THE BEST WATERSKIER IN LUXEMBOURG

TALES OF BIG FISH IN SMALL PONDS

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Introduction

Odd though it may seem, one of the great moments of my childhood was stumbling across a branch of the Leamington Spa Building Society during a family outing in Central London. I wasn’t interested in banking nor did I much like the large building societies such as Nationwide or Abbey National. Instead I ‘collected’ small and obscure ones such as the Harpenden Building Society, which had a branch in Radlett near my home in Elstree. I loved the fact that it was always empty but also felt anxious on the staff’s behalf: surely this couldn’t be a real business. The Leamington Spa Building Society was even more extreme - it was huge and completely void of customers. I wondered who would ever join such an obscure institution and felt kinship and admiration for them.

Ever since I was a child I’ve relished smallness and obscurity. As well as minor building societies, I was fascinated by smaller airlines and secretly cursed my Dad if on business trips he took British Airways rather than a small airline. If he flew to Brussels I took it as a sign of moral weakness if he didn’t take Sabena, the Belgian national carrier (it went bust in 2001, probably because of the indifference of people like my Dad).

It was sport that provided the happiest hunting ground for obscurity. When I watched Ski Sunday I was less interested in the top skiers than those further down the running order, the ones the BBC only showed when they crashed out. I found out the name of the person who came last in the 1981 downhill World Cup - an Austrian called Helmut Gstrein - and dropped his name to my bewildered classmates whenever I could. As well as obscure sportspeople, I also loved to discover obscure sports. At the breakfast table I would eat my cornflakes while pouring through sport encyclopaedias, discovering Jai Alai, Spaceball and Winchester Fives in the process.

More than anything else though, I loved small or obscure countries. Growing up in England and speaking English means everyone in the world has heard of your country and everyone has heard of your language. I lived just outside London, one of world’s great metropolises and longed to know what it would be like to come from somewhere peripheral and mysterious, like Sao Tome e Principe or Palau. What secrets were they hiding? Was it comforting to live somewhere where everyone knows everyone or was it just claustrophobic? I used to gaze for hours at my Children’s Encyclopaedia of Our World, which provided the national dress and flag for every country in the world, willing the inert pictures to give up their secrets.

I still love small countries and I have a grown up justification for this: Malta, Laos and Vanuatu are never going to dominate their neighbours or build nuclear weapons; the Faroe Islands aren’t going to flood the world with their goods or their mass culture. The writer Vitali Vitaliev, who in his delightful travelogue Little Is The Light, travelled around Europe’s small states, argues that they have preserved a human scale, a quirkiness that bigger countries have lost. Leopold Kohr in his visionary book The Breakdown of Nations argued in 1952 that 'where something is
wrong, something is too big’, advocating the breaking up of large countries into a host of smaller entities.

Of all the small states of the world, there has only ever been one that I’ve had even a vague connection to - Luxembourg. My father went there a couple of times as a young man on hiking trips. He once stayed in a youth hostel run by a middle aged woman who, it was rumoured, would select one of the male guests to be her ‘companion’ each evening (Dad claims he was never one of the chosen ones). He worked for a law firm and during my childhood he went on business trips to Luxembourg every now and then. He was actually in Luxembourg when my wife and I announced our engagement. When he came back I’d pepper him with questions about what it was like. If he’d flown Luxair I’d be desperate to know how it compared to other airlines. But Dad generally spent all his time in office blocks so he wasn’t particularly illuminating. At some point I was thrilled to discover that Luxembourg had its own language and I begged Dad to buy me a Luxembourgish newspaper or dictionary. He looked hard (at least he said he had) but came away empty handed.

Unanchored in any real knowledge of Luxembourg, I treated the country as a blank space onto which I could project my fantasies. When I was 10 years old I wrote a story about the Luxembourg secret services, a subject on which I was, needless to say, entirely ignorant. In my fantasy Luxembourg, the secret services did all the jobs that other security agencies in Europe could not or would not do.

So my childhood Luxembourg obsession was wrapped up in fantasies and in Oedipal awe at my Dad’s business travels. The obsession lingered into adulthood, but I never actually visited the country. It was more fun to treasure it as a mythical, imaginary place. It wasn’t until my late 30s that I began joking that I was ‘The Best Water Skier in Luxembourg’.

I’m a sociologist by training and in the last few years I’ve published books on extreme heavy metal and on the British Jewish community, in the process gaining a modest reputation as an expert in both fields of research. As you have probably guessed, there aren’t many people who research extreme heavy metal or the British Jewish community. And so I explained to people who wanted to know what I did that I was biggish fish in a small pond - rather like being the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg. Sometimes I’d vary it and say I was the best table tennis player in Latvia. The point was the same: I was taking pride in my achievements while admitting that, in the ultimate scheme of things, they were fairly inconsequential.

And there my interest in the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg would have stayed had I not had a brainstorm in April 2011: why not track down the real thing? After all, my professional speciality was scenes and communities. Perhaps a whole book on water skiing in Luxembourg would be a little over the top, but I could expand it into a book about other big fish in small ponds as well. So I fired up my laptop, googled ‘Luxembourg water ski’ and immediately found the LWWF - The Luxembourg Water Ski and Wakeboard Federation. Luxembourg water skiing did exist. I also turned up the name of Sylvie Hülsemann, a Luxembourger who won the world championship in
1961. Luxembourgers had made an impact on international water skiing.

That was all the research I did. The whole point of the book would be to start off from a position of ignorance, to pick different scenes almost at random and go off to find out about them. Even if it started out as a joke, the more I came to live with the idea the more I became convinced of its value. A book revealing the lives of unknown heroes is potentially an important statement within a publishing industry dominated by celebrity memoirs and biographies.

And I was willing to bet that the scene would be interesting in its own right. In my academic career researching scenes and communities, I have been constantly impressed by how the small worlds that human beings create are the focus for peoples’ hopes and dreams. Jewish communities, heavy metal scenes and sports clubs are all sustained by passion and commitment. People are inspired to do extraordinary things together; even the lowliest stamp-collecting club can be a place where individuals achieve things they never could on their own. That doesn’t mean that small worlds are always happy, joyful places. One of the reasons they are so interesting is that passion often leads to conflict and tension, leading to schisms that seem absurd to outsiders, but are deeply serious to those involved.

What do people know about Luxembourg? It has better name recognition than Palau or Moldova. It’s known for being small of course. Beyond that, it’s associated with banks and the European Union - rightly so, given their importance to the Luxembourgish economy. Those who grew up in the 1960s might have fond memories of listening to Radio Luxembourg, although it played Anglo-American pop music rather than anything distinctively Luxembourgish. Ask British people to name a famous Luxembourger and the only names you might conceivably get are Frank and Andy Schleck, who came second and third in the Tour de France in 2011. Perhaps political geeks would be able to name Luxembourgish politicians with a prominent role in the EU such as Jacques Santer and Jean-Claude Juncker. But name a Luxembourgish film, novelist, musician, artist...? Need I say more?

Why this invisibility? It’s not just because Luxembourg is a small country. With a population of around half a million, Luxembourg has many more people than Iceland (around 300,000) but isn’t in the same league as a hip destination. When Damon Albarn of Blur chose to buy a bar in Reykjavik a while back, I doubt he wavered between that and buying one in Luxembourg City. The invisibility isn’t due to people not visiting. There’s a constant stream of businessmen and politicians into the country. Thousands of Belgians and French commute to work in Luxembourg City. Nearly half the permanent residents were born outside Luxembourg. There’s a big British expat scene, with two English-language publications and a number of English pubs and shops. But somehow Luxembourg’s cosmopolitanism doesn’t translate into global visibility. People end up in Luxembourg by accident or go there because they have to. When was the last time you met someone who went on holiday to Luxembourg? The invisibility isn’t due to Luxembourg being dull, although it does have that reputation. Luxembourg City is one of Europe’s most beautiful capitals, built
around a dramatic succession of ravines and cliffs. The countryside is gorgeous; with the Moselle wine lands, the gorges of little Switzerland and the rolling hills of the Ardennes all packed into just under 1,000 square miles. Culturally, Luxembourg’s extraordinary multilingualism (most people speak at least three languages) and its enigmatic national identity make up for its lack of world-class artists.

