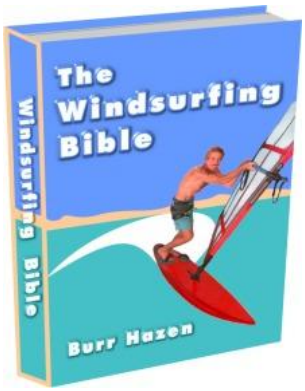

Stampeding Fish

People have been seriously injured—and worse—while windsurfing!

Now that I have your attention, let me also add that people have been injured while walking, running, riding, and, amazingly, rigging. Don't be paranoid about windsurfing—just be smart!

I don't mean physics smart, philosophy smart, or Phi Beta Kappa smart; I mean common sense smart. There's a very big difference. Aren't some of the smartest people you know, also some of the dumbest?

However, people don't have to be smart to be dumb. They can be, well, you and me—that is, when we aren't thinking straight: when we're excited, tired, or cold. When in one these conditions, we place ourselves into a category that's called *Most People*.

Most People get in trouble when they contract a case of *The Dumbs*. This affliction has two symptoms. The first is adrenaline rising to a hazardous high, which causes common sense to drop to a dangerous low. The second is fatigue setting in, which causes physical coordination to set out. Like skiing mishaps, windsurfing incidents usually occur on the first run of the day when adrenaline is high, or on the last run of the day when fatigue is high. Brand that on your brain!

Let's deal with our windsurfing highs and lows by grouping them in two categories: *Stampeding fish on shore* and *Stampeding fish off shore*. Don't sluff off the shore portion because many windsurfing mishaps occur when people are just milling around. And, a few precautions taken on the land prevent trouble on the water.

Also, if some of the following seems ridiculously obvious, be aware that there are many people out there with a permanent case of The Dumbs.

Stampeding fish on shore

Before leaving home, SECURE YOUR EQUIPMENT ON TOP OF YOUR CAR. No matter who strapped on the gear, it is ultimately the driver's responsibility to ensure that it's tight. Besides, it increases the insurance premium of the driver, not the passenger, if a sailboard flies off his car and crashes through the windshield of the car behind.

DON'T USE BUNGEE CORDS: if you stop suddenly, they won't prevent a mast spearing through the rear window of the car ahead (another insurance increaser). And CHECK THAT YOUR ROOF-RACK IS ATTACHED TO YOUR VEHICLE as tightly as your equipment is to your rack. Visualize the consequences if it isn't.

When you arrive, DON'T UNSTRAP YOUR GEAR UNTIL YOU'RE READY TO RIG IT. In other words, don't leave your equipment unsecured on top of your car. A gust might toss it into the air and onto someone else's car or someone else's head.

Before rigging, CHECK WIND DIRECTION. If the wind is offshore, and you are determined to sail even though your skills aren't that great, let your life *leisurely* pass before your eyes on shore, before it *quickly* passes before your eyes off shore. Said another way, DO NOT SAIL IN OFFSHORE WIND, that is, unless you also check your life insurance policy because you are, of course, going out on a date with death.

What's the wind strength and CAN YOU HANDLE THE CONDITIONS? Sure, the only way to learn how to handle high-wind is to sail in it, and besides, you're excited and you *need* to sail. But are the conditions *too* different from what you're used to? Let common sense prevail.

TALK WITH PEOPLE. What are they rigging; what are they wearing? What should you rig; what should you wear? If you're unfamiliar with the sailing area, what are the hazards: submerged obstacles, currents, oyster shells . . . ? ARE THERE PEOPLE TO TALK WITH? If there aren't, understand that you will be sailing alone. Is this smart? Common sense, common sense.

Assuming your common sense says sail, then CHECK YOUR EQUIPMENT. First, your lines: downhaul, outhaul, and harness-lines. It's easier to change a frayed line on

shore, than to jury-rig something off shore. And don't forget the inhaul (the little line hidden inside the boomhead); imagine how graceful you'll appear to all the windsurfer-gawkers on shore as you limp home holding onto a boom that's not attached to your mast. Nevertheless, it's still smart to stuff some extra line(s) inside the mast or into the pocket of your harness. Having checked *your* lines, you won't need it, but you might be able to assist someone with a case of The Dumbs who didn't.

