



Photograph by Lynn Novakofski

Modest O'Connor Proud Winner Of Gilkerson Award

As the sun stretches over a smooth glass waterfront in Madison Wis., Paul O'Connor can't help but reflect on the way his life has been going lately. Three national titles with the Mad City Ski Team? Check. Recipient of the 2007 Skip Gilkerson Award? Check. A wife who shares his passion for show skiing? Check. "Show skiing is a sport of total dedication," says O'Connor, whose Mad City Ski Team recently won its third national title in the past four years at the 33rd Malibu Division 1 Show Ski National Championships in Loves Park, Ill. "Progressing through the sport takes years of practice, patience and of course, a good boat driver."

Those three things combined with his fellow Mad City Ski Team skiers, have equaled a pretty tasty recipe for success. O'Connor's step-out performance at the Show Nationals earned him the 2007 Skip Gilkerson Award, given to the top male performer. "Winning the Skip Gilkerson Award fulfilled a long-time goal for me," he says. "Knowing my name will be up there with those amazing skiers and getting to go up there and shake "the man's" hand is something I'll never forget."

A modest O'Connor credits his performance to the strength of his team. "I owe it to all my teammates – the skiers, drivers, announcers and everyone involved," he says. "They believed in me and gave me confidence on the water and in what I plan to do in the future."

Water skiing since his early teens, O'Connor was enticed to try the sport after witnessing some impressive jumps. "When I was 14, I started skiing with Spray Masters, a local ski team in southeastern Michigan," he says. "From the first time I stepped onto the ski site and saw two guys going off that jump, I knew that I found my sport."

O'Connor skied with Spray Masters for five years and his love for skiing began to grow passionately, giving his aspirations for his future in the sport a sturdy jump start. "I like to push the boundaries," he says. "I think we need to keep progressing, take it to the next level and keep it creative." Progress means maintaining that competitive energy among the team, something that is all too familiar to O'Connor. "I'm a competitor by nature," he admits. "Everyday of my life I compete in one way or another. Show skiing is just the way of competing I like best."

Show skiing has long been known as a community within itself. It isn't unusual to hear your competitors rooting for you from the shoreline. "This is a rare sport because the loudest cheers

usually come from competing teams," O'Connor says. He explains that everyone on or off the water is there for each other. There is a certain pride among teammates, and winning means so much more when that bond is shared.

Sometimes that bond reaches off the water, too. In August 2006, Paul married fellow Mad City Ski Team member JoAnna (Joey) Gabrielson, whom he met while water skiing professionally in Germany. This fearsome pair are not only highly committed to each other, but to their show skiing family as well. "We talk about how lucky we are that we both love show skiing and being on the team together, because so much time is committed to it," he says. "We look forward to having kids one day on the team, too."

It is refreshing to hear O'Connor speak so passionately about show skiing, a sport in which he jokingly

WWSF Think Tank Set For Feb. 29-March 2

The Wisconsin Water Ski Federation's 32nd annual Think Tank, the world's largest indoor water ski convention and exposition, will take place Feb. 29-March 2 at Chula Vista, a premier resort and indoor water park, in Wisconsin Dells, Wis. Think Tank is the water sports industry's leading educational experience, providing training and clinics for nearly all USA Water Ski sport disciplines. The latest in water sports equipment, boats and swimwear also are on display.

Kneeboard and wakeboarding tanks have been added to the program this year. In addition, the annual MasterCraft Indoor Adagio Doubles Competition will take place along with the wakeboarding (trampoline) contest.

Registration is available online at waterski.org or can be obtained by e-mailing Cathy Luiting at wedodbls@jvl.net.

Registered Think Tank attendees can enjoy their stay at Chula Vista for a special rate of \$129 per night, which includes a pass to the water park. Call 1-800-388-4782 or visit chulavistaresort.com to make hotel reservations. Chula Vista features many on-site recreational activities, including an indoor water park as well as a spa for stress-relieving massage therapy and body treatments. Chula Vista also offers fine dining, casual eateries and other entertainment experiences. In addition to the on-site events, Wisconsin Dells offers a broad range of activities.

— Scott N. Atkinson

says offers challenges like "either waiting around in the emergency room or dancing." It's clear that with such dedication, O'Connor won't be leaving the water anytime soon. "Show skiing has been a big part of my life for a long time," he says. "I truly love this sport that has brought me friends, experiences, taught me drive and perseverance, and has shown me my own strengths and weaknesses. It has given me more wonderful memories out on the water than anyone could ever ask for. But most importantly, it led me to my beautiful wife Joey, which is why I will forever be grateful to this sport."

— Marissa Foglia

GO FIGURE

194 difference (in feet) from the Open Men national jumping record (49 feet) approved for Charles R. Sligh Jr. in 1947 and the one (243 feet) approved for Freddy Krueger in 2007