

Björn Dunkerbeck

Easy Rider

He speaks the language of the sea, feels the rhythm of the waves and senses the breath of the skies. He is simply the best windsurfer of all time.

It's amazing what you can do with a board that's 264 centimeters long, 34 centimeters wide, weighs 4.2 kilos and comes equipped with a sail: you can ride mountainous waves, rise ten meters into the air, and do a flip, elegantly holding one hand behind your back at the same time. Or you can conquer the world's most dangerous waves, the kind that roll boulders around in the surf instead of pebbles. Or you can strap on a leaden vest, tack into the wind and sail down the beach at almost 80 kilometers an hour. Those are just some of the things you can do – provided your name is Björn Dunkerbeck, which makes you not only the best windsurfer in the world but also of all time.

How many times has he been world champion? Dunkerbeck has to think about it. He's not all that sure, he says. Our research reveals 33 official titles, the first dating back 14 years when he had just turned 18 and didn't even have his driver's license yet. Since that year, 1988, he's been dominating his sport like no other athlete before or since. Not even Robby Naish, the hero of the early days, was able to leave the kind of footsteps that Björn could follow in. Björn became "overall world champion" – and thus the best windsurfer in the world – 12 times in a row. His superiority was so apparent that most of his potential competitors' only hope for fame was in entering specialized competitions. That reduced the number of potential competitors until there was no longer any point in awarding the title, and the award was abandoned.

Björn: the name summons visions of two blue eyes, always on the lookout for the best waves. But they're not the blue eyes of Paul Newman or Terence Hill – they're the piercing eyes of a Viking, constantly searching land and sea for booty. Significantly, these eyes peer from a Viking body that prefers a Viking lifestyle: life with the sea, transoceanic voyages, and a love of pleasure in its most worldly aspects. You should see Björn sitting at dinner with several plates heaped with food in front of him. Then his eyes take on a warm expression, as if the Norman conqueror in him were gazing contentedly on a plundered monastery, enjoying the flickering flames of its destruction in the sunset.

The impression he makes on his modern enemies, the competitors of the PWA (Professional Windsurfers Association) Worldtour is similar: it as though a Viking boat had appeared offshore. The nickname others have given him is pretty unimaginative:

The Terminator. In contrast to the ski star Hermann Maier, who turned a nickname into a business concept, it doesn't do much for Dunkerbeck. "It's nonsense," he says, pointing to all the negative qualities that are associated with being a terminator: arrogance, invincibility, inhumanity. When he makes public appearances, Dunkerbeck may seem to be reserved and distant, but it's only to protect himself from the consequences of his prominence, as he himself says. "I don't open my personal life to just anyone."

So is Dunkerbeck's character something like the proverbial land of plenty, Cockaigne? Do you have to eat your way through a thick layer of porridge before you reach the land of milk and honey? Dunkerbeck's friends would tend to agree. The man is honest, dependable, generous and straightforward, they say. He shows no trace of the arrogance often found among the best of the best; he treats every hotel doorman with respect and has a friendly word for every subordinate.

There's a refreshing anecdote to illustrate this straightforwardness. A friend with good media connections had finally managed to get the surfing world champion invited to appear on one of the most popular German TV game shows. But Dunkerbeck canceled his appearance at the last minute because the waves were too good to miss.

The same straightforwardness can be seen in his business relationships: the Austrian board manufacturer F2 was the first company to sign a contract with young Dunkerbeck, and Björn remained loyal to them for more than 15 years. He was one of the first top athletes to be sponsored by Red Bull – and the partnership continues today. Equally legendary and of almost equally long duration were his advertising spots for the chocolate spread Nutella. Does he really eat Nutella? He does.

How does one get to be the best among the best? Does it take some kind of exceptional talent, as is often assumed; is it inborn? And how does a Dutchman become a star among all the beautiful people from Hawaii?

The blending of the worlds started with the Dunkerbeck family itself: his father is Dutch, his mother Danish. His father provided the citizenship, the mother the land of his birth. Young Björn grew up in Denmark, until his father closed down his textile business at the beginning of the 1970s and moved the family to Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands. There he opened a surfing school at Pozo, the best spot on the island. Björn was six years old at the time, but another two years would pass before he climbed onto a board himself. But from that moment on, he was practically inseparable from the water and trained like a man possessed, determined to make waves. And if you think this combination of ingredients was a recipe for becoming a world champion, you're not far from the truth. As we all know, Michael Schumacher's father worked at a kart racetrack, and in that case, too, his son was almost wedded to the asphalt.

At the age of 15 Björn was already ranked third in the European championships and ready for his first season in the World Cup of surfers, the PWA Worldtour. Of course a drop-out and surf freak like Dunkerbeck, Senior showed understanding for his son's ambition, but nevertheless felt compelled to wag an admonishing finger: "If you finish among the top ten, you can keep it up. Otherwise you have to stay in school." It wasn't a real challenge for the 16-year-old, and it wasn't a bad reward, either. Dunki,

as his friends call him, finished seventh and was spared the ordeal of further schooling. A great career was underway. Robby Naish, now transformed from an idol to a competitor, quickly recognized the talent of young Dunkerbeck, exclaiming after his first win: "Fuck, he's done it. From now on there's no stopping him." In his second complete Worldtour, Dunki took second place, and everything from the third season on is history.