EXAMINE YOUR BOARD AND RIG. The part that receives the most wear is the universal joint. If made of rubber, it eventually will split at the thinnest part or the metal studs on either end will separate. If the u-joint is mechanical, which lasts longer than the rubber type, check that it's intact. Another weak part of the rig is the mast at the point where the boom attaches. Before rigging, look for cracks, which indicate the mast should be reinforced with fiberglass or replaced. And slide your feet into all the footstraps to ensure they aren't too large. Finally, give the rest of your gear a general perusal.

Once it's rigged, and if the wind is strong, SECURE THE RIG AND BOARD. A flying rig can knock someone unconscious (I've been). A flying board can kill someone (I've nearly been). Loop the uphaul around a sturdy object—a boulder, tree trunk, or car bumper for instance—to prevent the rig taking off like a kite. And point the bow into the wind; otherwise the board might cartwheel downwind like a log rolling down hill, mashing everything—possibly including you—in its path.

Having checked the condition of your equipment, WHAT CONDITION ARE YOU IN? Said another way, are you physically fit for the sailing conditions? If you are, you're less susceptible to injury, and more susceptible to fun, than if you aren't. Also, do some stretching exercises before sailing; if you don't, you might pull something else besides your downhaul.

Of the thousands of times I've windsurfed, only once was I barefoot. The resulting seven stitches convinced me of the utter stupidity of not protecting our feet. Realize that every body of water conceals junk that is sharper than a punji stake. Please, WEAR SOMETHING HARD-SOLED AND THICK. Thin rubber booties are good for traction, but provide as much puncture protection as a sock. (So, why aren't I wearing booties in the book? Artist's prerogative.)

Scuba divers wear wetsuits because of the water temperature; windsurfers wear WETSUITS primarily because of the air temperature. And they aren't just for your comfort; they're also for your safety. That is, they help maintain your body temperature at its normal level, which brings us to HYPOTHERMIA: a dangerous lowering of body temperature. The symptoms are intense shivering, chattering teeth, loss of coordination, and a dulling (dumbing) of mental capabilities. In other words, the hypothermic person does not realize he's in trouble—which is another reason not to sail alone or in offshore wind. If you see someone exhibiting these signs, get him out of the water, out of his wetsuit or wet clothes, warm—not hot—and dry fast. If the person remains in the water, he likely will drown before he dies of hypothermia.

So, when contemplating what to wear, follow the philosophy that you would rather be hot than cold; hypothermia occurs in windsurfing, heat stroke does not.

Another cause of drowning is being knocked unconscious by the mast during a fall. If you're someone who falls, and we all do, consider a HELMET.

Now the PFD question. There are two schools of thought about the PERSONAL FLOTATION DEVICE: one says you can swim faster without one; the other says you can tread water longer with one. I'm not a member of either school, so the decision is yours. In making your decision, consider the following two situations.

After a fall, the rig, instead of landing in the water, lands on the back of the board. Because the sail cannot act as a sea anchor, the board rapidly sails away on its own, which means YOU MUST INSTANTLY SWIM AFTER IT. If you can't catch it because you're a weak swimmer, you are in trouble. If you can't catch it because the PFD slowed your swimming, you are not in as much trouble.

The other situation arises because you neglected to use the SAFETY LEASH: the little, bitty bungee cord that connects the board and rig. If the mast-base pops out of the mast-track during a fall, the board quickly drifts downwind, placing you in another swimming situation.

So, evaluate the strength of your swimming and decide your answer to the PFD question accordingly. However, don't wear a PFD because you think it will keep your head above water if you're knocked unconscious. It won't, unless it has a large collar like the ones that Coast Guardsmen wear.

Timeout! Having windsurfed and been a windsurfing teacher for two decades, I've pretty much seen it all. But something that continually astounds me is encountering people who decide to learn to windsurf before they learn to swim. Is this an example of the most severe case of The Dumbs?

No! The most severely afflicted are those who already can windsurf and can't swim! (I am not kidding.) I always wonder how they have survived life for so long and when their brains became as mushy as mashed potatoes.

