

FLUID FOUNDATIONS

Episode 3: Footstraps

WITH THE ARRIVAL OF SUMMER and the promise of a fantastic windsurfing season stretching ahead of us, Jim Collis continues with his Fluid Foundations series - a series of articles that take us back to first principles and concentrate on the core skills and techniques within windsurfing in a simple, easy to follow progression. So far Jim has looked at getting planing and harnessing, and the series continues this month by looking at footstrap work. Future episodes will consider developing stance, improving tacks and gybes, and ultimately honing beach and water starts. 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 five themes that run through your windsurfing, whether you're an absolute novice or a world champion. These themes underpin the essential core aspects of the skills within windsurfing, helping you to concentrate on the root cause of why a skill works, thereby giving you solid foundations in your skill level, rather than confusing you by concentrating on peripheral aspects that might happen as a result of doing the skill. For example, in a tack - focusing on what your head is looking at to help control your direction, rather than thinking about what your little toe is doing as the board steers!



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

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

ARMS - Keeping a straight front arm, thereby distancing yourself from the rig and causing you to naturally counter balance against it, by using your 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 you stable.

BODY - Changing your body position/shape according to conditions and how you feel. For example: if you feel over-powered or threatened get lower, and if you feel underpowered or inefficient become more upright.

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

K.I.S.S. is not some crazy, half-hatched idea, but rather an interpretation of a widely used concept in a huge number of sports; the idea of bringing everything down to a '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 footstrap work and looking at the skill of getting into the footstraps while still maintaining control and comfort. This is predominately a planing skill, but the actual process of placing your feet in and out of the straps can be practiced in non-planing conditions, as well as planing ones.

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

FOOTSTRAPS

Getting into the footstraps and effectively attaching yourself to a board is a key moment in your windsurfing career. You suddenly feel more secure when going a bit faster, you find that the board feels much more efficient over the water, and you feel ready to tackle slightly choppy water states with the knowledge that you are connected safely.

All too often, however, getting into the footstraps becomes a sticking point in your development, this is usually caused by a mixture of misinformation about how to get into them and a fairly high 'fear factor' due to the fact that you are now beginning to go fairly quickly.

Even if you're a seasoned pro at moving back into the straps, you might still find that on certain boards you're not as flowing and comfortable as on other boards, in which case you could probably do with refining your technique.

As with all skills in windsurfing, bringing it back to the basics and just concentrating on the core aspects of the skill can make footstrapping very simple and achievable, whatever ability level you might be at. Combined with this, giving yourself a chance by practicing the skill at lower speeds and in less strong winds means that you can control that psychological fear element and thereby relax, concentrate on the skill at hand and ultimately achieve it quicker and more effectively.

There are two key parts to footstrap work - understanding how you can move down the board to enable you to get into them, and the process of actually getting into the strap.



THE BOARD ACTING LIKE A SEE-SAW:

As is well known, a flat board is a happy board! When your board is on the water it tends to tilt two ways - side to side, and fore to aft. When looking at a board with footstraps on, the fact that they are right down by the back of the board and positioned out towards the edge defies all logic...or does it?

In actual fact, the process of planing is integral to your ability to use the footstraps properly. When a board is planing, the board's natural 'pivot' point is no longer up by the mastfoot (as it is when you're not planing). It actually moves back and settles in between the front and the back footstraps due to the fact that there is much less board in contact with the water (usually just the back third). This means that to keep the board flat, you have to move back down the board to stay over the 'pivot': henceforth you end up standing where the footstraps are. Try to move back before the board is planing however (perhaps a little too eagerly) and of course the board will not have released fully from the water, meaning the pivot will not have moved back down the board far enough, and you will end up sinking the tail and upsetting the board.

Not only does getting planing help move your 'pivot' point back down the board to enable you to move down into the footstrap zone, but also the 'drive' created by the fin (the fin's resistance to us being pushed sideways by the force of the sail) increases as you go faster. This increased 'drive' from the fin tends to cause your windward rail

(side of the board closest to the wind) to lift up slightly and so you also have to move slightly out over the windward edge of the board to help keep the board flat and happy. The result is that you end up standing pretty much directly out, over the footstraps.

