

Interview with Bjorn Dunkerbeck

On a recent visit to the Neil Pryde Design Centre on Maui, Neil Pryde Brand Manager Simon Narramore took the opportunity to interview Bjorn Dunkerbeck, the man who plans to break the current world speed sailing record and hopefully smash the elusive 50 knot barrier too. This is what he had to say:

Question: So tell us a little about how you came to be challenging the world speed record?

Dunkerbeck: Well it's been quite a few years since I last competed in a speed competition. There used to be a number of events and they're usually a lot of fun. There's nothing quite as exciting as riding at the very limits, and I think it was this that made them so enjoyable. But then I got thinking about why I stopped the competitions, or what I felt was wrong about them, and basically it comes down to the number of sailors taking part.

As it is, you only get a few days of "perfect conditions" during which records might get set - 45-50 knots of wind and really smooth water is what you're looking at these days if you want to set records - so right there you've got a huge luck factor. And if you have too many people out on the water taking turns, then the number serious of attempts you get in those perfect conditions will be dramatically reduced.

So this time I'm looking to create a situation where I can maximise my time on the water in the right conditions and really take a serious shot at a new record. It's all about being in the right place, with the right equipment, all tuned-in, and ready to go when the conditions arrive.

Question: We understand the attempt you made last year on the record was really more of a fact-finding exercise than a serious attempt - what did you learn from that?

Dunkerbeck: Well ... probably time was the main issue last year. An opportunity suddenly arose, we were talking with some people who were willing to put on an attempt and pay for the set-up costs and the timing, and basically all I needed to do was show up and give it my best shot. Without any special preparations or without any specific development we figured we could push the existing RS sails, given the right conditions, and that we could make a serious attempt on the record.

As it turned out we didn't actually get the conditions we really needed. We'd get the right wind, but then the water would be too choppy and one way or another it never really came together. Eventually we ran out of time and had to pack it in. But it was certainly a useful exercise, we still learned a lot from pushing the gear, you learn so much from sailing equipment at the limits like that, so it waQ't time wasted. I guess you learn something every time you go on the water one way or

Question: So how long have you been working on the new sails?

Dunkerbeck: We've already put several months into these new sails and they keep getting better and better. Hopefully these next few weeks before July we'll squeeze even more speed out of them. I'd already confidently say they're several knots faster than an RS out there on the speed course and we're just finding ways to make them even smoother and more stable. It seems that the more sails we make the better they get.

Question: From speaking with Neil Pryde's Chief Sail Designer Robert Stroj, it sounds like the real challenge in the sail development has been stability and getting the shape all nicely locked-in?

Dunkerbeck: Yes that's right, it's essentially been about efficiency, stability and acceleration - it's this combination that's going to make you go faster in the end.

Question: And boards, what have you been looking for there?

Dunkerbeck: We've made quite a number of boards, so far I think we're up to 12 prototypes that we've gone through of various sizes, but it's boards of between 35cm and 37cm where we'll be focussing on for breaking records. We've been looking at different tail widths and different concaves.

Actually the really good thing about having a private speed trial is that you have a month to try different equipment. As it is, I have already put aside most of June for testing as well so I'm hoping to log somewhere in the region of 100 hours on speed boards even before we begin the official record build up. Then we've allowed ourselves 4 weeks of official timed runs - weather and conditions permitting that is.

Question: I understand that you've developed some "top secret" new method for smoothing the water during runs - are you at liberty to tell us more about that?

Dunkerbeck: Yes, we have been working on a couple of different methods of eliminating chop in the water within the boundaries of the speed course - with the water conditions under control, we'll hopefully only be dependent on the wind showing. If this all works out then I'm looking at getting quite a few more hours of optimal conditions and these days you really do need the conditions to be perfect if you want to break the record.

It's not an altogether new method that we're trying, it's certainly been done before, but never quite perfected - all will be revealed when we're down in the Canaries in July. Either way, we're hoping to get it all working in time for the official sessions and to make the most of those extra hours of ideal conditions to set a new record.

