

# Zenon Bilas Puts His Best (Bare) Foot Forward

**A national** barefoot water ski champion in the 80s and 90s, Zenon Bilas is now in his early 50s and has returned to the sport and competition he loves. He recently shared his comeback story with *Southern Boating*.

**Q: What has been most difficult about re-entering the sport of barefoot water skiing?**

**A:** Getting back into shape. I never stopped water skiing and barefooting, but in 2006 I was out of shape and weighed 200 pounds. I could still do basic tricks but the more difficult ones were harder than they used to be. My strength, confidence and timing were not there. But as a water ski coach, I knew to go for small but continuous steps to improve. Now I weigh 152-155 pounds, I'm in the best shape of my life and ski as well as I did 20 years ago.

**Q: What are the most significant changes in the sport?**

**A:** I first competed in the 80s and 90s and returned to barefoot competition in 2012 at age 50. In the 80s we competed with the towline attached to the standard ski pylon. In the late 90s, however, barefooters began utilizing the new wakeboard tower to get a higher pull, which allowed more difficult tricks. Towline material has advanced giving barefooters a low or no stretch line. Reduced stretch makes barefoot tricks easier, but I needed to adapt to the new innovations.

**Q: Which boats and equipment do you find most conducive to your needs for teaching, practicing or competing?**

**A:** The tow sport discipline I do or coach determines the boat I prefer. The boat's wake is the primary factor to consider. For barefooting, I train with a Sanger DX II.



ZENON BILAS PHOTO

The wake table is flat and turbulence is minimal, ideal for barefoot starts, tricks and crossing the wake.

When I coach slalom skiers or do my own trick ski training, direct drive ski boats like Malibu, Nautique and MasterCraft provide plenty of power, tracking and a low wake for slalom skiers. At slower speeds like 18.3 (my trick speed) these

ski boats create a smooth upward sloping wake and a flat center of the wake, which gives the trick skier more airtime and better lift.

When I coach wakeboarding, the tow boat of choice is a 20- to 23-foot V-drive inboard like Moomba, Centurion, Tige, Malibu, Nautique, and MasterCraft, which provide big wakes for big air tricks.

**Q: Do you have an exercise program or personal trainer that you use?**

**A:** Everyone is surprised that water skiing is my sole fitness routine. I'm based in Florida so I can train all year on the water, and the on water training gives me a complete body work out from feet to head. No muscle is neglected and the training also provides a great cardio. Before each on-water session, I stretch and do balance exercises. People that don't have year-round access to on-water training should complement with cardio and strength training throughout the year. Your choice depends on personal preference and current physical condition.

**Q: Tell us about your diet.**

**A:** Experience has taught me that everything starts with nutrition; everything you eat and drink counts. I began by replacing sugary drinks with plain water and green tea. Now I'm happy with just water. I kept tweaking my diet, eliminated bread, pizza and fried food. Now nothing that I eat comes in a box. It's fresh fruits (blueberries are a favorite) and vegetables along with protein from lean meat and unsalted nuts.

**Q: How many students do you have and what are the age restrictions?**

**A:** I've coached water skiers for 30 years with students from the West Palm Beach, Florida area, including visiting students from all six continents, and have also traveled to China, Brazil and western Europe to coach. Currently my youngest student is 9 and most mature is 77. I love coaching a wide range of ages and abilities and seeing people reach their potential. 🐟

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