

## Adaptive water skiers showcase sport's accessibility



Visually impaired water skier Ryan Riehl makes a jump at Albert Dyck Park, under the watchful eye of guide Dave Wassill.

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On a perfectly sunny day at Abbotsford's Albert Dyck Park, Ryan Riehl and Dave Wassill ride shoulder-to-shoulder on water skis as the tow boat carves a lazy loop at the east end of the lake.

The two make idle chit-chat – cracking jokes, good-natured teasing and such.

As the boat completes its turn and accelerates toward the ramp in the middle of the lake, it starts to "get serious," as Riehl puts it. Wassill begins a countdown, and at the last possible moment, he peels off to the right, leaving Riehl on his own. Riehl hits the ramp and launches skyward.

It's an amazing adrenaline rush.

What's even more amazing is the fact Riehl is able to compete in water ski jumping in the first place.

The 25-year-old Saskatoon, Sask. resident is the first visually impaired member of Canada's adaptive water ski

team. Wassill is his guide. They showcased their teamwork on Tuesday and Wednesday, during the Canadian Water Ski and Adaptive Championships at Albert Dyck Park.

"I'm classified as a V2," Riehl explained. "I have tunnel vision. I can see shadows, colour and I have light perception.

"It started deteriorating when I was 10 years old (due to a tumour). I'm 25 years old now, and I've learned to adapt to it."

Riehl was one of two "adaptive" athletes competing at water ski nationals in Abbotsford this week. The other is Pete Andrews, who competes in the paraplegic division. Coincidentally, he's also from Saskatoon.

Both athletes have had success internationally. Riehl won four bronze medals at last year's World Disabled Championships in Vichy, France – for visually impaired jump, trick, slalom and overall. Andrews, 45, won the jump event at the same meet, soaring 19.3 metres to clinch Canada's first-ever gold medal at the Worlds.

"It was quite the rush," Andrews recalled. "It was the first gold medal ever for Canada, and it was a goal I'd set for myself. To achieve it was amazing."

Andrews tried water skiing for the first time five years ago at a wheelchair sports clinic, using specialized ski equipment that enables him to compete in a seated position.

Riehl got involved three years ago when someone – he still doesn't know who – passed along his name to a coach who was looking to get more visually impaired athletes to try water skiing. Riehl had prior experience skiing on snow, and a bit of a daredevil streak to go with.

"I picked it up right away," Riehl recalled. "I went out to our club in Saskatoon, called the Rat Hole. I got up on the skis on my first try and took three trips around the lake, and about a week and a half later I was at disabled nationals."

In recent years, Water Ski and Wakeboard Canada (WSWC) has integrated the adaptive and able-bodied national championships. Andrews said the WSWC is one of the most progressive national sport organizations.

"If you look at the international scene, Canada's the only country I'm aware of that integrates adaptive skiers into the nationals," Andrews pointed out. "Two or three years ago they combined them, and I like it. We get to see the best skiers in Canada ski, and they get a little exposure to us. It's a good fit."

Furthermore, the WSWC is adding technology to aid the adaptive skiers. Case in point was Wednesday's visually impaired slalom event, where Riehl participated with the aid of a "bat blaster." The machine, which is mounted in the competition boat, measures the angle of the tow rope. When the skier is a certain distance from the centre line of the boat path, an audio blast signals the athlete to slalom back in the other direction. For visually impaired athletes, the effect is similar to rounding physical buoys.

According to Riehl, Wednesday's competition marked the first time the bat blaster had been used at Canadian nationals.

"I'm kind of laying the pathway for other visually impaired athletes to get into the sport," he said. "I'm hoping to get through all the hard paths so that coaches and officials will be able to say, 'Oh yeah, I've done this before,' instead of, 'How are we going to do this?'"

- The Canadian Water Ski and Adaptive Championships continue on Friday and Saturday, beginning at 9 a.m. both days. Friday's slate includes the elite men's and women's slalom, jump and trick competitions, while Saturday features the open men's and women's events. The national championships are projected to wrap up around 1:30 p.m. on Saturday.