Maybe the reason Luxembourg is invisible is simply because people have got used to ignoring it. And maybe Luxembourgers themselves have got used to being ignored - a high GDP is decent compensation. In any case, finding out more about Luxembourg was a mouth-watering prospect. Here was a world as unknown as the remotest rainforest, but just over one hour’s flight from London and with no chance of getting malaria. Luxembourg was also perfect for this project as it isn’t too small. The Best Water Skier in Lichtenstein, Andorra or San Marino? Well how many water skiers can there be in any of these micro-states? But Luxembourg’s 500,000 residents can support pretty much all of the things you find elsewhere. Luxembourg even has an army (though its troops number less than a thousand). So the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg would be a big fish in a small pond not a puddle.

The same logic that made Luxembourg perfect also applied to water skiing. Like Luxembourg, most people have heard of it - it’s not korfball (look it up). Indeed, plenty of people have tried it, usually on holiday. But it’s not an Olympic sport (although it was a demonstration event at the 1972 Munich games) and it’s rarely on television. Ask anyone in the UK who isn’t involved in the sport to name a water skiing champion and the only name you might conceivably dredge up is Mike Hazelwood, the British world champion whose heyday was the 1970s and 1980s. Water skiing today is as culturally invisible as Luxembourg. The great water skiing novel has yet to be written. In the post war era there was a brief period when water skiing was associated with sophistication and glamour. Florida’s Cypress Gardens was well known for its spectacular displays of formation skiing and in 1953 there was even a film musical, Easy To Love, set there. But today, if water skiing is known for anything, it is for the Fonz jumping the shark on Happy Days - hardly a byword for cool. The situation is a bit different with wakeboarding, which is to water skiing what snowboarding is to alpine skiing. It has a certain cachet in the extreme sports world but even here it is very much the poor cousin of skateboarding, snowboarding and BMX.

Just as Luxembourg’s invisibility is unfair for an intriguing country, so water skiing’s invisibility doesn’t do justice to a tough and spectacular sport. It’s fiercely competitive, fully international and there is even a small cadre of professionals. Water skiing developed as a sport in the 1920s and 1930s but its golden age was the first few decades of the post-war period. It was then that the technology and rules were standardised and the three main disciplines were created. Slalom skiing uses a single monoski and involves negotiating a series of buoys. Competitions are judged on a combination of how many buoys are cleared, at what speed and at what length of rope (the shorter, the more difficult). Trick skiing, usually performed on one ski these days,
is highly technical and features jumps, twists and rope movements. Competitions are judged on how many tricks are performed during two runs, with more difficult tricks scoring higher points. Water ski jumping is performed on two long skis, with competitors hitting a ramp at high speed and flying as far as possible. Water skiing competitions usually feature the three disciplines and an overall competition for those who compete in all three. Wakeboarding developed in the late 1980s and, as we shall see, is not always classed as a variant of water skiing. Wakeboarders use one wide board, similar to a snowboard. As the name suggests, jumping the wake of the boat is a major part of wakeboarding. This allows competitors to complete a huge variety of tricks, flips and jumps.

To bring together water skiing and Luxembourg is to bring together two neglected worlds. But, somehow, I had already convinced myself, based on absolutely no research, that the person I sought would be a bona fide expert, someone who had dedicated their life to a sport which promised little or no fame or fortune. And, ever the sociologist, I was on the lookout for more than a particular individual. I wanted stories that no one had heard before; stories that, until now, had never passed outside the narrow confines of Luxembourg’s water ski scene.

This was the mission, the challenge. To find a small world of which I knew nothing and to immerse myself in a community, with all its quirks and complexities. And so, in the middle of December 2011, I got on a plane...
1. For non-UK readers: a building society is a mutually owned financial institution, usually specialising in mortgages and savings accounts.
2. I subsequently realised that being last on points didn’t mean he was the last of all - only the top riders scored any points at all.
3. I admit there are exceptions to this rule: Qatar, for example, is using its petrodollars to buy up much of the UK.
The Best Water Skier in Luxembourg
Deen beschten Waasserschifuerer zu Lëtzebuerg
Or
De Beschte Wasserskifuhrer zu Letzeburg

‘Chapter One. He adored Luxembourg City. He idolized it out of all proportion.’
‘Luxembourg...shit; I’m still only in Luxembourg.’
‘We were somewhere around Luxembourg City...when the drugs began to take hold.’

Luxembourg doesn’t lend itself to grand entrances, to dramatic panoramas, to fear and loathing. And yet I can safely say that I have rarely been as full of anticipation as on my arrival in the country. In the preceding days I’d been so excited that I’d been living on my nerves. Strange stomach aches and paranoia about getting a cold had beset me. When my wife and kids took me to the airport I managed to pick pointless rows with all of them. The tiresome rituals of clearing security and getting on the flight had passed agonisingly slowly.

At first though, Luxembourg seemed too bland to justify my excitement. The airport itself was medium-sized, calmly efficient and little different to anywhere else in northern Europe. Stepping out of the terminal, the Luxembourgish evening was as grey as the one I had left behind in London. Staring out the window of the airport bus, the neat shuttered houses, Christmas candelabras in windows and occasional brasseries were as pleasant but unexciting as their counterparts in Belgium or Germany.

But as the bus reached the outskirts of the city, this dull familiarity began to recede. A large extended family got on, chatting loudly in Luxembourgish, the everyday language of the Grand Duchy. I’d studied a bit before I left and could recognise its romance-tinged Germanic tones. This was the first sign that I’d arrived somewhere distinctive and not merely a sub-region of the northern EU. Spurred on by the family, I looked more closely at the signs and adverts on the bus and discovered a trilingual notice for the Luxembourg version of the Samaritans. If you are thinking of killing yourself there, you can talk it over in three languages. This casual linguistic virtuosity was to become one my favourite aspects of the country. While waiting in the post office one day, a clearly mentally ill man was shouting and swearing to himself in French. When his turn came to come up to the counter, he began shouting and swearing to the assistant in Luxembourgish.
The bus deposited me outside the train station in Luxembourg City, from where it was a two-minute walk to my hotel on Rue Joseph Junck. When I was setting up interviews prior to my visit almost everyone mentioned that Rue Joseph Junck was the centre of Luxembourg’s red light district; a couple of people even implored me to find somewhere else. I scoffed at this, refusing to believe that Luxembourg’s red light district could consist of anything more threatening than a strip club or two. It was immediately clear though that Rue Joseph Junck was the real deal. Groups of men loitered on street corners. The strip clubs looked like old-style Soho clip joints. The street was lined with dimly lit bars filled with solitary, hollow-eyed men nursing beers and chain-smoking (which you can do in bars in Luxembourg). Later on my trip, an Irish journalist I met pointed out the car park round the corner from my hotel where there’d been a gangland triple murder a couple of months back.