In a nutshell, throughout the process of trying to keep your board flat and happy when planing, you end up moving back and slightly outboard: standing where the footstraps are.



Keeping the board flat and the see-saw level when not planing



Keeping the board flat and the see-saw level when planing

MOVING YOUR FEET:

Obviously, it's all very well standing on top of the footstraps, but we want to be in them! Well, the art of putting your feet in (and out) of the footstraps is purely about learning how to move your feet around on a board without losing control.

This is down to one simple aspect - counterbalance.

If you want to lift your front foot off the board to place it somewhere, then your weight naturally goes onto your back foot. To counterbalance this shift of weight, if you move your rig slightly forwards as your weight moves slightly back, then you find that the movement is effortless.

Conversely, if you want to lift your back foot off the board to place it somewhere then your weight naturally goes onto your front foot. To counterbalance this shift of weight, if you move your rig slightly back as your weight moves slightly forwards then you find that this is achievable too.

TOP TIPS

Going on the water in light winds and practicing un-weighting your feet using this counterbalance method is invaluable for footstrap work, it also helps make you lighter on your feet for other skills such as tacks, gybes and even beachstarts and waterstarts!



Practicing unweighting feet in lighter winds is invaluable

JIM COLLIS TECHNIQUE

THE SKILL ITSELF – FRONT FOOTSTRAP:

BEFORE THE SKILL

Before footstrapping, you should make sure you are comfortable and relaxed, sailing on kit you are happy with and used to, and in a wind strength that is strong enough to achieve the skill but not too strong to intimidate you. Starting footstrap work in a force 3-4 and then gradually moving into a consistent force 4 as you gain more confidence will help you to achieve this skill very quickly.

You should have set your footstraps up on the shore, making sure they are in the right position and are the right size.

Once on the water you should get yourself planing in the harness and get into a comfortable and relaxed sailing position by running through the essentials of K.I.S.S....

Head - Looking where you want to go.

Arms - Both arms relatively straight and relaxed, gently pushing you away from the boom and helping you to commit 100% to the harness.

Legs - Front leg straight, back leg slightly bent and flexed with feet positioned to help keep the board flat (more outboard and back as you are planing – you should be standing very close to the footstraps).

Body - In a comfortable position (lower if feeling slightly threatened and powered-up, more upright if feeling slightly inefficient and underpowered).

Breathe - Take slow, easy breaths to feel relaxed.



Feeling comfortable & relaxed before attempting the front strap

DURING THE SKILL

To move into the footstraps, you are going to do one at a time, starting with the front strap. As mentioned above, it is all about counterbalance; if your body moves one way you move the rig the other way to counter it. This comes from the arms.

Arms - Extend the rig fractionally forwards by fully straightening your front arm.

Legs - Lift your front foot and place into the front strap.



Counterbalance - rig forwards as body moves back - for front strap



Your head, legs, body and breathing should be fairly similar to what they were doing before you started...

Head - Keep looking where you want to go.

N.B. Having a little peek at the front strap to check its position is fine, but try not to stare at it!

Legs - Keep the back leg slightly bent and flexed whilst manoeuvring the front foot, with the back foot positioned to help keep the board flat.

Body - In a comfortable position staying committed to the harness.

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

AFTER THE SKILL

Just as you were doing before the skill, you should now return to sailing in a comfortable and relaxed fashion according to the 5 elements of K.I.S.S., even though you are now in the front strap...

Head - Looking where you want to go.

Arms - Both arms relatively straight and relaxed again, gently pushing you away from the boom and helping you to commit 100% to the harness.

Legs - Front leg straight, back leg bent and flexed, feet positioned to keep the board flat (front foot in the strap, back foot nudging up against back strap).

Body - Still in a comfortable position staying committed to the harness.

Breathe - Take some deep breaths to recover and relax.



