AVANCED TECHNIQUE

A wave board has to do many things. It may be called upon to give big, smooth, flowing turns in big waves, or it may be asked to deliver snappy, pivotal little turns in mush. Or it may simply be required to deliver good control and decent jumping performance in choppy conditions. And any of these in anything from 15 knots through to 50kts+. Expecting perfect performance in all these areas is indeed asking a lot of a board. However, if you take a bit of time to tune your wave board for the conditions, you will definitely give it a lot more chance to perform to its best. With the help of some of the UK's best wavesailors, Jem Hall attempts to deliver the comprehensive guide to getting the most out of your wave board, be you first timer, intermediate or expert wavesailor. Pix by Raf Czepulkowski...

TUNING YOUR WAVE BOARD

Most windsurfers are fairly comfortable with the idea of tuning their sail to suit the conditions. More wind = more downhaul / outhaul. However, the idea of tuning the board is something that most sailors are much more vague about – a shame, since with careful tuning we can reap huge benefits. This is particularly so with wave boards, where a few simple tweaks can dramatically improve performance. From my coaching clinics I have seen time and again clients getting much better results on the water after tuning their boards correctly for the conditions.

So in this feature I will be examining the various wave board tuning options available, when to use them and how to make the most of them. The comments are valid for any normal wave board or freestyle-wave board in the 70-90L range. As well as drawing on my own coaching and testing experience for this, I will also be including some insights gained from working with Team Fakefish riders Chris Audsley, Louise Emery and John Skye. Past world wavesailing champion and all-round top bloke Francisco Goya will also be injecting his wisdom.

There are six tuning options on a wave board:

- **Mastfoot Position**
- **Footstrap Position**
- **Footstrap Spread**
- **Footstrap Size**
- **Fin Position**
- **Fin Size**

Before we look at what each tuning option can offer in the way of adjusting optimum performance, it's important to understand what we're actually trying to do when tuning a wave board...

The main focus of wave board tuning is on making it ride waves well – which largely comes down to maximising and maintaining speed through your manoeuvres. However, there are two very distinct styles of waveriding. I'm not going to get into a full-blown discussion of waveriding technique here – all I want to concentrate on in is the main distinction as to whether you are wanting the board to ride off the back foot or the front foot while *all* turns should be initiated with your weight on the front foot, you can then alter the radius and style of the turn by varying where the majority of your weight is applied as the board goes through the bottom turn.

FRONT FOOT STEERING

If you want to drive the board through a fast, wide arc turn you need to maintain more weight on the front foot. This is the best method for riding bigger waves, and in decent cross / cross-offshore wind conditions.

Setting your board up for front foot steering is focussed around maximum control, as you are aiming to turn the board at high speed, using pretty much the full length of the rail, and keeping this speed up through the bottom turn and into a fast powerful top turn. The downside of tuning your board to maximise front foot steering is that it will make the board less willing to turn in a more pivotal fashion, feeling stiffer and not turning so tight at slower speeds

CONTROL & FRONTSIDE RIDING –
MASTFOOT FORWARD, FIN BACK, STRAPS FORWARD

SET-UP

Mastfoot forward – keeps the nose down.
Footstraps forward – engages more rail.
Fin back – board tracks better through the turns and is more stable.

BACK FOOT STEERING

If you want to make the turn more pivotal with a tighter arc, you transfer more weight to the back foot, turning the board more on its tail and tail rocker. This is the usual method for waveriding in cross-on to onshore conditions. When tuned to maximise back foot steering, the board will be more lively and manoeuvrable, yielding tighter turns and more of them. The trade-off may be less control.

TURNING & BACKSIDE RIDING –
MASTFOOT BACK , FIN FORWARD, STRAPS BACK

SET-UP

Mastfoot back – lifts the nose to give a shorter rail.
Footstraps back – weighting through the rearward rails.
Fin forward – board more manoeuvrable.

So let's now look at each of the six variables in more detail, discuss what happens when you adjust them, and look at when and why you might want to make particular tweaks.