There was a jarring incongruity to my base of operations during my visit. I don’t know where you’d expect someone looking for the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg to stay, but it probably wouldn’t be on the country’s worst street. Undeterred, on my first morning, I took the short bus ride to the centre of the city. The old part of Luxembourg City is a giant fortress, a plateau surrounded by sheer cliffs and ravines, reinforced over centuries of conflict when Luxembourg was part of one empire or another. The starkness of the situation contrasts with the chocolate-box prettiness of the buildings and squares of the old city. I made my way to the cluster of government buildings on the eastern side of the plateau to meet Romain Schneider, the Luxembourg Minister of Sport.

Romain was a genial and friendly man. He had been well prepared, with a briefing paper in front of him including printouts from my website, and a civil servant sat in on the meeting, chipping in occasionally with additional information. While he talked up Luxembourg’s sporting prowess – the national football team had recently beat Albania and Slovakia and drawn with Algeria – he had to admit that he didn’t know much about water skiing, although he had met Sylvie Hülsemann, the world championship gold medallist from 1961. He gamely looked up the figures though, and told me that there were seven water ski clubs, all but one of them located on the Moselle and Sûre rivers which form part of the country’s eastern border with Germany. He said there were 200 officially registered water skiers in the country (although this doesn’t mean that there are only 200 members of water ski clubs in total). The Luxembourg Water Ski and Wakeboard Federation had been granted with
€13,500 in 2009 from the government (the last year he had have figures for). That’s more than American Football gets (€257) but a lot less than basketball (€56,435). Romain half-apologetically concluded, ‘water skiing is not the number one sport in Luxembourg’.

The Golden Age

It’s easy to find out who the Best Water Skiers in Luxembourg used to be. With a bit of searching on the internet you find two names - Sylvie Hülsemann and Jean Calmes, the 1962 European champion in trick water skiing.

Jean Calmes was easiest to find, as he sits on the board of the Luxembourg-American Cultural Society. He divides his time between Luxembourg and Florida and fortunately he was in the country during my visit.

I met him at his apartment, an elegant two-floor modern penthouse at the top of an office building to the south of the old city. A well preserved 67 year-old, he had, like the minister, prepared for our meeting by printing out reference material. Clearly he felt a responsibility to tell his version of the story accurately - which is as it should be, because his story is integral to the story of the golden age of Luxembourg water skiing.

It starts with Jean’s father, who in the early 1950s bought a boat for water skiing, one of the first people in the country to do so. This was a family activity: ‘We were five all together, myself, my parents and my brother and sister, and everybody went water-skiing, the whole family.’ Gradually things started to spread and as the 1950s wore on, there were a few families water skiing together at one spot on the Moselle River called Ehnen. It was a tight-knit group, ‘I think my father was one of the very first ones, and then came the Hülsemann family. We were like brothers and sisters.’ Eventually they formed the country’s first water ski club, Aqua Ski, and then a national federation, ‘We had a federation, we had a president, we were very proud, we had everything we needed and we got some subsidies, but it was very, very small.’

Despite their size, this tiny extended family managed to compete internationally with countries where water skiing was well-established and popular. Jean, together with Sylvie Hülsemann first competed in the 1958 European championship in Milan and managed to achieve some high placings. As Jean recollects, ‘I was 14 years old and I had no fear! We suddenly could measure ourselves against the French, the Germans,
the British. We started to become the famous little Luxembourg team!"

The early 1960s marked the team’s zenith. Sylvie Hülsemann won the world championship in 1961 when she was 16 and Jean Calmes won the European championship in tricks the following year, when he was 18 years old.

These successes capped a whole series of high individual and team placings in competitions throughout the world. Jean, emphasised the tight-knit nature of the whole team: ‘We had more than two skiers. I had one brother who was an excellent slalom water-skier, I had a sister who was an excellent slalom water-skier, then we had two, three, good friends who were in that team. And it was even more than that. Take the driver in our boat - he built that boat. He built the ramp. He built and placed the slalom every year, and when there were floods and the whole slalom had been swept away, he built it again the next day. My father was the first president of our federation. Sylvie’s father became a famous member of international water skiing juries later on in the sixties. Her mother was on juries also. Without all of this Sylvie and I couldn’t have done what we did. And it was not an easy game. I went to school like everybody. It was a long day - 6 o’clock in the morning to the Moselle, an hour training and at 8 o’clock we were at school. Sylvie and I calculated we skied enough to circle the earth during our years on the Moselle.’

Jean never quite equalled Sylvie Hülsemann’s achievements. He never became world champion and he didn’t retain his European title. Despite missing out on greater successes, he evinced no disappointment, even when telling me about his chance to go professional: ‘At the age of 18 I got a contract from Cypress Gardens in Florida, where they had water ski shows three times a day. I was still not finished in Zurich where I was studying engineering. They offered me more than I would make being an engineer. But my father said, no, you must finish your studies. And that’s what I did.’ Still, water skiing allowed Jean to see the world. He travelled for competitions in Lebanon and Jordan, ‘Sylvie and I and my brother, trained with the King of Jordan who was crazy for water-skiing. We visited him several times in his residence and in Aqaba. The conditions were not always good, but it meant we could keep water skiing over Christmas and New Year.’

Jean Calmes dominated Luxembourg men’s water skiing until the early 1980s, winning 60 national titles in the various disciplines. None of his countrymen has ever equalled his international success. I wondered why. Jean sighed, ‘I have a good memory for good things, I have a bad memory for bad things, but something went
One of Sylvie Hülsemann’s 1961 gold medal ceremonies (photo courtesy of Peter Gutenstein).

wrong. Opinion was divided between those who wanted to keep the federation small and selective, focussed on training international competitors, and those who thought we should try to organise a large basis for water-skiing in Luxembourg. The Hülsemann family wanted to keep it small; I went the other way and had the support of the Luxembourg sports authorities. So, in the seventies we established a larger federation of seven clubs and the price we paid was that the competitive standards dropped. So did Jean’s relationship with Sylvie become strained? ‘Yes, we had been excellent friends before that. I was living mostly outside Luxembourg so we had rather different lives, but yes, things became strained.’

Jean’s reticence raised as many questions as it answered. To know more, it was clear where I needed to go. As I said goodbye to Jean, he told me, ‘You must speak to Sylvie and hear her story’.

Meeting Sylvie was clearly vital. She may no longer be the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg, but she was certainly the most successful of all time. As a former world champion, in 1997 she was elected into the International Water Ski Federation Hall of Fame.

Despite Hülsemann’s renown, none of the people involved in Luxembourg’s current water ski scene knew where to find her. Eventually, I got in touch with Petz Lahure, the doyen of Luxembourg sports journalists, and he was able to get Sylvie’s e-mail. I fired off a message and got a response by return, though from her husband Peter rather than Sylvie herself.

Negotiating a meeting was not easy. In my attempts to raise funds for my project, I’d declared in a number of media interviews that I planned to meet Sylvie. Peter mentioned in his e-mail that ‘we have mixed feelings about the fact that you are publicly talking about Sylvie; we are not sure if we should be flattered or a little bit upset’. He also took issue with my justification for the project: ‘I’m not sure that a “self-deprecating joke” is flattering for Luxembourg or for Sylvie’. I rang Peter as soon as I got the e-mail, and was able to reassure him enough to arrange an appointment. On the morning of my second full day in Luxembourg he picked me up from my hotel to drive me to meet Sylvie at their house in Imbringen, a village 15 minutes drive east of the city. After exchanging pleasantries, Peter told me that Sylvie was a bit uneasy about meeting me.

‘I’m English so I understand your sense of humour but Sylvie didn’t really get your pitch for the book. She doesn’t like people making fun’.
There was more: ‘Sylvie doesn’t really want to talk about the splits in the late 1960s and her relationship with Jean Calmes. It was very painful for her.’

