Back in the day every other article was about stance and set-up. Kit was random and transitory so there was a lot to talk about.

But over decades, as rigs have softened, boards widened and rigging instructions became ever more precise, it’s now relatively easy to rig it right and drop into a serviceable stance … or so you would have thought. And yet I still get more questions about posture, trim and set-up than anything else.

I suspect it’s partly down to people reaching planning much earlier and therefore with relatively little experience of Kit and how a tweak affects feel and balance. It also has to do with the diversity of the sport. Last week at Nelson’s extensively equipped Vassiliki centre, one of my group was holding 2 boards from the same brand both around the 100-litre mark wondering which to use. They looked similar (both were green) but one (a Freestyle) had a 40-cm. fin and the other (a Freestyle) had a 22-cm. fin. Such multiplicity offers huge opportunities for choosing mismatching and ensuing discomfort. So in an effort to sort this out once and for all, I’m going to look at how they change for different board and rig types and disciplines. And, finally, in the tradition of all good workshop manuals, do a bit of trouble-shooting to discover how, if you are uncomfortable, why?

THE MEANING OF COMFORT

‘Comfort’ is a nebulous concept for a sport, which encompasses a host of different sensations. The aim is to be comfortable for the aspect of performance which your chosen combo is designed to excel. Different board and rig types will feel ‘comfortable’ at different times. All round five-rider kit should feel fine on and off the plane and as you move into the marks, in nicely powered-up conditions. Slalom kit will only start to feel comfortable once you’re locked down and up to full, crazy speed. It’s pretty uncomfortable off the plane. Wave kit feels a bit weird in a straight line (apart too far apart and too inboard) but makes sense as you push and pull the board online in mid air and as you drop into carved turns. And freestyle kit feels comfortable … never, in my opinion … but sort of when you’re sliding backwards turned inside out. Most of the time ‘comfort’ isn’t the right word. Yes if you sail in the lee of a Polynesian atoll over the flattest water in a constant 16 knots of breeze on supreme ly tuned free-ride gear, you can achieve a state of glorious weightlessness where not one gram of effort is stressing your body. But, sailing fully maxed on slalom kit over wild chop, no matter how well set up you are, ‘comfort’ isn’t the first word that pops into your head. However you should experience a feeling of balance, symmetry and efficiency.

TRIM, BALANCE, CHICKENS AND EGGS

In sports involving balance and a variable environment, because of people offering systems and fixed shapes, “Standing looking like a ‘7’ with load spread 60 to 40% in favour of the back foot,” is well meaning advice in that it asks you to stand tall and extend the arms, but it also encourages immobility. What happens when you get a gust or change course? Premature change so we have to be reactive. It’s better to focus on the desired end product, which is to keep the rig still, deliver a constant source of power to the board and trim it level nose to tail and side to side. Then just do what you’ve got to do to maintain that angle through gusts and hails and as you raise up or downwind.

Sounds a bit vague, but it gives you the scope to react instinctively. You have these points of contact, back foot, front foot and mast and you constantly adjust how you share the load between them to keep a steady trim. If the tail is sinking you shift load from the back foot to the mast foot etc. It gets a little more complicated when you factor in speed and fin size and how much lift you get from the fin. However, if you react to sensations rather obey a formula, the movements should be also instinctive. And as you get better, you refine those movements, moving from front to back foot, had to do, to seek the perfect trim angle – slightly nose up or nose down, windward edge up or down – where the board makes the perfect contact and feels no feeling of pushing. But if the only way to achieve that perfect trim is to twist and contort to the point of torture, then you have an issue with your set-up and tweaks have to made.

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ARE YOU COMFORTABLE? DO YOU KNOW WHAT ‘COMFORTABLE’ FEELS LIKE?

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It's quite subtle. If you have to twist and agonise, you need an upwind stance so you feel load at the front of the harness. Head and hips driving forward towards the mast in the hold the nose down. But how much depends entirely on the size of fin, type of board and how powered up you are. It's a constant balancing act.

THE UPWIND COMFORT STRUGGLE

Across the wind is the best way to test your set up as the loading is symmetrical. The key is to forget fixed shapes and systems and feel which way to lean miles forward …

"Contorted misery here stems primarily from sailing too slowly.

Sail set with enough shape in the bottom battens that it can pull from one spot.

If there's no way you could even dream of letting a sheet in or out, if the board wants to bear away or head down and develop a feel for what's going on. I recommend you set sail in such conditions, please let me know where.) Now set off onto the plane. (By the way, if you find such conditions, you can and should feel the following -

- The harness hook (your centre of gravity, your harness hook, lining up directly with your CLR - i.e., the front hand will lie directly above the Centre of Effort (CE) - with the power source. All being well, you don't have any sense of load or discomfort.