CARRY YOUR EQUIPMENT FROM THE SHORE INTO THE WATER SEPARATELY AND SAFELY. So, don't attach your rig to the board and then suavely try to carry it all on top of your head. You probably will lose control and look like an idiot, not to mention injure someone (maybe you). Connect the rig to the board only in, or at the edge of, the water.

Before leaving shore, let me leave you with this final thought. Even if it's hazy, slather on the SUN BLOCK. You might temporarily appear more attractive with a great tan, but you also might permanently appear less attractive with a great melanoma on your nose. And, wear a hat if you're bald—actually, wear a hat even if you're not bald.

Well, I'm not very organized today because here's another final thought before leaving shore—or in this case before leaving the hotel. Safety considerations particularly apply on a WINDSURFING VACATION.

Talk with the person in charge; is there a person in charge? Are there currents, reefs, or anything else to beware of? Are the fish hungry? (Remember two things: the answer to the last question is always yes, and, once you enter the water, you also enter the food chain.)

Who runs the rescue boat—find out specifically by name and, more important, by face. Is he there; will he be there; is he awake; is he sober? Does the engine work; is there an engine?

Thoroughly check your rental equipment: u-joint, lines, and footstraps. The maintenance person might be permanently on island time or be smoking something he shouldn't.

While we're on vacations, have you ever seen a fish stampede? (If you haven't, come to Bonaire and I'll show you one. Or, for a truly novel vacation experience, come to Bonaire and sail in the midst of one.) Watching a stampede is like watching a new group of windsurfers, usually a school of male members of our species, on their first day of vacation. They survey the wind, the water, and the whitecaps—plus the sails all rigged and ready—and instantly become animalistic. They dart about, usually sounding like the flock of flamingos that nightly mates outside my window, and dash out, usually downwind, to immediately abuse their bodies and my equipment.

So, if you find yourself stampeding like a fish, or squawking like a mating flamingo, then remember one reason why you're on vacation: to relax.

Stampeding fish off shore

First, understand the three basic RIGHT-OF-WAY RULES.

1. Port avoids starboard.
2. Windward avoids leeward.
3. Overtaking avoids overtaken.

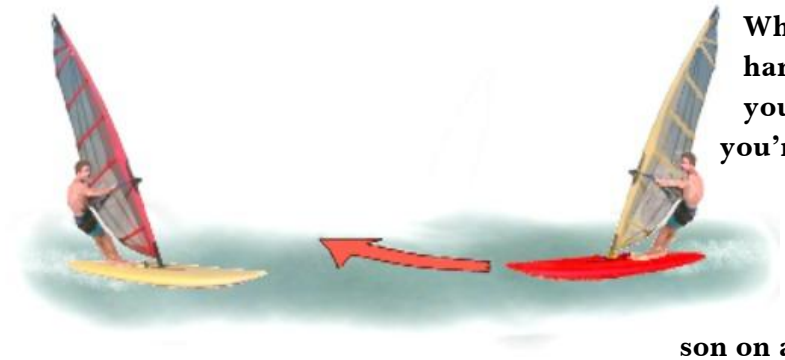

Figure 16.1

When your right hand is your front hand, you're on a starboard tack. When your left hand is your front hand, you're on a port tack. If two boards are on a collision course, the sailor on a starboard tack (right front hand) has the right-of-way over someone on a port tack (left front hand). The person on a starboard tack should yell "starboard" and the other sailor must steer clear.

Figure 16.2

When two boards sail in the same general direction, the windward board must keep clear of the leeward board. The downwind sailor should yell "leeward" and the other person must turn away.

Figure 16.3

When two boards sail in the same general direction and one is overtaking the other, the overtaking board must avoid the slower one.

Something to understand about right-of-way rules is that you do not *take* the right-of-way—you GIVE THE RIGHT-OF-WAY. In other words, be courteous. That may sound archaic in our modern age, but it's important in sailing, not to mention life. Don't aggressively sail *at* someone while yelling "starboard" and expect him to understand what you're yelling about. Just like you don't always trust another driver's turn signal, don't trust another sailor's understanding of the right-of-way rules or assume that he's sufficiently skilled to maneuver out of your way. What all this means is do everything

possible to avoid crashing into other sailors (look before you gybe), stalled boards with their rigs in the water, and swimmers. However, COMMERCIAL VESSELS *do* have right-of-way over windsurfers, as do BOATS confined to a channel. They don't give the right-of-way; they take it.