If this makes the car ride sound awkward, that wasn’t really the case. Peter and I are both London-born Jews and this helped to break the ice. A retired chemist, now in his seventies, he’d moved to Luxembourg to work in the early 1960s and never left. As a keen genealogist with a passion for historical research, he had relished the task of archiving and organising the record of Sylvie’s career.

After a short drive through the forests of southern Luxembourg, we arrived at the sprawling old farmhouse that they’d been working on since the early seventies. As Peter backed his car into the garage, there was Sylvie herself. A trim and well-dressed woman in her late sixties, she greeted me with a reserved smile. As she busied herself making coffee I noticed that the house didn’t appear to have any trophies or monuments to Sylvie’s success. Instead, there were dozens of paintings in a variety of styles. I remarked on one and Sylvie said ‘Oh that was by my father. He taught art and we have lots of his paintings here’. She went on to point out the pictures of her four grandchildren on the wall. Clearly, for Peter and Sylvie, family was paramount.

We settled down to talk and I began by reassuring her of my noble intentions and my lack of desire to muckrake. She nodded and smiled but said nothing. Throughout our discussion I was struck by her quiet dignity and integrity. She was not as forthcoming and voluble as Jean Calmes and I refrained from pushing her too hard, but I had to admire the way she refused to turn her story into a drama. Peter sat in, offering support and occasionally looking up stray facts that Sylvie had forgotten.

Sylvie’s water skiing story is bound up in her close relationship with her parents (who at the time of writing are still alive):

‘It was my mother who started it all. We were on holiday in Locarno in Switzerland and she saw people skiing and so she went to have a look, secretly, without telling the rest of the family, and she thought that might be something that I would like - I was six or seven. Then we all went and tried it, the whole family. That’s how it started.’

Things quickly got much more serious: ‘Every year we went to other places where we water skied and we all loved it. We spent all our holidays on the water and skied and skied. Eventually my father bought a boat. It was a little outboard with a small motor. By the time I was 10 years old, I was driving the boat.’

Like Jean Calmes, Sylvie emphasised that you can’t water ski alone: ‘It’s a family sport and competition standard can only be achieved if the whole family is participating; otherwise it’s impossible. My father was training me all the time. We taught ourselves - I never in my life had a trainer. There were three main families who were most active at the time, and we were all together for a long time. Until 1968 it was one big family - and then the split’.

Yes, the split. I kept my word and didn’t ask more. Still, it was starting to become clear that Sylvie and Jean told their stories in subtly different ways. Both were modest about their achievements, stressing the support they received. But whereas
Jean focused on the extended family of Luxembourg water skiers, Sylvie emphasised her own nuclear family.

Whatever the differences between them, Sylvie was more successful than Jean. Perhaps the undivided attention of her parents paid dividends. Maybe a reserved, single-minded approach provided a better route to sporting success. Whatever, her record speaks for itself. In international competitions between 1957 and 1979 she achieved 90 golds, 60 silvers and 30 bronzes. In 8 World Championships from 1959 to 1977, she won 2 gold medals, 2 silvers and 1 bronze. In 13 European Championships from 1959 to 1977 she won 9 gold medals, 6 silvers and 11 bronzes. On top of that, she was Luxembourg champion in all disciplines from 1959 to 1976. In any sport this would be an impressive CV.

The 1961 World Championships in Long Beach were the climax of a great summer for Sylvie and for Luxembourg water skiing as a whole.

‘The European Championships were in Spain the week before the World Championship and I got three gold medals and one bronze. Then the other Luxembourgers came home again and I went with my parents to Long Beach and I got two golds, one silver and one bronze. The golds were in tricks and overall, the silver was in jump and the bronze was in slalom.’

Sylvie talked about her success in a very matter-of-fact way. But a world championship is always a big deal. Peter dug her medals out of a cardboard box and handed them to me. They were handsome, heavy in an elegant wooden display box.

A 16 year-old Luxembourg girl becoming World Champion was a shock to the Americans who dominated the sport. Peter volunteered enthusiastically:

‘The Americans no way had expected it, even though she was European Champion. They were so egotistical’.

Sylvie continued: ‘They treated me afterwards with respect, but they were a little bit - I don’t know how you say it in English?’ she turned to Peter.

‘Pissed off’, he said.

‘They were a little bit, yes’, smiled Sylvie, ‘They didn’t even know where Luxembourg was - they thought it was in Germany or Belgium. When I had to go on the podium they had absolutely no idea what the Luxembourg national anthem was. They had an orchestra there, and they just played some sort of a march, God knows what it was, but it was anything but the Luxembourg anthem!’

Before coming to Luxembourg I had found a short article in the *New York*
*Times* online archives on the 1961 world championships. It seemed to suggest that Sylvie had won in controversial circumstances. The father of Vicki Van Hook, the 17 year-old American defending champion, who came second in tricks, had launched a protest that she had been deprived of 180 points that would have made her the winner. But ‘The five judges of women’s trick skiing viewed films of yesterday’s competition for six hours before picking Miss Hülsemann as the winner of the event.’

I was intrigued about this controversy. Was it a case of a proud father’s sour grapes? Or maybe outrage and incredulity that the mighty US had been bested by little Luxembourg? I’d managed to track down Vicki Van Hook to get her side of the story before I came to Luxembourg. She responded warmly to my e-mail but didn’t want to talk publicly. Let’s just say that neither Vicki nor Sylvie’s ‘sides’ come off particularly badly. When I asked Sylvie about the controversy, she simply said ‘I don’t remember that at all.’

A pattern was starting to emerge. The water skiing world, both internationally and in Luxembourg, is full of passion, rivalry and controversy. But no one seemed willing to reopen old wounds for a stranger. Jean, Sylvie and Vicki all wanted to remember their water skiing days with pride and pleasure.

I asked Sylvie if becoming World Champion changed her life.

‘Not really, no. I went back to school. I was famous in Luxembourg for about 20 years or so, but it didn’t bother me very much, I mean I still carried on in my normal life. It’s not that I suddenly went crazy.’

It’s a sign of the esteem in which she was held that when she won the Luxembourg Sportsman (sic) of the Year in 1961, she beat Charly Gaul, the cyclist who came third in the Tour de France that year and won in 1958.

She is still remembered in Luxembourg to this day. Peter showed me the award she was presented at the week before I came at the annual sportspress.lu awards ceremony, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of her world title - a lovely clear glass ornament with a hologram inset of a photo of her being presented with her Sportsman of the Year trophy in 1961.

Sylvie kept competing internationally until the late 70s. She never won a world title again but was consistently a top performer.

‘I was second in tricks in ’65 in Australia, in ’67, that was in Canada, I was fourth in jump, slalom and overall. In ’71, in Spain, I was fourth in tricks. At that time there was no ranking yet like in tennis or in other sports. But if you would take now the ranking of that time I was for 15 years in the top five.’

Needless to say, she won the Luxembourg title year after year.

‘I don’t have the title anymore but I still hold the Luxembourg records. There’s
nobody who did better - not in jump, not in tricks and not in slalom.’

Sylvie’s major regret was that she never won the Olympic title when it was a demonstration sport at the 1972 Munich games and she was the only Luxembourg competitor.

‘I was fourth. I fell, it was a stupid, on the trick that I did hundreds and thousands of times, and I missed. If I wouldn’t have fallen there I would have got gold. Yes, that was unfortunate.’

I wanted to know how Sylvie became so very successful and her answer was simple, ‘By training! A little bit of talent maybe as well. My father trained me all the time.’ This wasn’t the case of a young girl being forced by pushy parents to compete.

