

FLUID FOUNDATIONS

Episode 5: Tacking

Summer is still in full swing, autumnal winds are on the horizon and the prospect of lots of great sessions on the water has never looked so good! With this in mind Jim Collis continues with his Fluid Foundations series - a series of articles that takes us back to 1st principles and concentrates on the core skills and techniques within windsurfing in a simple, easy to follow progression, to help us get the most out of our time on the water! So far Jim has looked at getting planing, the harness, footstrap work and developing our sailing stance, and the series continues this month by looking at improving and fine-tuning our tacks, whether planing or not. Future episodes will concentrate on improving our gybes, and honing our beach and waterstarts.

The Fluid Foundations series is designed as a tool to be used by any level of windsurfer. Whether an entry level sailor looking to improve their skill level, or an advanced sailor who might benefit from taking on board simple tips that will help to hone and consolidate their performance on the water: this series works for one and all!

To help with this easy progression, all the skills within the Fluid Foundations series are broken down and simplified according to Jim's "K.I.S.S." methodology - Keeping It Stupidly Simple (see Jim's KISS Series from June 2007).

K.I.S.S. consists of 5 themes that run through our windsurfing, whether you're an absolute novice or a world champion. These themes underpin the essential core windsurfing skills, helping us to concentrate on the root cause of why a skill works, thereby giving us solid foundations in our skill level, rather than confusing us by concentrating on peripheral aspects that might happen as a result of doing the skill. For example, in a tack - focusing on what our head is looking at to help control our direction rather than thinking about what our little toe is doing as the board steers!

THE 5 THEMES OF K.I.S.S. ARE:

HEAD - Looking where we want to go and being aware of everything around us.

ARMS - Keeping a straight front arm thereby distancing ourselves from the rig and causing us to naturally counter balance against it, and using our back arm to 'sheet in' or draw power from the rig.

LEGS - Adjusting leg and foot positions on the board to keep it flat and us stable!

BODY - Changing our body's position/shape according to conditions and how we feel. For example, if we feel over-powered

or threatened we get lower and if we feel underpowered or inefficient we become more upright.

BREATHE - Remembering to breathe so that we can be relaxed, alert and responsive when sailing which in turn helps us to flow and perform more naturally whatever the skill or conditions.

K.I.S.S. is not some crazy, half-hatched idea but rather just an interpretation of a widely used concept in a huge amount of sports; the idea of bringing everything down to 'base' level and creating firm foundations from which to build a solid skill level and above all complete understanding through simplicity.

In essence, this Fluid Foundations series is about simplifying skills and techniques essential to our windsurfing. This episode concerns improving and fine tuning our tacks whatever the wind or water state and whether we are planing or not.

Before continuing, it is important to point out that this series does not go into equipment and kit set up. For information on this, please refer to Jim's Tech Spec Series from September 2007.

It is also worth mentioning that, in addition to the articles in this series over the next few issues, Jim has recently released a DVD called Fluid Foundations that runs through all of these core skills in windsurfing on film. For more information on obtaining a copy of his DVD please contact Jim on jimcollis@windsurfevolution.co.uk

TACKING

The ability to tack, or “turn around, taking the nose of the board through the eye of the wind”, is without doubt one of the most important skills a windsurfer should have under their belt.

But...why bother with the tack?

As well as being very achievable with the fantastic kit that is available today (including boards that have more width around the mast foot than in the past, and rigs that feel weightless to manoeuvre), the tack is far less intimidating than gybing. This is because we are going into the wind and hence have less power in the sail and our board slows down considerably, whether we are planing or not. The tack is also an integral skill for any level of sailor, whether a beginner or pro, as it keeps us upwind and is achievable in any conditions: from no wind through to nuclear winds, and mirror calm through to very confused water states.

So why on earth is it so common to see people learn the fundamental technique for the tack when first getting into the sport and then consequently ignore it in favour of the gybe once they reach a reasonable technical ability?

Probably the biggest reason for people not tacking is the frustration factor! For example, a huge amount of sailors find they constantly fall in as they go round the mast foot. Understandably, this gets very frustrating and so people end up moving on to another type of turn that feels a little more stable, where their feet tend to stay in one place for longer and they hold onto the rig until the end of the turn... i.e. the gybe.

