

Water sports reborn

Change is upon us and fad has once again come full circle. Water sports are back and back in a big way. Wake boats and water sports are emerging as the fastest growing boating demographic in this slow economy.

When I was a little guy in San Diego my family belonged to the MBBandSC (Mission Bay Boat and Ski Club) we skied almost every weekend and my sister had the honor of topping the pyramid of skiers at the Sunday show on Mission Bay. About that same time Cypress Gardens was in full swing and water skiing was all the rage.

Then, like Disco, the ski craze dwindled and died.

Circles are round, and around we have come. Water skiing (of sorts) is back and so is a little disco. If you flip through the radio dial you can once again hear some classic dance hits from the same era.

When I first came to Marco 20 odd years ago there were two actual ski boats on the island and I never saw either one of them leave the dock. Now there are dozens. Up until a few years ago Keywadin on a weekend would host a few tubes or skiers but not many and always being pulled by the family runabout or center console fishing boat. Not now. Now the ski boats have returned and now they are called wake boats. These boats are big dollar high tech craft that, unlike their earlier now rotten predecessors are designed for salt-water use. They feature high horsepower V-8 V-drive power plants and water ballast systems with overhead racks fitted with speakers, lights and board racks. A trip to Keywadin any weekday will find at least 4 maybe 8 or 10 of these pretty boats loaded with young people doing cool tricks on wakeboards and wake skates on the artificial surf these boats provide. Along with the wake boats you will find the return of the family boat and fishing boat pulling boarders, skiers, knee boards and tubes of all descriptions. A trip to the local boat store will find shelves once devoid of water toys now bristling with the same. Bass Pro has a whole new section devoted to wakeboarding that wasn't there when the store opened. All this leads to congestion upon the few areas of water left that are suitable for sporting and haven't been bequeathed to the manatee and its' opportunistic supporters.

One respite from the crowds is an idea that is fast gaining traction is called a "cable park". Think of a snow ski chair lift placed in a circle around a small lake. Only instead of chairs the lift is fitted with towrope handles. For a few dollars you can ski all day on endless butter or trip sic tricks on kickers, ramps and sliders. My oldest son started skiing last year at age 7 and this year at 8 I bought him a wakeboard. The little guy was having so much fun I had to try for myself. (Aflac!) So now we both are riding and mom is skiing, aunt Nina is skiing, little brother and cousin Madison are knee boarding and little sis is in the tube. Outdoor play together fun for the whole family is back and it doesn't take batteries or an Internet connection. I have met some great people in this middle age re-immersion to water sports. To note a few are the two Kenny's at Gulf Shores Marina (774-5428) Purveyors of Master Craft Boats, CWB and Gator boards and all things wake and water. This is the closest store to Marco Island where you will find nice people with quality product, knowledge and patience for pros and beginners alike. Great deals on the best gear and outstanding customer service can be found there 6 days a week. Good service begs mention Revolution Cable Park in Fort Myers. I showed up last Saturday with two kids of 8 years old and my own beginner's issues and ageing body in tow. The

staff there was beyond accommodating. There was zero intimidation from the younger crowd, only support and patience. The three young men on staff that day took great pains to make sure all had a fun and safe experience. The kids never had any fear and left excited at the prospect of a return trip. This is a fantastic track for learning and just getting time on any kind of ski or board. Revolution is open Wed-Sun afternoons (239-656-3000) The friendly and professional staff made all the difference.

Lets go back to Keywadin on the weekends. The place is getting crowded and there is a real mix of water sports going on. It is imperative that we all do the utmost to be safe and courteous or the powers in charge will pull the rights to these last remaining areas and we will all find ourselves pulling riders 9 miles off shore in Federal waters. With that in mind here are a few hints; wait your turn. If the place is packed wait 20 minutes or so and space will open up. Never ever never ever NEVER! Follow directly in the wake of another towboat. I hope the gentleman driving the Century pulling a tube last Sunday is reading this. You have several people on board let them watch the rider. The driver must drive. Period. If you as an operator are pulling two riders and one goes down please just cut the throttles and start over with both. Don't let the one fallen rider drift half way to Hideaway while you are pulling the remaining rider. That's it have fun and take time to think. Dust off the old Scat Skate and well see you on the water.