‘It was all pleasure; it was not a forced thing. We did it because we all liked it, because we all enjoyed it, and we all did it together and we were all the time together.’

Her parents’ support was crucial in other ways: ‘I was never professional; I never got a penny. My parents paid for everything.’ Her equipment was sponsored though. Peter brought in one of her late sixties sponsored trick skis from the garage. It was marked ‘Sylvie Championne de Monde’.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Sylvie’s attention gradually shifted from water skiing to other things. She got married, worked as a PE teacher and had children. She stopped competing in 1979 at the age of 35. They still own a boat, although they rarely use it. ‘I wouldn’t go in the Moselle anymore because it’s too dirty, too cold! But I still think I could do my tricks; but maybe not at the same speed.’

Throughout our meeting, Sylvie barely mentioned Jean Calmes. I didn’t really appreciate how close they must have been until Sylvie and I finished our talk and followed Peter into his study to look at his archive of photos on his computer. There were plenty of photos of a young Sylvie competing (and even a jerky super 8 of her water skiing as a child) but I was struck by how many there were of Jean and Sylvie water skiing together. The two would do synchronised displays, moving in perfect harmony like a Luxembourgish Torvill and Dean. When the first photo of them together came on the screen, Peter pointed out ‘that’s Jean and Sylvie’. Sylvie added ‘before...’ Her voice trailed away and I watched her look at the screen with a mixture of nostalgia and regret for those golden days spent on the water.

Jean and Sylvie’s lives were closely interlinked. Jean met his wife Trixie through Sylvie, who was a friend of hers. Sylvie met Peter at a party thrown by Trixie. Clearly, the relationship between Jean, Sylvie and their families was not only pivotal to the golden
Jean Calmes and Sylvie Hülsemann’s synchronised display, 1962 – before the split (photo courtesy of Jean Calmes).

age of Luxembourg water skiing, but had a deep impact on their lives. Water skiing wasn’t just a hobby for them, it was something that defined them.

As I met more people in the Luxembourg water ski scene, a few more details of the split trickled out. I learnt from a couple of people that things got so bad that at one point there were two competing national water skiing federations. Gradually, I pieced the story together. At some point in the late 1960s, disputes over the future direction of the sport became personal and led to a breakdown of relations between the Calmes and Hülsemann families. It became untenable for the two families to remain inside Aqua Ski Club. The Hülsemanns and another of the founding families left Aqua Ski in 1968, starting their own club in 1970. Aqua Ski led the five other water ski clubs to form a new federation, the Union Luxembourgeoise de Ski Nautique (ULSN), meaning that the Hülsemanns and their club were left on their own as the rump of the federation. Sylvie continued to compete internationally during this difficult period, keeping Luxembourg firmly on the world water-skiing map and Sylvie’s parents continued to be involved in the World Water Skiing Union. The two Federations coexisted uncomfortably for a few years in the 1970s until in the early 1980s the two were reunited once again, by which time Sylvie had retired from competition.

This was a sad fate for the once happy world of Luxembourg waterskiing. The split was accompanied by much rancour and accusations of cruel behaviour. Whoever was ultimately at fault, Sylvie Hülsemann still finds the memory of those times difficult. But this sort of schism, the type that seems faintly absurd to outsiders, isn’t so unusual. The UK Jewish community that I grew up in, seethed with similar schisms and conflicts, many of them over apparently trivial issues. Wherever there are organisations, you are likely to find disputes.

Ultimately, Jean’s aim of expanding water skiing in Luxembourg worked. Seven clubs in a small country of less than half a million, all but one of which are on the same small stretch of river is a lot – in the whole of UK there are only 120 clubs affiliated to the national federation – and there are still several hundred active water skiers competing there. You can see why. The Moselle is a beautiful region and hanging out by the river in the summer, taking the occasional ride behind a boat, is a great way to spend your time. This relaxed outdoor vibe meant that from the 1970s
onwards the Luxembourg water skiing world became more social than sporting. Whole families would stay members of clubs for decades, without necessarily doing much skiing. As a result, the pool of serious skiers became so small that no new Sylvie Hülsemann or Jean Calmes emerged and the country gradually became a backwater in water skiing terms.

Dedicated competitors still emerged. One of the big fish in the post-Hülsemann/Calmes era was John Hoffman. I met John at the apartment he shared with his wife and two teenage daughters in the Belair neighbourhood of Luxembourg City. Concerned about his English he’d invited his friend Alain Wester, another long-standing water skier, to join him. Both of them are retired, in their early sixties. They’d known each other since they were teenagers and worked together as train drivers for Luxembourg railways.

John owes his involvement in water skiing to his uncle, who had built his own boat in the 1950s. He invited John and Alain, then in their mid-teens, to join him at the only non-Moselle club, in the north of the country. The club is on a small lake used as an overflow to regulate the level of a nearby reservoir. Secluded and private, it can only be used when the water level is high enough. It’s also very cold, as John said: ‘It was around 10, 11 degrees, when you fall you have to put your hands out of the water or you can’t hold the rope, it was unbelievable’. They learnt the hard way, taught by John’s uncle, learning by trial and error. But it was fun: ‘We’d go at the weekend. There was a little wooden house with an open fire and we could live there for two days or three days’.

To really improve though, they had to go to the Moselle, where there were jumps and a slalom course at the Aqua Ski club. There, Jean Calmes trained them properly and they began to compete in the national championships. After Jean retired, John won the national championships on a number of occasions and went on to compete internationally. While he never equalled Calmes’ international success, he did win the Benelux Veterans Championship in 1995. Despite the modest nature of John’s achievements, he was still one of the top skiers in the country. Alain is more typical in that the social side of water skiing was for him as important as sporting success. John is driven, a sporting obsessive (he was even Luxembourg karate champion at one time). You need people like John in any sporting scene to ensure things don’t get too comfortable. There just aren’t enough of them in Luxembourg.

John and Alain think the odds are stacked against their sport. Alain complained that ‘we are one of the richest countries in the European Union, but the Luxembourg Water Ski Federation has no lake.’ John explained that water skiing on the Moselle means sharing the river with all kinds of other traffic, ‘it’s like if you were playing soccer and in the middle of the field is a street, and every time a car comes you
have to stop the game.’

When I knew nothing about the Luxembourg water skiing, I’d imagined that the scene would be pretty much as John and Alain described it: an obscure, insular social club leavened by the odd obsessive. But the example of Jean Calmes and Sylvie Hülsemann showed that it didn’t necessarily have to be marginal. Could their success be repeated? Could the sport regain its former glory? It seems unlikely, not least because there is now a new waterborne threat to contend with.

The Wakeboarding Revolution

Alain Wester’s son Marc used to hate them: ‘I’d come to the club with my mono ski and I had to wait over two hours because of the fucking wakeboarders occupying the boat! I said I’d never start wakeboarding because I hated those people.’ But eventually Marc became one of ‘those people’ too. And those people have grown in number over the last few years to the point where classic water skiing is endangered in Luxembourg.

Marc is a 28 year old policeman from Luxembourg City, whom I met at my hotel.

He was, he told me, ‘born in a boat’. He began water skiing at the age of seven, and over the years he’d tried all the classic water ski disciplines. He even once competed in the Luxembourg national championships.

Marc was drawn into wakeboarding in 2005 by a German guy from just over the border called Sepp Ascherl, who persuaded him to give it a go. The ‘conversion’ was swift: ‘I never used my mono ski again.’ Sepp appears to be the John the Baptist of Luxembourg Wakeboarding: ‘Sepp is an icon in Luxembourg! I hated wakeboarders, and two days after meeting him I was on a wakeboard too.’