THE EXCEPTIONS THAT PROVE THE RULE

Unfortunately, wavesailing tuning is not an exact science. While the guidance given here will be good for 90% of sailors, as your skills develop you may well find your prefer a specific kit set-up which does not necessarily conform with the guidance given here. **John Skye** is a case in point:

*"Personally, I **don't** change my set-up much between onshore and sideshore conditions. I **always** try to drive off the front foot to maintain speed, which means having the mastfoot and front strap a long way forward. Sometimes I may move my fin forward a tiny amount (maybe 1cm) if the waves are small, to help the board turn better. Also if the conditions are really perfect – side-offshore and good quality waves – I have been moving my mast track **back** about 1-2cm. This again helps the turning and allows the board to get more vertical. Because the conditions are good, maintaining speed is not an issue. If I am losing speed at all however I will move the track forward again."*

In other words, while there are general rules it can pay to experiment. John is such a top sailor that he can really feel what the board is telling him, and tune accordingly. But even for John, the Holy Grail is maintaining board speed. This is really what should always be at the focus of your tweaking decisions...

MASTFOOT POSITION

In order to be able to tune your board to the conditions you need some reference points on the mast track. Measuring from the back of the board, mark up the 130 and 135cm points. (Don't assume the manufacturers' measurements are accurate!)

To give you a starting reference point, most riders position their mastfoot somewhere in the 132.5–137.5cm range, according to the conditions. The main aim when tuning your mastfoot position is maintaining boardspeed while riding the wave, and in general you put the mastfoot forward a bit to increase speed, as for when doing front foot turns. All our pros were agreed on this. Over to **Chris Audsley**:

"I go for between 133 and 136cm on my wave board. For example, if it's onshore I will set the mastfoot at about 133-134cm because I turn more off my back foot when riding in onshore conditions. Yet in cross-shore conditions I have it about 136 so I can get more weight forward over the front of the board to get more rail in. "

Finding the right spot can be a revelation – moving the mastfoot just a few cm forward or back can make all the difference. John Skye mentions how he was struggling to keep speed until he moved his mastfoot forward to 134-136cm, which he says totally transformed his sailing.

And this is possibly the most important point of all to take away from this article. Even if you don't take on board any of the other tips, just remember this: The old adage of *"whack it in the middle of the mast track and she'll be right"* is pure, simple, utter *rubbish.* Boards have their mast tracks at very different positions – you need to measure where your mast track is in relation to the tail, mark some reference points and use them. Setting your mastfoot at 136cm might mean it's quite near the front of the track. That's fine... Believe me: From first hand experience, dropping down a logo high choppy Cape Town face you definitely want that nose down...

FOOTSTRAP SPREAD

Where these are placed can often be the jewel in the crown. I have sailed loads of boards and thought *"hmmm, this isn't feeling right,"* I can't get the rails in or I'm not holding speed. So I come in, change the strap positions and – *"whooohh, what a beauty!"*

While at first it might seem that the footstrap positioning is the most important thing – actually, the footstrap *spread* is the most important factor. And because we are not all blessed with the same leg length, it's something that you really need to tune to your own requirements.

When we talk about the footstrap spread, we are talking about the distance between the middle of the front strap to the middle of the back strap, taken down the longitudinal centreline of the board. And by and large, the spread on a wave board should be fairly wide – probably wider than you might have on your freeride board. Working through our team, Louise at 5'6" has her strap spread at 53cm, John at 5'10" likes 56cm, Chris and I at 6' like 57-59cm. Francisco did not give me his preferences but in a previous sneaky peak at one of his boards I measured 60cm. He once gave John a board to try out and being the polite chap he was, John took it out, gave it back and said very nice – he later told me that trying to sail it in the straps was like doing the splits!

So why is it good to have a wider stance? It gives you more control and allows easier jumping and the ability to control / steer the board in the air. To quote again from **Chris Audsley**:

"I prefer a wider stance on a wave board, so I can get more rail in the water when waveriding."

Find out what works for you through a bit of experimenting. When getting to grips with a new board I will usually start by setting my front footstrap in the front position, and then adjust the back footstrap to get my required spread – and go from there

FOOTSTRAP POSITIONING

Getting the spread right is the most important thing. Once you know your spread, you can tweak the board to be more front-foot-orientated when riding by moving the entire strap spread forward, and for back foot riding by moving the whole set back. If you're riding a freestyle-wave board which has inboard and outboard position options for the front straps, then you should definitely go for the inboard positions for wavesailing (and of course, a single rather than double rear strap).