It's actually all about increasing the number of hours in which you have record-breaking conditions - and since we get those conditions so rarely you really want to make the most of it. The more time you have, the more runs you can make, you can try different board and fin combinations and really get your gear dialled-in.

For a windsurfer to break this record you firstly need to have a lot of wind. The big trimarans like Yellow Pages can attempt records in 25-28 knots of wind, but above that speed the boats become unstable, so there's a relatively narrow window where they can operate. For a windsurfer you can usually go faster than the wind speed, but to break the 46-50 knots records we'll still need winds in excess of 40 knots and we'll need water that has no chop, so that's an awful lot of variables that we can't control.

I'd prefer to do the attempt in the actual open ocean rather than in a prepared speed ditch because that feels more natural. Windsurfing is a very natural sport and we'd obviously prefer to see the event held in more natural surroundings. For this reason the chop reduction measures we've been developing would look and feel much more natural, but if all else fails I guess we'll have to go to France and dig another speed ditch and give that a go instead.

Question: So the official plan involves three attempts in three different venues?

Dunkerbeck: Actually I'm more interested in breaking the record more than the place where I break it. We have first to break the current record of 46.5 knots and then we're looking at the magic 50-knot barrier. In the right conditions I'm actually very confident we can break the current speed record but 50 knots is going to be a little different. That's probably going to take longer than the first session we have planned for the Canaries in July. So we now have plans to follow this up with two or three more attempts within the coming 10 months.

Question: We've been talking a lot about the gear, but the other variable in the windsurfing equation is the human in control of the rig - have you been undergoing special physical or mental training for this?

Dunkerbeck: Well you know how it is as an athlete, the fitter you feel, the better you perform - so working on my fitness has always been something I've done. It doesn't matter if it's preparing for the World Cup or if I'm just going wave sailing here at Ho'okipa, the fitter you are the better you'll be out on the water.

Right now I'm only focussing on Wave sailing and Speed sailing, which is a perfect combination - when there's no waves I can go speed sailing instead. I actually like the combination; I enjoy the challenge of going at the limit. It's also good to have the time to put into this, rather than rushing from one race venue to another every second week as we did in the old days.

Question: That was actually going to be my next question - now that you're not so involved in the World Tour how has this affected your approach to windsurfing?

Dunkerbeck: If anything my windsurfing has got better and better. The more time I get to spend in the water the better I windsurf and now that I'm away from the structure of the tour I can pick and choose when and where I sail, so I'm sailing when I want in the conditions I want, I don't have to follow a certain pattern.

It's an unfortunate aspect of contests that you become so focused on your heat that you don't get to windsurf all that much in the end. When you're free sailing you can do 4 or 5 hours on the water whenever the conditions allow for it - so like I've said I can definitely feel that my windsurfing has got better.

Question: And you're still as excited about windsurfing as you ever were? –

Dunkerbeck: Yes, although I'm probably less inclined to go out in bad conditions these days, unless I have to (laughing). I've never really enjoyed light-wind sailing or choppy water, over these past few years I've sailed in what are undoubtedly perfect conditions.

With The Search project I've been able to travel to some amazing places and sail in perfect, empty waves - having the time to discover these places and to go there in your own time is really the ultimate, it's perfection. One of the shortcomings of running from contest to contest and always focussing on beating everyone else you simply don't have the time or the space to enjoy it.

Question: You've had one or two additions to the Dunkerbeck family this past year - you're now married and you have a baby daughter - how has this affected your lifestyle?

Dunkerbeck: Well little Alba was six months old yesterday and so far we've been everywhere together. It's still a wonderful experience; every day is full of surprises. She seems to love the water and she swims every day if it's warm. She's already been out on the ocean on surfboards and windsurf boards and looking ahead with

her growing up around the ocean I guess it's very likely she'll find her own way out into the water as well, who knows?

Anyway like they say, you never know what it's going to be like until you finally become a dad and I've got to say that I'm really very happy that I've found Maria my wife and now with little Alba as well, and I'm pretty sure that this is not going to be our last addition to the family. I'll be sure to keep you posted on that! (Laughin)