In 2006, Sepp, Marc and a few others bought a specialist wakeboarding boat and formed their own club ‘Wakemakers’. They held the first national wakeboarding competition in 2006 and even got sponsorship from Heineken. This is the pattern that I found with other wakeboarders in the country: the sport dragged them in quickly, from apathetic to obsessive in no time at all. What was it about the sport itself that caused Marc to abandon his family water skiing heritage? ‘It’s the jumps! It’s a 3D sport, not 2D like water skiing.’

Marc is a former national champion, sort of. ‘In 2006 I was in the first competition and I came first with one backroll - so one trick, the first place. There was hardly anyone else to make up the competition.’ Marc keeps pushing himself. He tries to practice every day in the season at his club, which now has a dedicated wakeboard
boat. And he will continue the Wester family tradition. When I met him his girlfriend was pregnant. Marc had already dragged her into the sport and he planned to take his child as soon as he could: ‘The age of four is the right time to begin!’

Andy Lamesch took third place in the 2011 National Wakeboard Championships, but he yields to no one in his commitment to the sport. He also came to my hotel, shortly after I met Marc.

A 28 year-old cameraman and editor, he first tried wakeboarding at the age of 20. He loved it immediately: ‘It was just a great feeling to be standing on the water. You feel like Jesus! In fact that was the slogan for our club ‘Jesus was walking on water, we are riding it.’

For the first few years, Andy ‘was really just playing around’ and saw the club as much as a place to hang out, drink beer and have barbecues. But in time the older generation of the club stepped aside and Andy’s generation began to take things more seriously. In order to pay for a new boat they started to hold an annual ‘beach party’ - the only one in Luxembourg - called Sunrise, which today attracts around 3,000 people. The more they raise through the party, the less they have to charge members to ride. Andy served as president of the club before ‘retiring’ in 2011 to concentrate on the sport itself.

Wakeboarding offers a lifetime of challenge. There are dozens of tricks to learn and you can never master them all. Andy is modest about his own capabilities: ‘I’m not as good as I want to be. Right now I can do a tantrum, scarecrow, front row, and I think I’m going to learn back row and maybe combine it with some 180s. But I’m never going to be famous in the world of wakeboarding.’ Still, Andy’s realism doesn’t temper his commitment and he finds the closed season in winter almost unbearable: ‘I try to ride at least five times a week in spring and summer. I spend winter being depressed and not sleeping. For me it’s a drug. Right now, I need pills to sleep.’ Even so, Andy is not just into the sport for himself. ‘I do more coaching and driving than riding these days. I love to coach people. To teach somebody a new trick and then watch them lands it - that’s even more fun than learning a new trick myself.’

Although water skiing is a sociable sport, wakeboarding appears to be even more convivial. Andy enthused that ‘it’s a sport where you meet somebody and you’re just right away friends. I’ve got connections with guys around the world like from Croatia, Thailand, US.’ Like skateboarding, BMX, freestyle motocross and the like, wakeboarding emphasises fun, friendship and style. Effort and commitment goes hand in hand with a certain slackness. Andy appeared to embody this culture. Dressed in a beanie hat, one of the markers of the subculture, when we had our pictures taken together at the end of our chat he pulled the ’hang loose’ sign with his hand.

Still, being a serious wakeboarder isn’t always fun: ‘Many people at the club ride
when the weather is good and they just like to have fun. They have more fun than me, that’s for sure. Most of the time I’m just really disappointed. I don’t care about being Luxembourg champion because you can be a Luxembourg champion and still be a loser. I tell people in other countries that I’ve been Luxembourg champion and they’ll say “wow, you’re a champion of your own country.” Then they go on and beat me!’

After talking to Andy Lamesch, I began to appreciate the conundrum that the Luxembourg water ski and wakeboard scene faced. The problem is that it’s too enjoyable to be part of the scene. To succeed internationally, hanging out on the banks of the Moselle with friends and family has to give way to pain and hardship. The challenge is to find a balance between the fun needed to bring people into the sport and the commitment needed to succeed in it. If Luxembourg wakeboarders are going to equal the achievements of the Calmes/Hülsemann generation of water skiers, then it’s going to take someone with the vision, dedication and intelligence to transform the scene. They may have found that someone in Chris Hilbert, vice-president of the Luxembourg Water Ski and Wakeboard Federation.

Chris was essential to my project. Through many conversations on Skype, he explained how the scene works and put me in touch with many of the people I needed to talk to. So I was looking forward to meeting him in the flesh and we managed to get together at a snug British pub in the Grund district of Luxembourg City. Chris spoke to me with a passion and intensity that no one else matched during my stay in Luxembourg.

Chris is 25 years old, currently studying for an MBA in France. He’d been raised in a water skiing family, taking to the water for the first time at the age of five. The family had a fixed caravan next to the club where they spent most summers: ‘There was a whole generation of children that would hang out, build huts in the trees and water-ski. But at the age of fourteen, fifteen, you start going out with friends clubbing, so I got bit less involved in the sport.’ All that changed at the age of seventeen when he first tried wakeboarding: ‘I was just blown away by how much fun it was.’

More than anyone else I met, Chris emphasised the conflicts between the younger wakeboarding generation and the older water skiers. Part of the problem is that wakeboarding and water skiing require different kinds of boats. Water ski boats are built so that the faster they go, the lower the wake gets. Wakeboarding requires lower speeds and a bigger wake. You can wakeboard behind a water ski boat but to get a proper wake you need to add ballast in order to create more drag through the water. As Chris says, ‘That was the first clash because – they accused us of destroying engine which weren’t built to handle shit like that.’ According to Chris, the most outrageous example of prejudice against wakeboarders was when, in 2005, the club decided to buy a new boat that couldn’t be used for wakeboarding. ‘Even back then most of the money in the club came from wakeboarding, but they decided to buy one of the best barefoot water-ski boats on the market, one that even if you put ballast in, it didn’t leave a wake.’

Despite the conflicts in the club, Chris was developing into an experienced
wakeboarder. He had begun training seriously with the Belgium champion, Oliver Delefortrie. He could have been a contender.

But then everything went wrong.

In March 2006 he was doing off-season training on the trampoline, landed awkwardly and ‘my whole knee blew out.’ He was taken to hospital, where it became apparent that this was a serious injury. The doctor told him he could forget about playing sport again but Chris was determined. ‘I stayed in hospital for one week and had eight hours of surgery. I had one of those electric machines that kept my leg moving, I was pushing the thing the whole time. I told the doctor “I want to go wakeboarding and you’re not going to stop me.” Nobody actually believed that it could happen, because I had torn everything.’

After three weeks, Chris got out of hospital and was soon embroiled in a crisis with the waterskiing club. He didn’t pay his membership as he wasn’t able to ski but he did continue to drive the boat. ‘One day the treasurer walks up to me and starts screaming at me that if I have a problem with how they operate I should just go and do my own thing.’

Chris smiled: ‘That’s when the idea started for doing Youthwake.’

Youthwake would be a youth-focused wakeboarding club, with cheap prices and good coaching, ‘I wanted to teach young kids how to wakeboard, because when I was young nobody ever taught me.’ By the end of the year he had attracted enough sponsors to take out a bank loan and buy a boat. A year after his accident, Chris had Youthwake up and running, at a spot within walking distance of the waterskiing club. ‘I wanted to teach them a lesson that throwing half the young generation out was a big mistake. They lost all their wakeboarders to us. We had the better boat, better prices, and better equipment - there was no reason to stay.’

Chris managed to get back on the water the year after his accident. ‘It felt great. I was the happiest person ever! I got a custom made brace to save my knee from getting torn, so I felt very safe. I wakeboarded a couple of times but after I’d proven it to myself I just lost interest in it. I was having more fun managing the club and teaching kids to learn the sport than actually being behind the boat. This year I haven’t even wakeboarded once. I’m over it.’