As well as the frustration factor, older teaching techniques made skills such as the tack seem very tricky. The main culprit for this is the concept of ‘list learning’ (i.e. learning skills by following a sequential order or ‘list’ of things to do one after another). Although we feel great about the fact that we have an ‘easy to follow’ menu for achieving a tack, this technique actually makes the skill harder to achieve, as more often than not we fall in not really knowing what went right and what went wrong. Our heads left brimming with points to think about when the manoeuvre itself only takes a few seconds!

With all of this in mind, we are going to approach the tack, as with all skills that have been covered in the fluid foundations series so far, with pure simplicity in mind, focusing on nothing more than our head, arms, legs, body and breathing.

The easiest way for us to achieve this is to actually break the tack up into its component parts...the beginning, the middle and the end! The great thing about this, is that other than having far less to think about on the whole, we can actually go and practice a particular section of the tack and when we feel comfortable, combine it with the other parts and hey presto...we start to get results without frustration or confusion!

As always, whether you are a first timer or a pro, aiming to do this skill planing or non-planing, and whether we are going out in mirror calm or



Non-planing



Non-planing



Planing



Planing

Whether planing or not, the technique for a tack is fundamentally the same and equally as achievable

THE BEGINNING AND THE END

The great thing about any turn is the fact that the beginning and the end quite simply consist of steering. To improve and fine tune our tacks, probably one of the most important things to do before anything else is to get very good at steering in and out of the wind...and all we need to concentrate on for that is what our head, arms, and body are doing.

TO STEER INTO THE WIND:

Head - Turn your head to look towards the wind (where we want to go, while being aware of those around us!)

Arms - Front arm straight keeping the rig away, back arm gently ‘sheeting in’ to keep some power in the sail...as the rig moves back so your body moves forwards, so there is constant counterbalance between you and rig

N.B. Moving your hands up the boom – front hand up by the head of the boom or on the mast, back hand up by the harness lines – helps to distance you more from the rig for better stability and controls the amount of power in the rig.

Body - Change your body’s position/shape according to the conditions and how you feel... even though your body is moving forwards, keep it low for stability.



Non-planing



Planing

The beginning - steering into the wind

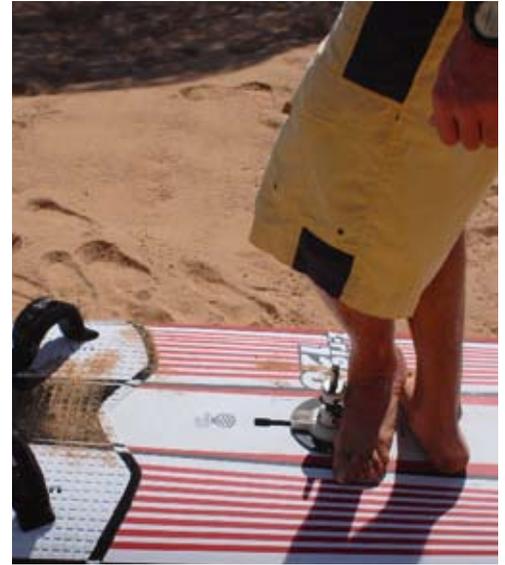
JIM COLLIS TECHNIQUE



Non-planing



Planing



Practicing on land pays huge dividends to our confidence and builds invaluable muscle memory

The end - steering away from the wind

TO STEER OUT OF THE WIND:

Head - Turn your head to look away from the wind (where we want to go!)

Arms - Front arm straight keeping the rig away, back arm 'sheeting in' to draw power from the rig... as the rig moves forwards allow your body to drop back so there is constant counter balance between you and the rig.

N.B. Moving your hands down the boom - front hand close to the harness lines and back hand further down still - helps to give good distance between you and the rig for good counter balance and provides excellent power control.

Body - Change your body's position/shape according to the conditions and how you feel - drop your hip over a bent back leg keeping your front leg straight...you are steering downwind and so need to adopt a more 'control' orientated body position.

As we are practicing this steering, so the other aspects of the 'KISS' formula, our legs and breathing, should be working as always in the background...

Legs - Adjusting leg and foot positions on the board to keep it flat and us stable.

As you steer upwind move your feet up the board to keep it flat - front foot wrapped around the front of the mast foot, back foot up by the front footstrap - and allow your front leg to bend so you move forwards to counterbalance against the rig as it moves back.

As you steer downwind move your feet slightly further back down the board so as to keep the board flat and you stable as the rig moves forwards - front foot level/just behind the mast foot and back foot behind the front strap. Have your legs in a normal sailing position with your front leg straight and driving the nose downwind, and your back leg bent allowing your hip to drop back as the rig moves forwards.