The only other consideration with footstrap positioning is the possibility of an offset back strap. If you are regularly sailing waves on one tack and are looking to maximise down-the-line waveriding performance rather than jumping, you may choose to move the back strap closer to the leeward rail. This allows you to get the toes right across onto the opposite rail to really push down and commit that rail to the turn. I'd suggest that this is best avoided until you really know what you are doing and can really benefit from that extra bit of grip in the turn – if your back footstrap is set big enough you should be able to turn fine without having to offset the strap.

Francisco Goya cranking a front foot bottom turn

FOOTSTRAP SIZE

The pictures demonstrate the range of acceptable sizes, from tight to loose. In general, you should have your straps set pretty wide on a wave board, except in the most bouncy, choppy, overpowered conditions.

This is often a difficult one to get across to people, but believe me, it makes a big difference. Over to **Louise Emery**:

"A big strap lets your feet get over the centreline of the board so you can commit more rail to the bottom turns. For frontside riding, the back strap should be set super-big, so much so that the strap hits the top of the ankle."

And from **John Skye**:

"Having the straps too tight is one of the worst things to do when waveriding. If you can't get enough pressure on the leeward rail, riding is really difficult. You will bounce out a lot and it will be hard to really carve the board or snap it hard out of the bottom turn."

However, for backside riding and onshore conditions, it's right to set them a bit tighter to keep your feet in the straps, as your body movements are a bit more aggressive. It's also recommended in really bumpy, bouncy, choppy conditions – at Pozo, for example, everyone tightens up the straps a bit, simply to gain more control.

For jumping, bigger straps are good news too. This might seem wrong – surely, too big straps are no good for jumping as your feet will come out more easily, right? Actually no; bigger straps get the toes more over onto the leeward side which helps keep the windward rail up. If your feet are coming out of the straps you're probably doing something fundamentally wrong in your jumping anyway. (Sign up for a technique course now!) So basically, except in the most bumpy / onshore conditions, you should consider setting your straps a bit bigger.

FIN POSITION

Once upon a time, every board had a 'classic' finbox, allowing quite a range of adjustment of fin position. Nowadays, with most boards having Powerbox or Tuttle fins, the whole concept of adjusting fin position is something that many windsurfers don't even come across until they get their first wave board. And then it's usually a case of, er, ah well, stick the fin in the middle of the finbox, like with the mastfoot... OK?

No! Fin position has a major effect on a board's performance. The basic rule is – bringing it forward loosens the board up (but can make it more prone to spin-out), while moving the fin back gives more tracking, speed and control. And there's nothing wrong with going to the extremes. The board may work best with the fin right forward or right back in the finbox!

Unfortunately though, beyond these basic concepts, it will come down to trial and error. But it's worth experimenting with as even very small adjustments can make a big difference. John marks his finboxes and tweaks starting from what has worked on previous boards, while Chris finds having the leading edge centred under the back strap gives him a gauge and he tweaks from there. As for **Mr Goya**:

"Further forward in onshore wind to increase snappiness. For frontside a little further back for control and speed."

Chris Audley snapping a quick back foot bottom turn...

FIN SIZE

This is a whole article in itself, but the basic approach with regard to fin size is relatively straightforward:

Use a bigger fin for more power in lighter winds, onshore winds, or if you're needing to hold up to windward because of rips or currents. You might also choose to use a slightly bigger fin if you're using a bigger sail.

Use a smaller fin for maximum manoeuvrability, when it's really windy, there's no current / rips and you're not having any problems staying upwind.

SUMMARY

So, now that you have greater understanding of how these six variables will effect your board, you should be able to get your kit set up perfectly every time, right? Unfortunately, no, it's not quite as easy as that. It can take a while to find your perfect set-up, and as no two wavesailing days are ever the same, what works perfectly one time might still need tweaking if next time out it's a different wind strength or direction. However, the more you think about tweaking your kit and the more you experiment, the more you will get to know how your gear works, hence your tuning will become quicker, easier and more instinctive. The best suggestion from all involved here is to experiment and when you find what works, make a note (by marking it on the board, if necessary) so you can easily recreate it.

And remember, listen to what your board is telling you. Unless you're already a top PWA rider, then the chances are that your wavesailing technique isn't perfect. But don't assume that the mistakes are *all* coming from you. If you're always bouncing out of your bottom turns, or just can't keep speed up down the line, it may be your dodgy technique, but it might just as easily be incorrect kit set-up. You won't know until you try a little tweaking...

ENJOY.

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