



POLE Position

How the USA is claiming first place (and second, and third) on race courses all over the world. By Gabe Brown



Adam Koch at the Canadian Championships.

At the 2009 Kiteboarding World Championships of Racing in San Francisco, top racers' boards were kept in board bags. They were even transported that way to the water, only revealed to the few who could see it glide out to the starting line. After all, nobody wanted anyone to see what type of fin setup they were running or how

many foot straps. Now? That's changed. "Secret training and testing is so two years ago," says Adam Koch. The American guys train together every day. They run long courses, they run short courses that are full of maneuvers, and they run synchronized watches with rolling five-minute count-downs so they can do real starts. When they're finished with a training session, they

compare notes—whose fins worked best on what course, whose board worked best for what conditions. "There's no secrets with this team. I want to race Johnny [Heineken], not Johnny's board," says Adam. "When you've got six guys all testing different gear setups constantly, you can come to conclusions about what works best a lot faster than one person training in a bubble."

So how's that whole transparency thing working out for them? Pretty good. On July 3, 2011, just hours before the US celebrated its independence, three US sailors stood atop the podium at the 2011 World Championships of Kiteboard Course Racing in Sylt, Germany. Despite a full-time masseuse, a dedicated coach, and an organized team, the French only managed to crack one

PHOTOS: JIM HEGAN, (OPPOSITE) (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) ANDREA BASS, RICHARD HALLMAN, KOCH, HALLMAN



There's always plenty of stiff competition in the Bay Area.

racers into the top five. The top 10 consisted of six Americans and just three French racers.

The French are clearly an organized team dedicated to progressing in racing. The French have been on the podium in most of the World Championships prior to this, so why did the US walk away with a clean sweep and a show of kiteboard racing dominance that left the rest of the world scratching their heads?

There are a few answers to that question, but if you ask the top sailors the most common response is this: camaraderie. Kiteboard course racing was born in the US and the top three guys at the worlds train together almost daily. And add to those another five guys who can crack the top 15 on any given day who are out training in the Bay Area as well.

There's another ace these guys have up their sleeve: race course experience—even if it's not on a kite. "There are two types of racers: kiteboarders that go fast and sailors that know their way around a course," says World Champion Heineken. What does that mean? It means the top three in the world all come from highly successful sailboat racing backgrounds and they

#2 WORLD RANK



ADAM KOCH
Age: 33

Hometown: A van down by the river in Rio Vista, CA

Previous racing experience: I grew up racing Lasers, International 14s, Laser 2s, 420s, and 49ers against top sailors and Olympians.

Years kiting: 10+

Sponsors: Ozone, Mike's Lab, Rista Fins, DaKine, Sherman Lake Marina.

Race setup: Ozone Edge, Mike's lab 70 cm, Rista 42s v12, Team Fluid bar, and a DaKine NRG waist harness.

Key factors in winning races: The best simply means the most practiced. I break down the race into sections: start, upwind, downwind, and corners. You have to be flawless at everything to win. It also helps to race too much and sail too much as the Bay Area crew tends to do.

Best place to train: Wherever the best sailors are!

#1 WORLD RANK



JOHNNY HEINEKEN

Age: 23

Hometown: Larkspur, CA

Previous racing experience: I grew up racing high performance boats, mostly skiffs like 29ers and 49ers.

Years kiting: 4

Sponsors: Ozone, Mike's Lab, Tectonics Maui

Race setup: Ozone Edge, Mike's Lab 70 cm Race Board, 42 cm Tectonics Talons up front and 38 cm in the back. Team Fluid race bar and a goofy seat harness.

Key factors in winning races: My dad always said, "Get a good start, go the right way, and don't mess up!" But seriously, this just about sums it up. One little stumble can cost you a few places. You've also got to be aware of your position on the course, those around you, as well as puffs, lulls, and wind shifts.

Best place to train: San Francisco, hands down. Crissy Field has nasty chop and 25 knots, the East Bay has long grinds, or Sherman Island for short course training and maneuvers. But most importantly, I train with other people.

#3 WORLD RANK



BRYAN LAKE

Age: 28

Hometown: San Diego, CA

Previous racing experience: I've been racing dinghies since I was five years old. I've managed to collect some hardware along the way: three-time College All-American, three-time College National Champion.

Years kiting: 8

Sponsors: Cabrinha Kiteboarding, DaKine, TMINUS9, Dave Defnet, TAC Apparel Company, Hawaii Surf and Sail.

Race setup: Cabrinha Crossbow and Mike's Lab.

Key factors in winning races: Don't join the swim team! Sail fast and sail smart.

Best place to train: Anywhere there is wind. Mix it up and train for all conditions.

know what it takes to sail successfully on a course.

Mostly, though, it's about addiction and dedication. Hell, Koch lives in a van down by the river for the sole purpose of becoming the fastest and best racer he can be. About a year ago, he realized the fastest and best racers were in the San Francisco Bay Area, so he towed his trailer out to Sherman Island and has been training with the world's best every day since. Brian Lake has been poaching the couch in Adam's trailer for the past four or five months. Joey Pasquali has spent the last year living on his boat in the bay. Heineken lives five minutes to one hour from five excellent training locations and these guys train against each other every day. For these guys, racing is a religion. It's in their blood. These guys can't get enough of it. Progression is extremely addicting and when you progress as fast as this collaborative team does, it's hard to sleep at night as anticipation of going faster keeps them awake at night. Maybe that's why they drink so much beer. Are there better athletes? Definitely. Is it possible to be a top racer and freestyler? Probably not. Racing is an addiction that leaves little room for anything else. Heineken just graduated from the University of Santa Barbara with a degree in engineering. He's supposed to be looking for a job, but how can he when he's so hopelessly addicted to kite course racing? What can a junkie do to



Heineken foiling his fins in Squamish, BC.