Breathe - Slow breaths to stay relaxed rather than hyperventilating and thereby tensing up!

Top Tip:

Practicing steering up and downwind whilst continuing in the same direction (doing 's-shapes') and not actually turning round, is a very good way of building confidence and solid foundations for great tacks. See how far into wind you can steer before steering back out of the wind again.

THE MIDDLE

Having looked at the start and the finish of the tack, all that is left is to perfect moving around to the other side of the board and rig, when we are up into wind. We do this by stepping around the front of the mast-foot and moving our hands from one side of the boom to the other.

Top Tip:

Rather than heading straight out onto the water to practice this, it is a good idea to build up some muscle memory through practicing on land with a finless board (ideally the one you will be using on the water) and a small rig (so that it is light and easy to manoeuvre on land...no 8.5 metre sails!)

When we feel confident with this part we can then combine it with our refined steering into and out of the wind. Hey presto we are tacking smoothly and seamlessly.

Although many of you will be groaning at the prospect of this part, in actual fact, it is as simple as the beginning and the end parts mentioned above and all we need to focus on are our arms and legs.

Arms - Arms straight and rig away for effective counter balance and stability.

Move hands around the boom (using the mast or just the boom depending on what you are comfortable with) trying to keep movements fluid and to a minimum.

N.B. the key here is to not get bogged down in specific movements with your hands (i.e. whether you use the mast or not) and focus more on minimal and smooth movements and most importantly



remembering to constantly oppose the rig's position...wherever the rig is, you are not!

Legs - Adjust leg and foot positions on the board to keep it flat and us stable.

Move your feet around the mast foot in a "heel to toe" fashion, trying to keep them close to the mast foot and over the centre line of the board, once again making movements smooth and minimal.

N.B. This "heel to toe" technique is very effective for achieving minimal, smooth movements whilst staying over the centre-line as you move around the front of the mast-foot. However, don't contort yourself into an awkward position if your body doesn't like it! The aim is to place the heel of your back foot where the toe of your front foot was...this is definitely something to practice on land!



JIM COLLIS TECHNIQUE



Changing sides on board and on rig during tack

As we are practicing moving around to the other side of the board and the other side of the rig, so the other aspects of the 'KISS' formula, our head, body and breathing, should be working as always in the background...

Head - Looking where we want to go and being aware of everything around us.

As we start to move around the mast foot, whip your head round to look for the exit of the turn (where you want to go) as it will help to make you more dynamic in your movements both with your arms and legs.

Body - Change your body's position/shape according to the conditions and how you feel. If you feel over-powered or threatened get lower and if you feel underpowered or inefficient become more upright.

Breathe - Slow breaths to stay relaxed, rather than hyperventilating and thereby tensing up!

Top Tip:

A lot of people get held back in their development with tacks as they get bogged down in the intricacies of the skill, such as timing during the middle part. In reality, the only aspect about timing that we need to concern ourselves with is the simple fact that a board tends to be more stable, both when it is planing and not planing, when it is still moving. Rather than worry about intricate timings and confusing ourselves with too much going on in our heads, just move around the mast foot before the board has stopped moving, and focus more on what your arms and legs are doing.

As mentioned at the start of this article, we can either make our lives difficult by over complicating and over informing ourselves (and thereby getting frustrated by our lack of success) or we can make life easier by keeping it base and simple. The tack can be broken down into its component parts of beginning, middle and end, and rather than beating our head against a brick wall with a 'list' of 30 things to think about when doing a tack, we can practice a part of the tack in isolation, refine it and tune it until we are happy. If we then combine it back with the other parts, we can achieve better, quicker and far more satisfying results!

Hopefully, this episode on tacks has been useful whether you are a first timer or an old hand looking to fine tune your performance on the water. Next month we will be moving onto gybes and seeing if we can apply the same simplistic approach to our gybing performance, whether planing or not.

In the meantime, get out there and see if keeping it stupidly simple makes a difference to your sailing!

The Fluid Foundations Series is written by Jim Collis - Pro Coach, Instructor Trainer and Test Editor for Windsurf magazine. If you'd like any more information on coaching or training to be an instructor with Jim please contact him on jimcollis@windsurfevolution.co.uk or visit www.windsurfevolution.co.uk