Chris recently stepped back from day to day running of Youthwake. Now his main priority is the wider world of Luxembourg water skiing and wakeboarding. At first, Youthwake got the cold shoulder from the Luxembourg Water Ski Federation and were refused membership. But Youthwake couldn’t be ignored. They started organising international meetings, hosting the Lowlands contest for Benelux wakeboarders with as many as a thousand visitors and competitors. Eventually, in a symbolic triumph for the younger generation, Chris was elected vice-president of the federation, which was soon renamed as The Luxembourg Water Skiing and Wakeboarding Federation.

Chris’s vision is for a Luxembourg national wakeboard team with a dedicated national coach and a structured training programme. This isn’t just about having
Chris Hilbert wakeboarding in 2009, with his knee well protected (photo courtesy of Chris Hilbert).

some successful Luxembourg wakeboarders, it’s central to developing the sport in the country. ‘After Hülsemann and Calmes have we ever had a good water-skier? Yes, a couple, but they didn’t get their knowledge from the people that were good before them; they got it from international competitions. That’s fine, but it’s not how you grow the sport. We want people in the national team to teach the kids of tomorrow how great the sport is, - something that has never happened in water skiing.’

This was all very admirable, but a question had been bugging me throughout my trip: why bother to organise on a Luxembourgish basis at all? Why not simply send the best Luxembourgish wakeboarders to train just across the border in France, Belgium or Germany. Chris responded instantly: ‘Because people would laugh - our best riders are not on the same level. Right now we do not have the level to compete with the big countries: we have to build it up first. It’s going to take a generation, but with a trainer who oversees the whole thing, it’s going to work.’

Chris’s vision also made me think again about the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg. For Chris, being a top wakeboarder/water skier meant being a role model, an educator, an upstanding member of the community. Perhaps this approach could finally reconcile the elite focus of Sylvie Hülsemann and the mass focus of Jean Calmes. Chris will have to be careful though. While he is passionate about growing the support, his relative youth, his intensity and his palpable frustration with inefficiency don’t sit easily with being part of a community that still contains a lot of genial but uncommitted hobby skiers.

In January 2012, after I had returned from Luxembourg, I heard from Chris that his vision had been accepted by the LWWF. The national team was becoming a reality, under the tutelage of Chris’s old mentor, the Belgian coach Olivier Delefortrie. Four out of six clubs now have dedicated wakeboard boats. In 2011 it was announced - to the astonishment of the LWWF who hadn’t been involved in the plans - that the municipality of Schengen was going to build a cable wakeboarding park. Cable wakeboarding, in which the boarder is towed by a cable, is a related discipline that, while it doesn’t have a wake to jump, allows a whole set of different tricks. It’s much cheaper than wakeboarding behind a boat and, given Schengen’s location at the apex of Luxembourg, France and Germany, could well see Luxembourg become an important destination for wakeboarders from three countries. The future is definitely
So who is the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg?

The more time I spent there, the more complex my mission to find the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg seemed. I’d met the two most successful ever, yet identifying the current best one was not as simple. The first problem was whether to count wakeboarders as water skiers. Wakeboarding and water skiing certainly have different cultures and there can be friction between aficionados of the two disciplines. But as the name of the Luxembourg Water Skiing and Wakeboard Federation suggests - waterskiing and wakeboarding are definitely part of the same world.

My task was made both easier and more difficult by the decline in water skiing. There was no national championship in 2011, due to a lack of competitors, so I couldn’t simply meet the person who came top. The pool of candidates was very small. The same three names kept coming up again and again. None of them were women, so that solved a potentially tricky problem of choosing between male and female champions. What all the candidates have in common is that they are members of an endangered species. They are committed water skiers within a scene that is abandoning the sport in favour of wakeboarding. They may be the Last Water Skiers in Luxembourg, big fish in a pond that is draining fast. One symptom of this was that Chris Hilbert, who is after all the vice-president of the LWWF, did not know many water skiers and seemed pretty uninterested in them. I had to push hard to get their details from him.

The first candidate is Patrick Girst. He is 22 years old and is currently studying civil engineering in Germany. He was out of the country when I visited but he did manage to answer some questions via e-mail. He told me that he has been skiing since he was 5 and he proudly stated that ‘at the time I was the youngest skier in Luxembourg.’ He has been involved in the Luxembourg water ski scene ever since. ‘I know a lot of people but they ski just for fun and most of them are wakeboarders, he wrote to me.’ Had he ever been tempted to try wakeboarding? ‘Tournament water skiers have a saying: if it’s easy, it’s wakeboarding.’

In summer Patrick tries to ski every day. His achievements include the national slalom title in 2010 but his biggest achievement was winning the Benelux Championship in 2009. He has competed throughout Europe and in a number of World Championships. Patrick’s goal at the moment is to beat the national jump record of 36.6 metres. He left me in no doubt who he thinks should be awarded the accolade: ‘When you combine slaloms and jumps I am the best water skier in Luxembourg at the moment.’ But he didn’t mention tricks, nor did he mention overall (jumps, tricks and slalom).

Joel Tessaro, the next candidate, was also out of the country when I visited - he’s studying physiotherapy in Amsterdam. He started water skiing at the age of 14 and took to the sport immediately. He concentrates on slalom exclusively. ‘I tried
jumping, but I’m much too tall. I even wakeboarded but it’s just too slow for me. The boat will travel at about 36 kilometres per hour but we travel at close to 60 kilometres per hour and it can go up to 110, 120 kilometres per hour. That’s just awesome!"

Joel was a big vague about his achievements. He won the Luxembourg title in slalom ‘maybe twice’ but is much more interested in competing internationally. ‘I rather prefer finishing fifth or sixth in an international championship than winning in Luxembourg actually.’ He has competed in tournaments across Europe, as well as the European and World Championships. He finished ‘either fifteenth or fourteenth’ in an Under 21 European Championship held in the UK, and in his best season was ranked in the top 40 in Under 21 slalom in the world.

To get some clarity, I looked up the world rankings on the website of the International Water Ski and Wakeboard Federation. I wanted to see how Joel compared with Patrick Girst. In 2006 Joel was ranked 117th in slalom and Patrick 380th; in 2007 Joel was 119th and Patrick 383rd. After 2007 the record stops - neither Joel nor Patrick were doing enough of the right kind of competitions to be ranked internationally. In Joel’s case this was because he had serious injury problems ‘My ankle has been sprained seven or eight times and I basically have no more ligaments in my left foot. I had surgery three years ago and only started training again last summer.’ Joel says that his personal best at slalom makes him the national record holder. Despite the time out of the sport he appears to have achieved more in slalom than Patrick has. So I’m moderately confident in saying that Joel is better than Patrick in terms of his track record.

The final candidate was Jeff Bidinger. I met him at his house in the spa town of Mondorf-Les-Bains, 20 minutes east of Luxembourg City. Mondorf is the home of cycling’s Schleck brothers, unquestionably Luxembourg’s most successful sportsmen at the moment, and Jeff lives round the corner from one of them. Jeff’s house was a pristine slice of Luxembourg bourgeois comfort, a neat modern residence. It was also a little empty - he has two children but is divorced and although the kids live close by, this was clearly the house of someone with a lot of time to devote to his surroundings. Jeff is 42 and is an automotive engineer, working in the municipality’s repair centre in Luxembourg City.