Besides the above rules, heed the following. Some JET SKIERS believe they have right-of-way over the entire planet and exercise that right belligerently; watch out for them. (Particularly watch out for a group of them, which is like encountering a swarm of bumblebees, but louder and less pleasant.) And always be wary of POWER BOATS—the drivers of some have the manners, subtlety, and intelligence of a sledge hammer. (Particularly be wary on a late Sunday afternoon, when the cumulative effects of the sun, the heat, and the cold contents of the cans they've consumed further erodes their manners, subtlety, and intelligence.)

Even though you intelligently checked your gear on shore, you might have EQUIPMENT FAILURE on the water. During a fall, the sail could shred, the boom break—as happened to me this afternoon—or the mast shatter. Then what?

Figure 16.4

If you're relatively close to shore, lay the rig on the back of the board and paddle. Or, if the wind is onshore, just sit on the board and drift. But . .

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Figure 16.5

. . . if there is a considerable distance to paddle, then you must derig. Disconnect the boom and roll the sail around the mast. Wrap the uphaul and outhaul around the sail and mast, lay the rig on the board, and paddle. This is called the SELF-RESCUE TECHNIQUE.

Derigging to self-rescue is easier to read about in a book than to perform on the water, especially if the wind is strong, there's chop, and you're on a short-board. So, because you weren't stupidly sailing alone, signal for help.

Figure 16.6

Sit on the board and repeatedly cross and uncross your arms above your head: this is the INTERNATIONAL DISTRESS SIGNAL.

Someone will sail over to help you derig and, if she's a good sailor, tow you to shore using the extra line you always carry.

But, if you were stupidly sailing alone in offshore wind, you must decide whether to ABANDON THE RIG. If the shore is close and you are *absolutely, positively, certain* of your ability to paddle to safety, disconnect the rig and ditch it. However, if you're tired and land is just too far away, then KEEP THE RIG ATTACHED to act as a sea anchor, and to provide stability to the board and visibility for the Coast Guard helicopter you hope someone calls.

Above all else, REMAIN WITH YOUR BOARD: it's your life raft. Under no circumstances should you forsake that life raft and attempt to swim.

Timeout! During my early years, I had a persistent case of The Dumbs. Memorable moments involving airplanes, helicopters, and fire trucks . . . mountains, swamps, and jungles . . . today still give me nightmares, not to mention a limp and a life with pain.

So, attention you of early years: you're not immortal—in fact, you are more fragile than you think, which you'll realize in a few more years, or after a close encounter with your body's frailty or your life's mortality.

Watch the horizon for WEATHER CHANGES. A cold front will radically increase the wind strength, which means your sail is suddenly a square meter, or two, or three too big. Or, the wind might change direction so the previous onshore conditions become offshore.

Speaking of weather, a LIGHTNING STRIKE is nature's way of curing a case of The Dumbs. If there are thunder clouds around, let alone if you see lightning, GET OFF THE WATER. Understand two things. First, lightning can strike 10 miles (16 km) away from a storm, which is how the phrase "a bolt from the blue" originated. Second, lightning aims for the highest point around, which, if you're sailing, is your mast-tip, or, if you're just standing on the board with the rig in the water, is your head.

According to the National Weather Service, if you are caught in a thunder storm, LIE FLAT ON THE BOARD WITH YOUR HEAD TURNED SIDEWAYS SO YOUR EAR TOUCHES THE DECK. If you raise your head to see what's happening, guess what's the highest point around.

Let me end with a story. I once participated in a series of unusual training courses that lasted half a year and were rather intense. During this training, instructors would frequently call out "Stay Alert," and we students were required to dutifully yell back "Stay Alive." We, being young and dumb, performed this ritual lackadaisically, until several people died because they weren't alert. Even though windsurfing is not *that* intense, please remember that you can avoid all but the most bizarre accidents when you "STAY ALERT–STAY ALIVE." That phrase has always stuck with me, as I hope it always will with you.

Oh! One last thought: be careful with whom you sail because The Dumbs is contagious.