But perhaps even more surprising than his rapid rise to fame is the fact that he has been able to remain at the top of his profession for so many years. After all, Dunkerbeck is reigning champion in "wave," one of the more rough-and-tumble disciplines. The ingredients for his success don't appear to have changed. If anything, his physical superiority (height 1.91 meters, just under 100 kilos) has grown, as has his ability to recognize the physiognomy of a wave, to sense its rhythm. This feeling for the way water moves also makes Dunkerbeck a darling of the "shapers," the name given to the designers of competition boards. And he's legendary for taking good care of the material he's given.

In contrast to most world-class surfers, Dunkerbeck's body shows almost no scars. A broken collar bone was, appropriately enough, the result of snowboarding.

One might say: this year Dunkerbeck is celebrating his 25th anniversary on the stage – that's how long he's been riding a board. At 33, does he feel his age – in his bones, in his head? He does, he says, especially in his approach to life and to his sport. Today he no longer takes part in every competition, feels no need to participate in every event. "I do it if I can have fun doing it." That sounds wonderful.

He also has fun with his own company on Gran Canaria, Proof, which manufactures the finest competition boards for surf aficionados. The "Ferrari of boards" (Dunkerbeck) of monocoque construction are sold primarily on the Internet (www.proofboard.com) and for the most part are tailor-made.

Dunkerbeck also has fun traveling and discovering, aided by his talent for languages. The school drop-out speaks perfect Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, German, English and Spanish. Ironically he hardly speaks the language of the country whose citizenship he still holds, Dutch. At home Danish was his mother tongue, in every sense.

The pleasure he gets from travel is associated, of course, with the search for the best surfing spots in less-known corners of our planet, and that's also the title of his latest project: *The Search*. This cinematographic presentation will not only make Dunkerbeck an ambassador of his sport, but also of the associated lifestyle, of which he is pretty much the finest living embodiment. The 1.5 million miles currently in his frequent-flyer accounts is the direct result of his various domiciles: Pozo on Gran Canaria has remained his home, but he also owns a house in Hawaii and in Andorra. It seems likely that the latter residence is connected with tax advantages, but Dunkerbeck has a different view about this point on his map of life as well: "It's beautiful here – like the Alps, but without the Alpine people."

And the tanned, blond Dutchman still has fun in surfing competitions. "Going up against the best athletes in the world remains a part of me." Another part of it is winning; he embraces the Olympic ideal only to turn it into its opposite: "It's only

whether you win or lose, not how you play the game.” And he sees his future with the Worldtour in a similar manner: “When I can no longer compete for the championship but am only trying finish fifth, I’ll quit.” At the moment this danger does not seem to lurking on the horizon. This year again, he has an excellent chance of successfully defending his world championship title.

His new casual attitude toward life has led inevitably to new challenges. In addition to working on *The Search* this summer, Dunkerbeck has also been actively pursuing the speed record for sailing. The nine-year-old world record stands at 46.52 knots – about 85 kilometers per hour – and was set by a trimaran of extremely complicated construction. The boat *Yellow Pages* was a fragile vessel with pontoons made of wood and aluminum. It was piloted by two sailors in a tight cockpit and weighed only about 90 kilos. The fastest surfer in the world, Thierry Bielak of France, was only slightly slower at 45.34 knots, but to attain that speed he needed a purpose-built 750-meter-long canal in order to eliminate the influence of the swell on the open seas.

Although Dunkerbeck has also had scientific help from Barcelona’s Polytechnic University – including a special aeronautic sail as well as extremely fine fins made of aluminum – his attempt to set a new record failed because the winds that usually sweep across the surfing center at the Playas de Jandia on Fuerteventura at that time of year were not strong enough. In any case, a repeat of this high-speed surfing scenario may be expected, some place or another in the world.

On many of his future journeys around the globe, Dunkerbeck will have company. The man known not only for his love of the sea and an opulent evening meal but also for his record of success with the ladies got married this summer. His wife, Maria, who is Spanish, has promised him a great deal of tolerance and is likely to see her promise put to the test, at least with regard to her husband’s travel. And there’s a reason why she strokes her stomach while she’s promising: a child is on the way. They’re expecting a daughter by the end of the year. And when Björn speaks the name he and Maria have chosen, Alba, he suddenly becomes an expectant father, just like millions of others: full of pride, curiosity, and anticipatory joy. Alba was not chosen because of the city of wine and white truffles in northwestern Italy, of course, but because of its meaning in Spanish: dawn.

Melodramatic? Not Dunkerbeck. Emotional outbursts and false exuberance are foreign to his nature. So even when he utters sentences that would be met by a pitying smile if they came from anyone else, you can only quietly nod in agreement: “The sea is like a brother. You have to respect it but you also enjoy its company.” Is that so. Then climb aboard!