue water rollers and the time I jumped off my board in front of a manta ray near the beach and touched its exposed wing-tip as it turned past me, and he thought that all sounded fantastic and was beyond excited to try windsurfing. A Google search revealed, to my great surprise, that there was a sailboard club less than an hour from Tallahassee that gave free lessons and supplied equipment for lessons on certain days and was inexpensive to join and that it's been continuously active for over 30 years! I had no idea. I couldn't believe I'd never heard about it before.

We signed up for a free lesson.

A guy named Bob Graves (aka DJ Bobby G aka The Scribe) contacted me and said even though

the lessons were technically full for the year he would go ahead and give Thomas a free lesson. A couple of Saturdays later, on a gusty, drizzly, overcast September afternoon, after signing waivers and waiting for the lightning to pass, we headed out into the water. While Bob was waist deep in the water patiently giving Thomas his lesson, he offered me one of the club's practice boards to try out. After my initial struggles trying to even stand up and pull the sail up in the choppy water, once I finally got hold of the boom and started moving, long dormant memories began to awaken. After about 20 minutes I wasn't sucking wind anymore and found that I was tacking without falling in on every other attempt. I had begun to regain my Windsurfing "sea legs" and felt like I was starting to have a basic level of control.

After several more lessons from Bob and some practice sessions over the next couple of weeks, Thomas had improved dramatically to a respectable level of competence, and I as well had come much further along towards regaining the level of control I had some 40 years ago. I felt like I could pretty much make the board go where I wanted it to go. Then, at the club's Endless Summer regatta, I chartered a Windsurfer LT, which is apparently a retro throwback board and rig set-up. It was apparently conceived as a "coming home" for the sport, a step back in time from the hi-tech short-board narrow-niche trend that had dominated the sport for decades after the initial boom of Windsurfing popularity in the 1980's. This turned out to be great for me, because that same "old-new" board and sail design were what I had logged hundreds of hours of experience on.

Up to that point we had been sailing the club's big "learner boards" with moderate-sized modern-cut sails, and it was all good. But getting on and sailing the LT was like meeting an old friend. All the idiosyncrasies and nuances of my Windsurfing muscle memory ingrained in me from the 1980's just fell right into place. The feel of that old style shape of sail, the way the board moved when I shifted my feet around, even the sound of the waves hitting the front of it, all came flooding back. As with my former 1980's self, after just a couple of hours it was as though no conscious thinking was required to make the board go where I wanted it to go. It felt like home. Strangely, however, the board sat a little lower in the water, and a couple of times I noticed the nose of the board dug into the water a little when I was heading downwind. That never happened with my old Windsurfer. Must be a design defect. It can't have anything to do with the 40 extra pounds I weigh now.

Thomas and I plan to sail as much as we can this coming season, and we're looking forward to the Club's Regattas and other events. Thanks to the Shell Point Sailboard Club, and the friendly, helpful, and generous people in it, I can have a lot of fun with like-minded people, pass on a few skills to my son, and maybe even re-live a little bit of my youth.