

KITESURFING

Sarah's in her element in the wind and on the water

Euan Reddie meets a woman who has powered to national success at kitesurfing

FEROCIOUS winds have caused misery and mayhem across the UK this month, but for South Hams woman Sarah Sylvester they have been heaven sent.

Indeed, it's a case of the windier the better as far as the 34-year-old is concerned as blustery conditions help her thrive at her favourite sport – kitesurfing.

Also called kiteboarding, it is a pastime that takes place on the surface of water and encapsulates wakeboarding, windsurfing, surfing, paragliding, and gymnastics in one extreme sport.

Kitesurfers use the power of the wind to

ness, number and tightness of turns on a wave.

In 2009 and 2010, Sarah also took part in the BKSA 'freestyle' competitions, when competitors are judged on tricks and jumps, and she came fifth overall in both years. She also finished second in the 2008 BKSA 'Course Racing' competition.

A keen skier and snowboarder, Sarah's kitesurfing infatuation developed in 2002 when she read an article about someone who had had a kitesurf lesson.

'I was hooked before I'd even given it a go,' she recalled. 'The combination of a watersport with more

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propel themselves across the water on a small surfboard or kiteboard, which is similar to a wakeboard.

Sarah has taken to the sport like the proverbial duck to water since taking it up in 2005, proving so adept at it that she's enjoyed notable success on the national stage.

She recently took part in the annual British Kitesurfing Association (BKSA) 'Wavemasters' competition held in Cornwall, which was held over the course of a week, and took first place in the ladies' division.

Similar to a surfing competition, the competitors are judged on their performance in waves, with points being awarded for commitment and style, as well as the smooth-

adrenaline than surfing, and the ability to do jumps and tricks, is what's hooked me. I had my first lessons while travelling, in warm water and, like most beginners, concentrated on learning tricks. But since discovering wavekiting, I love that too for the thrill of dropping into big waves.'

Sarah's love for kitesurfing became so intense that she even abandoned her career as a project manager to concentrate her energies on the sport, which she practises on Bantham Beach near her West Buckland home.

She added: 'My fiancé and I are self-employed, working from home importing and retailing kitesurfing equipment and doing kite repairs. Because we're self-employed, like a lot of



Sarah Sylvester in action at Bantham

the local kitesurfers we can drop everything when conditions are good for kitesurfing.

'Of all the sports I've done over the years, kitesurfing is the one that's hooked me the most, and it's become my life, meaning I abandoned my previous career in project management. I am a qualified instructor and have taught in England and abroad, though rarely teach now.'

The South African-born kitesurfer is a treasurer of the South Devon Kitesurf Club, which was set up six years ago to promote safe and responsible kitesurfing.

It has now become a social and networking outlet for the members and, in 2008, became affiliated to the British Kitesurfing Association, the sport's national governing body to cement its growing importance.

Prospective members are very welcome to join, Sarah said, although there's no official way of doing this.

She explained: 'It is more about being



Celebrating her first place in the ladies' division of the recent British Kitesurfing Association (BKSA) 'Wavemasters' event

down the beach and getting to know the regulars. There are about 30 regulars; we keep in contact via the website forum, hold regular socials, and we are friendly to newcomers of any age or ability.

'Anyone wanting to get involved, whether as a complete beginner or proficient kitesurfer, should take a look at the website www.sdkc.co.uk, say hello on the forum, or

come to one of our socials. There are plenty of people who kitesurf in south Devon while on holiday or as a one-off, and we would ask that they look at the website for safety info, or talk to one of the regulars, as we have worked hard to maintain access for kitesurfing. There are issues to be considered especially during RNLI-supervised months. We do ask that anyone want-

ing to kitesurf in the area has insurance to do so, which you can obtain by joining the BKSA, although it is difficult to police. This will cover you for any injury you may cause to others.'

Sarah was also keen to stress that women can be as proficient at the sport as men.

She explained: 'People think you need a lot of arm strength, and women are often put off (trying it). But

we wear waist harnesses that mean most of the power is transferred to your core muscles, so women can be just as good as men.

'Once you start doing more complicated tricks which involve unhooking from the harness, your arm strength does come into play, and generally at this stage men have an advantage over women. But we are fast catching up.'

'More and more women are now getting involved in kitesurfing; the first magazine aimed specifically at female kitesurfers has just started, there are women-only clinics available worldwide, and competition prize money is usually equal for men and women, unlike some sports.'

In view of her all-consuming passion for kitesurfing, it's no surprise that Sarah is effu-

types of kiting, you're bound to find something about it you enjoy. You may just be happy to be on the water, or want to learn tricks, or may find wave kiting is your thing, but there is also the racing element with competitions held countrywide.

'There are speed challenges and you can also stay warm and dry on land in a buggy or on a landboard. The most important thing to say to anyone wanting to start kitesurfing is that you do need to get lessons. Not only will you learn more quickly than on your own, but it will also be much safer for yourself and other beach users.'

Of her own future ambitions, Sarah says she'll take part in UK freestyle competitions and also more wavekiting contests.

She also fancies having a go at internation-

'It's a great way to enjoy the seaside and the great outdoors, especially on those miserable windy, cold days that Britain throws at you'

sive about its merits in a bid to encourage others to take it up. She said: 'Like many sports, it gets you fit, is a good way to make new friends and is a lot of fun. But you also get a great feeling of freedom, and this is one sport that is particularly addictive.'

'Suddenly you will find yourself constantly checking the weather forecast and, instead of complaining about bad weather, you'll find yourself hoping for more wind. It's a great way to enjoy the seaside and the great outdoors, especially on those miserable windy, cold days that Britain throws at us.'

The sport's myriad challenges are also integral to its appeal for the enthusiastic kitesurfer.

She said: 'Because there are different

al competitions and taking up snowkiting again, which combines kitesurfing with her favourite winter sports, over the ensuing months.

Sarah said: 'Last year I took part in the Snowkite World Cup, held in the Alps, and I might do that again this winter. There is no British kitesurfing team as such, although most of the UK competitors are good friends with each other and will share lifts to Europeans event and travel to warmer climates together in the winter.'

'There is talk of trying to get kitesurfing into the 2016 Olympics, so by then I guess there may be a British team. Who knows where the sport will be by then? It is only becoming more popular by the day.'