

# Rising Above the Water

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.  
photo by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

## Equipment cost

Following are average prices:

**Water skis:** \$80 and up

**Knee boards:** \$120 to \$200

**Slalom ski:** \$250 to \$600

**Towrope and handle:** \$30 to \$100

**Gloves:** \$24 to \$50

Ralph Samuelson was the first person to water ski. In 1922, the Minnesota native used two large skis and was towed by an airplane equipped with floats. What he originated became

an exhibition sport on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1920s and 1930s, using outboard-motor boats instead of airplanes.

Now, millions enjoy the sport, which has evolved into knee board-



ing, slalom, jumping, ski-boarding, speed skiing, kite flying, show skiing and barefoot water-skiing.

Airmen don't necessarily need to buy a boat to have fun on a nearby lake. Like golf, it's made more affordable through the Air Force services programs like outdoor recreation or a marina. Instead of buying a boat, rent it.

## Ski boat rates

Expect to pay anywhere from \$30 to \$50 an hour for a ski boat. It may sound like a steep price, but if shared with another family or friends, it won't dent the wallet as much. It's also more affordable to rent a boat in half- or whole-day increments, rather than by the hour. You may find that with all the sun and exercise involved, a half day of water skiing is all the family can handle, at least during their first few outings.

Keep in mind that most of-fices require boat renters to attend training before they're allowed to take the boat out for a spin. These courses are usually offered for free and may only take an hour or two. Outdoor recreation or the marina is also a good place to rent life vests, skis and a towrope for a reasonable price.

Check the services office to see if it offers water skiing safety courses [See "Safety Tips," this page]. Like most fast-action sports, water skiing does offer its share of dangers.

## Common injuries

Knee and facial injuries are the most common among skiers. On average, it accounts for more than 23,000 injuries each year, with about 76 percent sustained by men, according to industry experts.

Craig Cohoon, owner of Water Ski School located just outside of Royal Air Force Fairford, England, said the average person can learn the sport and that it's very safe. In actuality, the injury rate is low compared to other sports, such as snow skiing — characterized by 10 times the injury rate.

Mr. Cohoon has taught many Airmen to ski during his 23 years in

## Safety tips

Water skiing and knee boarding are exciting summer sports, but like all sports, danger intertwines with fun.

- For starters, five to six feet of water is needed for safe skiing. This keeps the skis from dragging bottom during starts, and it allows for a margin of safety against hitting bottom or submerged obstacles during a fall.
- Likewise, avoid skiing when the water is rough from high winds. Choppy water demands a greater skill level and causes the skier to fatigue more quickly, often because the boat can't maintain a constant speed. Also, don't ski in the rain. It reduces visibility.
- When skiing in cooler weather, beware of hypothermia. A loss of body heat leads to reduced coordination and judgment. Also, it's smart to wear waterproof suntan lotion.
- Always wear a Coast Guard-approved life vest. Ski belts aren't recommended. A proper fitting vest should be short to make it easier to bend at the waist. The top of the jacket shouldn't go above the ears when the arms are raised straight above the head. Women should buy vests especially made for females.
- Always have an observer on the boat. This is a legal requirement for many states. The boat driver can't watch the skier and operate the boat at the same time.
- If you plan on bringing children, those ages 3 and under should wear a vest containing head and neck support, as well as a strap that goes under the crotch, which prevents them from sliding out the bottom of the vest.
- It's important for skiers to have a smooth acceleration out of the water. The boat operator should ease the throttle at first with a slight increase in speed. It's a gradual speed that eventually puts the boat on a plane, as well as the skier. Then, the boat captain should maintain a reasonable, safe speed at all times and keep an alert eye for other boats. When skiers fall, retrieve them quickly but safely. Other boaters may not easily see a skier in the water, and the presence of the ski boat may keep others away.
- Since a majority of accidents occur during skier pickup, boat operators should approach with caution from the driver's side so the skier is always in view. A boat should never backup to a person in the water. Also, the engine should be shut off when a skier is near the boat. Even in neutral, the propeller may still turn and injure a skier.
- The boat operator, observer and skier should all know proper water skiing hand signals. For instance, a thumb's up sign means to go faster, not that everything is OK.
- Alcohol plays a significant role in serious boating accidents and fatalities. It's unlawful to water ski or operate a boat under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Also, it's not only unwise to ski after dark, it's illegal.

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the business, and he said the hardest thing to teach is technique.

"Women are easier to teach than men because men tend to struggle against the boat," he said. "If you're a beginner, you've got to learn to just go with it."

But don't let a few bumps and scrapes get in the way of good fam-

ily fun. After a little training, family and friends will be skimming across the top of the water like Ralph Samuelson more than 80 years ago, except hopefully, it'll be behind a boat and not an airplane. ☺