Adam Koch maintaining form as he grinds upwind.



Former National Champion dinghy racer Bryan Lake.

PHOTOS: JIM HEGAN (3), (OPPOSITE) STEVE GUINN



Training, training, training—the winners are on the water even when there's no start line.

make it even harder to quit? Surround himself with other junkies. That's the Bay Area crew—in it to win it together.

The success of these Bay Area sailors has not gone unnoticed. Heineken, Koch, and Lake have gotten the attention of big boat sailors and their yacht clubs. Masters class World Champion and kiteboard course racing pioneer Chip Wasson points out that “the world of sailboat racing is changing.” As the focus (and money) moves from single hull design to double hull, guys who used to be considered the best in the world are now left without a boat or a team. Now consider that these world-class sailors can

buy into kite racing for a few thousand dollars and learn how to use the gear in less than a year. Watch out, kite world! Yacht clubs are noticing too. “While our kiteboarding sponsors have given us the most support they can, it's the St. Francis Yacht Club that sent us to Germany to compete in the Worlds this year,” says Wasson.

Koch agrees. “Sailboat racing is expensive. You're spending a couple million dollars on a boat and then thousands every time you need to get it to the other side of the world for a race. Kite course racing requires and provides the same sailing knowledge, skills, and rush, but our boats cost a couple thousand and fit in a bag we



The formula for success: train together, race together, drink together.

can put on a plane.” Whether they're joined by more sailors or not, there's no question these riders from the Bay Area will be a force to be reckoned with on the kiteboard racing scene. In the most recent test of racecourse speed at the Canadian National Championships in Squamish, the same three kites proved their success racing in Germany was not a fluke, as they again claimed all three spots on the podium. A wise person once said, “You are a combination of the five people you associate yourself with the most.” Is it any wonder the top-three racers in the world eat, drink, and race together every day? It certainly shouldn't be.



WILL THE IKA RUIN KITE RACING?

The future of gear will shape kite racing — but not as much as governance.

Course racing boards are constantly evolving (see our article on shaper Mike Zajicek on page 32), but enough has been figured out to allow the IKA (International Kiteboarding Association) to put restrictions on the size of the board (70 cm width), allowing everyone to race generally on an even playing field. Fins can vary quite a bit, but future development will probably focus on getting equal or slightly better performance while increasing the usability. Some of today's fin setups can make a board extremely difficult to ride. The 2012 IKA regulations require everyone to be in a production class, which means any board in competition has to belong to a run of at least 50 production boards.

Kites have a long way to go. Presently, there's not a lot of incentive for manufacturers to make kites that perform well for such a small niche. Rob Whitall, the designer for Ozone kites, deserves a lot of credit for designing what is probably the leading race kite on the market right now, the Ozone Edge. Sources say he has some pretty exciting designs coming out for his race team in the next few months. This is the next natural equipment progression that needs to happen. Team Fluid has designed a race bar that allows for 3:1 depower using a downhill system activated by the rider on the fly so the racer can pull in quite a bit of front line in anticipation of gusts. As a result they can keep their body attitude consistent throughout different wind conditions.

While gear advancements play a major role in the future of the discipline, industry and association decisions may play an even more important role. Kiteboard course racing began under the guidance of the St. Francis Yacht Club in 2005. The yacht club did something that no previous association was able to do; it brought systematic organization to the sport and its growth. It brought the first Kiteboarding Nationals event to the San Francisco Bay. It brought on ISAF sanctioning and the first Kiteboarding Worlds to the San Francisco Bay. The St. Francis Yacht Club paved the road for other yacht clubs around the country to start circuits of their own. They shared experiences

and knowledge and in some cases staff with other organizations interested in running their own regattas. San Francisco has served as the testing ground for all race gear advancements. It really is the center of racing, playing host to seven or eight of the world's top-15 racers.

For many of the kite racing's competitors, the IKA came out of nowhere, stating that there was a need for an association, a governing body if you will, to make sure that the sport would have direction. They recognized the opportunity (and need for organization) and capitalized. They got a few people with competition credentials and started making tour rules. Mostly trying to use windsurfing and sailing as a model, but in some cases making regulations that limit progress and sometimes threaten safety. Well, the IKA now holds all the cards and maybe more responsibility than they even know. The athletes that carried this discipline on their backs now have their future in the hands of a governing body that is not made up of one serious sailor. Course racing is a sailing sport, supported by yacht clubs. The top-three racers in the world are sailors. The reason the Olympic committee is considering kiteboarding for the Olympics is course racing. Race boards and kites provide the confidence that an event can run in just about any venue. Boardercross and Slalom Racing (which are being pitched as Olympic disciplines) cannot be run on the same gear as course racing. Simply put, they are not sailing disciplines. They certainly are not disciplines the ISAF would recognize.

So IKA, listen up. The top course racers in the world recognize your efforts. You're doing everything you can to push kiteboarding into the Olympics. That is understood. Please don't make the mistake of so many before you. Don't forget what got kite racing where it is today. The sailors so currently enthralled have no interest in grinding head-to-head with a competitor who doesn't know sailing rules, nor do they have any interest in jumping their 2,000-dollar race board over obstacles. These sailors will continue to push the sport forward. Listen to them. They know what they're talking about.

When the horn blows, kites with a sailboat racing background are generally at the front.



PHOTOS: ANDREW BASS (A BOY) / MIKE HEGAN (COURTESY)