

WATER WORKS

Lessons in water-skiing produce more than just balance

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

The first time I attempted to water ski I was 13 years old. I plunged into Grand Traverse Bay after watching my father's friend's 17-year-old son—upon whom I had a huge crush—skip gracefully across the waves. “It’s easy,” Dad said, tossing me the towrope while he sat dry in the speedboat. “Just stand up as the boat gets going.” It looked fun, and, as a strong swimmer, I wasn’t afraid of the water. I most hoped to impress Scott, whose job it would be to watch me while our fathers drove and alert them if I fell; I imagined that if I was able to hold his gaze long enough, I could make him fall in love with me.

As with most romantic fantasies, that isn’t exactly what happened. I lacked the coordination required to transition from squatting in the water to sliding across it as the boat gained speed. Each time the boat leapt into gear, I slammed face first into the water. The men circled back, providing verbal instructions in an increasingly annoyed tone, and eventually Scott wondered when it would be his turn again. “You can do it now,” I said, hoping to win some affection by forgoing my lesson for him. As I swam toward the boat, weak with exhaustion and embarrassment, I felt myself pulled toward the motor propeller by its current. I consider it one of the great miracles of my life that I managed to escape without gashing my leg.

Nearly 30 years later, I faced my fears at Callaway Gardens with a water-skiing lesson, persuaded by the promise that instructors ski behind students to lift and balance them and then move to the side for continued instruction. With such skilled guidance, I hoped to conquer my childhood defeat and discover what racing atop the water feels like.

On a recent sunny Friday, I arrived at Robin Lake. The water was calmer than my nerves, but I donned a life jacket. Should I wear my sunglasses? “Not if you’ll fall,” said Tyler Kiggins, the 22-year-old instructor. Anticipating that inevitability, I handed them to Gardiner Turner, the 19-year-old driver of the Correct Craft Nautique towboat.

I slipped into the cool water and wedged my feet into the skis. Kiggins swam over to check the fit and pushed the footholds tighter. Would my feet break free if I fell? “Don’t worry,” Kiggins said. “Not one of my students has had a problem yet.” How much job experience could this University of Georgia student have? Turns out that Kiggins has taught water-skiing at Callaway Gardens for six years, with students ranging from 3 to 79. My concerns eased.

Kiggins handed me a towrope, grabbed the second one and positioned himself behind me. “Pull your knees to your chest,” he said. “Put your arms around your knees and keep them straight. When the boat starts pulling, stand up—but not too fast.” A vision of the boat rumbling into gear, lurching forward and dragging

me behind it flailing like a fish, flashed through my mind. Before I could say that I wanted to quit, the boat sped forward.

This might be a better story if I could report that these muscled youths reminded me of Scott, that I struggled until conjuring up a vision of Dean, my husband of 12 years, and rose atop in the water awash with a feeling of pure joy.

But this is not fiction. What happened was I stood up on my first attempt. My only thought at the time was, “Don’t fall.” When I wobbled, Kiggins tugged my lifejacket, and I found equilibrium. Though I’d feared drifting into a sideways split, keeping my legs together proved simple.

My challenge was figuring out how to follow the boat into a circle. I dropped the towrope and fell into the soft water—yes, the skis popped off—to ask for guidance. “Tilt your foot to turn right or left,” Kiggins said. We resumed launch position and as the boat sped toward 20 mph, I stood again. When I felt myself growing weary, I dropped again. Turner circled back, and Kiggins suggested I try standing on my own. I got up on my first attempt, completing the triumph over my past. After another loop around the lake I dropped the line, swam to the platform and staggered out, exhausted.

Perhaps my balance has improved with age. Or perhaps with age I’ve learned that success requires focusing on the task instead of on my audience. **SP**



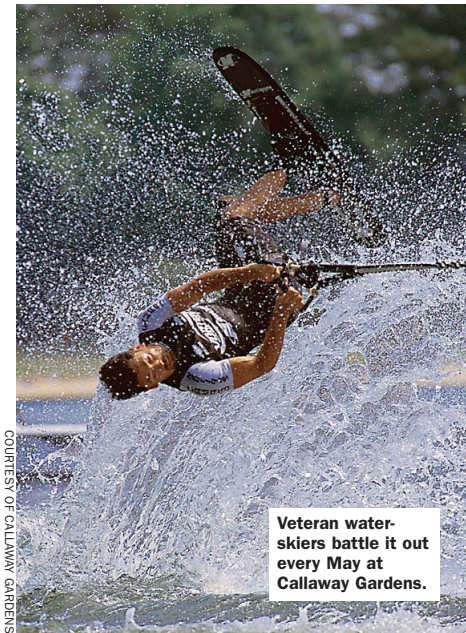
Make a splash by learning to balance on skis this summer.

HOPE S. PHILBRICK

LIFE LESSONS

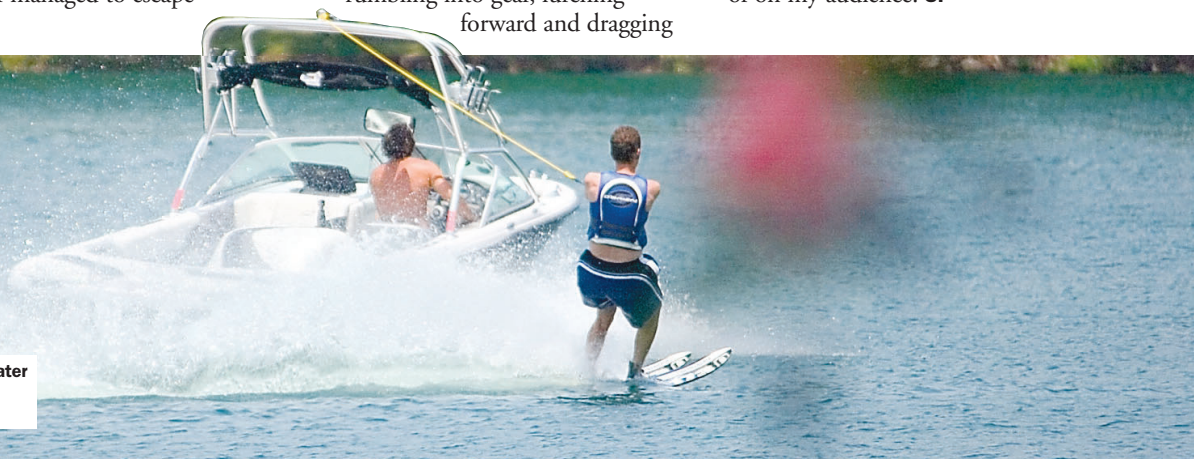
IF YOU GO

Water skiing lessons are available through August 12. Individual lessons can cover the basics or advanced skills such as jumping, slalom, wakeboarding and more. Advance reservations are required and can be made daily between noon and 6 p.m. Call 706-663-2281, ext. 5356, or visit www.callawaygardens.com. Lessons are \$55 for 30 minutes. To see how the pros do it, visit in late May when the Masters Water Ski & Wakeboard Tournament, the world’s premier water sports championship, is held.



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Veteran water-skiers battle it out every May at Callaway Gardens.



Cutting across the water on skis—and staying upright—is a thrill.

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