

Waveskiers roll with the punches

A once-mocked craft is back in the water, writes

JEREMY STEVENS

Once shunned as the ugly ducklings of the ocean, waveskis are making a comeback. Derisively nicknamed goat-boats by other surfers, in recent years waveski enthusiasts have been as easy to spot in water as mermaids.

But away from the spotlight, the number of waveski fans has started to grow again. This week they even have their own competition — the Australian Waveski Surfing Titles held at Emerald Beach, Coffs Harbour. Tomorrow's finals will showcase world-class, aerial ski surfing far removed from the weekend-warrior stereotypes often associated with this oft-maligned sport.

Organisers feel it's a perfect chance for the public to discover the sport's broad appeal and to confirm just how far local riders have taken it.

"Unfortunately there are waveski riders not following surf rules, tarnishing the rest of us," says Reese Duncan, 34, six times Australian Champion and twice World Champion.

"All board riders see are the guys who go straight down the line, dropping in on surfers, but when they see the top guys it blows them away."

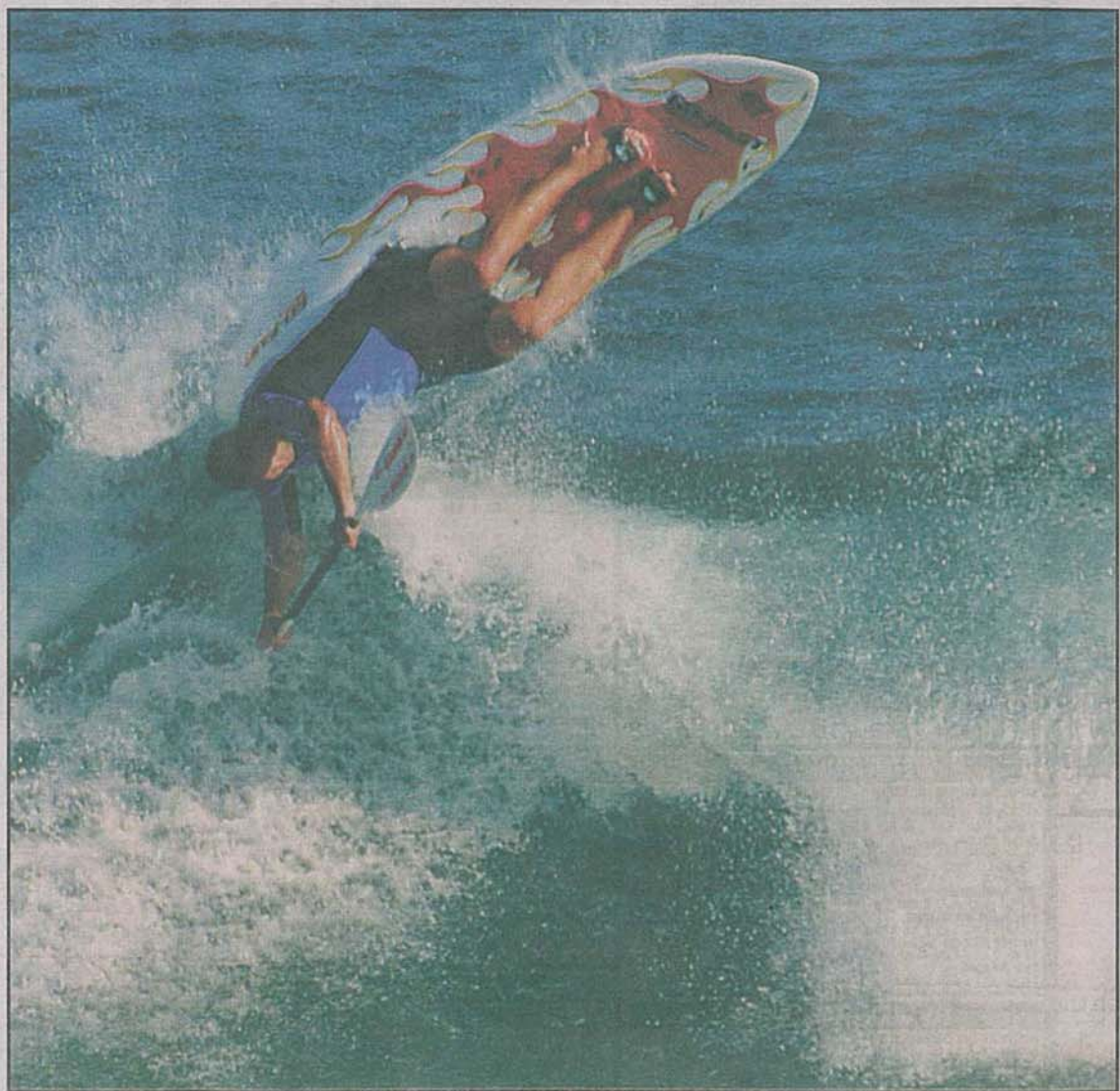
Waveskis are ridden seated, the rider secured with foot straps and a seatbelt. Typically around 2.25m long, they are mostly constructed out of polystyrene foam and epoxy fibreglass. A paddle is used to catch waves and help through turns.

With entry-level skis and paddles costing about \$500, getting wet shouldn't be too hard; a swimsuit, towel and a sense of fun should get you through the rest.

Australians led the way in the 1990s with the focus on aerial manoeuvres (mirroring the shift in stand-up surfing).

And most surfers agree riding a waveski well is difficult and avoiding disaster in crowded surf a constant worry.

"It's more physical than



Goat-boaters no more... the new breed of waveski aficionados are flying.

Picture: MELISSA HARDY

stand-up surfing... you take a bigger pounding too," Duncan jokes. "You can't bail out if you get stuck in a hollow section. You have to ride till the death and hope it's not the end of you."

Foreign riders are increasingly threatening Australia's dominance, though. Says Duncan: "France, South Africa and Brazil are probably stronger in numbers and have a strong background in paddling kayaks. But they have professional teams who go to schools to learn paddling and they're paid surfers."

"We don't have anything like that. There's no pro tour and no

real prize money but we probably have the better riders."

Growing numbers of female riders have emerged in local ranks and many now compete in the Open divisions with the boys. Melissa Hardy, 36, has been Australian Champion for the past two years and is the current president of Waveski Surfing Australia.

Quite staggering when you consider she has only been paddling for five years.

"I thought it would be easy but, you know... famous last words. You have to be quite strong to roll and enjoy it but the beauty of it is that anyone

can do it. It just depends on the size of the surf. You can build yourself up as you go," she says. "At last year's Australian titles, I ended up in the top 20 with the guys. So there's always a challenge there as well."

Duncan says the longboard's reborn popularity took many away from skis. "There seems to be a bit of a resurgence now. Definitely on the world scene it's getting stronger," he says.

"We have a good-quality field this year. There's a current world champ and three former world champions. You will see the best Australia has to offer."

More: waveskisurfingaustr.com