Jeff has no family history in water skiing and only started in the sport in his early teens: ‘I learnt it very fast and even on the first day I said to the trainer that I wanted to try on one ski. It was perfect and my trainer soon saw I had talent.’ He progressed rapidly on tricks, slalom and jumps and in his mid-teens began competing.

Jeff specialises in jumps and tricks and has been national champion fifteen times in each, including at the last National Championships in 2010. Slalom is his worse discipline and he has never held the national title. Jeff was at one time the national record holder in jumps. He also competed internationally, attending World and European Championships where he was ‘happy when I was not last.’

Like Joel, Jeff has tried wakeboarding himself, if only to show the doubters what a water skier can really do. ‘We have a lot of guys who are wakeboarding in the
club and I am always practising my tricks and they say “Oh what’s this? It’s not really sport”, so one day I said “Okay, give me a wakeboard”. I’d never been on the wakeboard but was able to perform a few tricks that guys who were three or four years into wakeboarding could never do. I said to them: “Now do you see? Wakeboarding comes from trick skiing.”

Trick skiing involves similar skills to wakeboarding, but is much more difficult. ‘The trick ski is flat. You can ride it on the side, on the front, and it’s a lot more unstable than a wakeboard.’ The problem is that although it’s more difficult, it’s not as spectacular. Have a look at videos of world-class trick skiers and wakeboarders on Youtube: wakeboarders perform a dazzling array of flips and turns in the air; although trick skiers also do some flips, much of what they do involves intricate, technical moves with the tow rope that are incredibly hard to perform but aren’t very photogenic.

Jeff stubbornly continues to push himself in tricks and jumps, ploughing up and down the Moselle and travelling several times a year to training camps in France. He looks back with nostalgia at the old days when there were more competitive skiers: ‘Twenty years ago there were always around ten guys who travelled around in the summer to go to different competitions - that’s something the wakeboarders today don’t have.’ He is almost certainly best in tricks in Luxembourg today.

In overall water skiing, despite his poor slalom skiing, Jeff is probably still the top all-rounder given his high standard in both tricks and jumps. Internationally, Jeff mostly competes in the over 35s category nowadays. In 2010 he won the Benelux championship in jumps for that class. In the 2011 world rankings, Jeff was placed 31 in men’s over 35s jumps and 34 in men’s over 35s tricks.

There are few people to rival Jeff in commitment to the sport. Like others I met, he considers his club to be a ‘big family, a perfect social life.’ He’s there in summer three or four times a week, training, coaching and driving the boat. He’s also the president. Jeff’s daughters, aged 9 and 13, also water ski and wakeboard.

After we’d talked, Jeff showed me his impeccably laid out photo albums. They were full of snaps of happy times by the Moselle, pictures of him jumping, tricking or slaloming, together with triumphant photos of Jeff being presented with cups and medals. He was also keen to show me his photos with the stars and characters of the water skiing world and seemed incredulous when I admitted I knew none of them. Jeff then took me to his basement, where he keeps his equipment. I admired his long, state-of-the-art
jumping skis, together with his trick and slalom skis. Jeff showed me the self-made training equipment for the winter months and his battered helmet, waiting expectantly on a shelf for next year’s season. Then he got out a cardboard box, filled with trophies and medals.

At that moment I realised - Jeff was the one.

Heroes

Choosing Jeff as Best Water Skier in Luxembourg was based partially on a gut feeling, a sense that his was a sporting champion’s house. It may well be that Joel Tessaro and Patrick Girst will eclipse him in due course, but at the age of 42 it’s quite something that he can compete with them at all. Jeff never gave up: he contends with living in a country with a fraction of the facilities that other places do, he doesn’t let today’s lack of water skiers bring him down, he came back from injury even better than before: he still has fire in the belly. And he gives back, teaching and helping to run his club year in year out.

Whether these are the right criteria for judging the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg I don’t know. But Jeff certainly deserves an award of some kind.

To be honest, the longer the project continued, the more uncomfortable I became with having to make a final judgement. All the water skiers and wakeboarders I met were heroes in their own way. Too often we think of heroes as people who are idolised by millions, or who do something suicidally brave, or who have a skill that virtually no one else has. But there is another kind of heroism that millions of people possess. It’s an everyday heroism, the kind that few people notice:

You can find it in Jeff Bidinger and John Hoffman - stubbornly keeping going with water skiing despite its declining popularity.

You can find it in Patrick Girst and Joel Tessaro - having a burning ambition to be better.

You can find it in Andy Lamesch and Marc Wester - persisting with wakeboarding despite their self-professed modest talent.

You can find it in Chris Hilbert - coming back from a horrific injury to change forever one small corner of the world.
You can find it in Sylvie Hülsemann - staying modest and discreet despite success on a world stage.
You can find it in Jean Calmes - working for years to grow the Luxembourg water skiing scene and refusing to dwell on the bad times.

These people aren't heroes despite being water skiers from Luxembourg, they are heroes because they are water skiers from Luxembourg. Being a dedicated water skier or wakeboarder there means battling the limitations of the scene. No one is likely to become famous or to earn money from the sport, and there is none of the infrastructure and support that you find in larger countries. Hülsemann and Calmes aside, the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg is likely to be insignificant globally, but even achieving that requires enormous dedication and sacrifice.

On reflection, the water skiing scene there is not unusual. Stamp collectors, churchwardens, brass band musicians, trade unionists - most of them toil in obscurity. It is this dedication that makes the world worth living in, that ensures that there are hordes of small worlds within it where people can find meaning, friendship and delight. Who needs anything more?

So I did it: I met the Best Water Skier in Luxembourg. The five days I spent there were among the happiest and most hectic of my life. I ran from appointment to appointment, learning more and more all the time, like a sponge, soaking up all that Luxembourg water skiing goodness. But I still hadn’t seen anyone wakeboard or water ski.

On my final day, I took a bus from Luxembourg City to the far east of the country. As the bus descended the steep vine-filled hillsides, I finally saw the Moselle river. I stopped at Remich, a riverside town joined by a bridge to Germany on the other bank. The rain was falling heavily and I ran from the bus stop to seek the shelter of the bridge. There I found a bench, huddled into my coat and stared at the Moselle. It was, to be frank, not a spectacular sight: brown, not particularly fast-flowing and not particularly wide. At this time of year the pleasure cruisers that are the bane of a water skier’s life were moored to the bank and I saw no other river traffic.

I wasn’t deflated though. After all, water skiing and wakeboarding are as much about transcending water as celebrating it. I knew that however humble the Moselle looked, it was a river of dreams, triumphs, tears and frustrations. On this modest stretch of water Sylvie Hülsemann and Jean Calmes pushed each other to ever greater achievements, Jeff Bidinger fought his lonely battle for water skiing glory, Marc Wester got concussed and Chris Hilbert taught the wakeboarders of tomorrow to love the sport. As the rain fell I felt a pang of envy - I wanted to be a Luxembourg water skier too.
4. Luxembourgish translation according to Chris Hilbert.
5. Luxembourgish translation according to Jean and Trixie Calmes.
Afterword

Hopefully, the story doesn’t end here. This was the first mission in a project to meet other big fish in small ponds all over the world. I want to delve into other small, obscure worlds, meet more people and steep myself in more stories. I want to show that the Luxembourg water skiing scene was not a fluke - that other randomly chosen worlds will be just as interesting. So my next missions will hopefully be:

- The top novelist in Surinam
- The best heavy metal band in Botswana
- The Icelandic Special Forces
- The best soft drink in Malta
- The top politician on Alderney

I need your help! The rest of the project will only happen if enough people fund it. So go to www.unbound.co.uk and look for my project page. As with this chapter, you can support at a number of different levels and there are goodies available to generous supporters.

Onward!
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