Settle down and relax again once in the front strap

JIM COLLIS TECHNIQUE

THE SKILL ITSELF – BACK FOOTSTRAP:

BEFORE THE SKILL

You are now planing happily in the front strap. Before going for the back strap you should make sure that you are comfortable again by running through the five elements of K.I.S.S....

Head - Looking where you want to go.

Arms - Both arms relatively straight and relaxed gently pushing you away from the boom and helping you to commit 100% to the harness.

Legs - Front leg straight, back leg bent and flexed, feet positioned to keep the board flat (front foot in the strap, back foot nudging up against back strap).

Body - In a comfortable position (lower if feeling slightly threatened and powered-up, more upright if feeling slightly inefficient and underpowered)

Breathe - Take slow, easy breaths to feel relaxed



Feeling comfortable and relaxed before attempting the back strap

DURING THE SKILL

To move into the back footstrap, it is still all about counterbalance: if your body moves one way, you move the rig the other way to counter it. This comes from the arms. The one difference here is that rocking onto the front foot when planing is never that comfortable or secure unless you are sailing upwind. As a result you are going to steer upwind as well, to enable you to easily rock forwards onto your front foot to release your back foot, and allow the rig to naturally fall back to counter balance.

To achieve this, you will also need to use your head.

Head - Turn your head to look upwind and allow your body to rock forwards fractionally.

Arms - Allow the rig to move fractionally backwards by keeping your arms straight as you start to sail upwind.

Legs - Gently lift your back foot and slide it into the back strap.

N.B. Just un-weighting your back foot enough so as to slide or pivot it into the back strap is fine... you do not need to lift it clear off the deck as this might make you feel less secure.



Counterbalance - rig back as body moves forwards – for back strap

Top Tips

- The key to footstrapping is counterbalance – use the rig to counter your shifting weight as you move from one foot to another.
- Remember to settle down and relax before and after the skill (using the five themes from K.I.S.S. can help you to do this).
- If attempting the skill in less than ideal conditions (severely underpowered or over powered), then adjust your head and body so as to have control before and after. For example, if the wind is a bit stronger, look upwind more with your head and drop your body lower, this will make you settled and secure before doing the skill. Do the skill as normal and then, when you are in the footstraps, keep your head looking upwind and keep your body low so as to settle down and retain comfort and control once again.



Your legs, body and breathing should be fairly similar to how they were before you started:

Legs - Keep the front leg relatively straight while manoeuvring the back foot, although you might find it easier if you allow it to flex as you rock slightly forwards.

Body - In a comfortable position staying committed to the harness.

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

AFTER THE SKILL

Just as you were doing before the skill, you should now return to sailing in a comfortable and relaxed fashion according to the five elements of K.I.S.S., even though you are now in the front and back strap:

Head - Return to looking where you want to go.

N.B. Having a cheeky look to check you are in the strap is fine but try not to stare for too long!

Arms - Both arms relatively straight and relaxed again, gently pushing you away from the boom and helping you to commit 100% to the harness

Legs - Front leg straight, back leg bent and flexed, feet positioned in the straps.

Body - Still in a comfortable position staying committed to the harness

Breathe - Take some deep breaths to recover and relax



Settle down and relax again once in the back strap

GETTING OUT OF THE STRAPS

Getting back out of the straps is purely and simply the reverse process of what you did to get in them:

- Remember to counterbalance: as you un-weight one foot remember to use the rig to counter your weight as it shifts either forwards or backwards.

- As you slow down (perhaps when coming into the land or in a lull) remember to think about moving out of the straps as otherwise you will upset your 'see-saw' and the board's tail will sink... with you on it!

Hopefully this episode has given you some food for thought, whether you are a first time footstrap user, or an experienced old hand looking for some top tips to make you even more effective on the water. As always, the important thing to remember overall is to keep it simple!

Next month I will be moving onto developing stance, so that you can be more effective, secure and efficient on the water in a wider range of conditions. In the meantime, see if keeping it simple makes a difference for you on the water!

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