- Your hands, also loaded equally, will be equidistant from the point of sail from where it's easiest to monitor the loading and where there are constant variables. If all is well and the net is up and good, as you arrive on the top of the wave or break down, you should actually you should never look down – but for this exercise you can and you should be feeling

- Your feet – i.e., the front hand will lie directly above the Centre of Effort (CE) (the power point of the sail) lies over the CLR. When the CE (the power point of the sail) lies over the CLR (the board's pivot point, the daggerboard back then) you go straight. If you move the CE in front of or behind the CLR, the board turns. When daggerboard retracted or disadvantaged and board planted, the CLR moves back and so we could angle the rig, back and sail the board from the sail. A lot of planing discomfort arises simply from not lining your CE up with your CLR (it's a good decade since I've quoted these famous acronyms – it feels marvellous!)

"You're just standing over the board getting blown along (or actually NOT getting blown along since you appear to be stuck in light wind)." With this in mind, you must learn how to speak of, the only way to hold your line and sail upwind in to sail entirely off the front foot and carve the hard to hold in the windward edge grip. The back foot is never loaded. Not until you start popping and sliding does it make any sense.

In general the more equal the loading between the feet, the more comfortable you are.

DIFFERENT KIT - DIFFERENT FEELING

If you're not able to guess which way to lean or how much to turn, you're never a slave to it. Hence you can move easily and make changes. There are no right and wrong answers - this is constant experimentation. The sense of most loading issues is the kit which is not allowing you to settle into positions which either suit your body or suit the wind.  I have had you sail against your body type and style, where your style suits you sail to suit your kit and see if you have similar problems. If they plan away you are planing (and don't quite know what you are doing) and change your approach to a more organic one. Feel free to sail a little further and try to find a balance between the two. Is this your normal set up? The back foot is never loaded.
SHOOTING THE TROUBLES

Let’s split the common troubles into set-up and pilot issues – starting with the latter.

Human error

These are things you can blame on no one else but yourself.

*Speed.* The number one reason for general discomfort on all types of board is lack of speed. If the board is sort of half-planing, displacing water and pitching into chop, the balance point moves back and forth. Without much apparent wind, the rig feels every change in the real wind. It’s a scenario that forces you into perpetual motion. The instant cure is to commit more to the harness and bear away. With speed both board and rig become more stable.

Comfortable on one tack but not the other.

Here’s a desperate email from Greg who’s been windsurfing for 18 months.

On a port tack, I can get both feet in straps and be fully hiked out and the sail feels balanced. But going the other way it feels like the CE is further forward and I have to lean towards the front of the board to balance the pull of the sail … I am just like “Aaaarrggghhh!!!” I can’t understand how it can be rigged fine one way and not the other.

Asymmetric discomfort is an interesting riddle. First you check rigging. Does the sail rotate and are the lines the same on both sides? Is it a stance issue? People who are especially one handed tend to oversheet when their strong hand is their back hand. Conversely when it’s their front hand, they tend to bend it, choke the rig and sheet out. But often it’s just tactical. What Greg is describing on his bad side, is a stance where he’s trying to sail too close to the wind with not enough speed. It’s quite common. When people leave the beach, they often sail broader to the wind than they realize especially if they’re heading for a blank horizon or a lee shore with no distinguishable landmarks. Sailing off wind, the board releases easily, goes up to full speed and feels hunky-dory. But when they turn, they instinctively point straight at their launch spot, which is now upwind.

**LINE IMBALANCE**

Misplaced lines are the root of massive discomfort and will corrupt your whole game. If you can’t sail with your hands in their normal places on the boom, something needs changing.

If the boom height is comfortable but the arms are not parallel with the water, the harness line is coming out at 90º to the body, you feel line up with the power and can use toes to trim the board level. If it’s too high you keep pulling the rig down to windward and drop onto your heels.

**MASTERCLASS TECHNIQUE**

The lines are too far back. The front foot is lifted up and has to move forward to bring on and avoid a nosedive, at which point the hand goes transferred to the foot that and you lose about 90º of control.

To restore balance the feet will want to match the hand position and the wheels fall off completely.
They never really get going and, as I described above, sailing without speed, especially upwind, is about as uncomfortable as it gets. The crew is in no hurry to get fully planing, even though it means heading below your goal, and then use that speed to carry you upwind.

Rigging errors

The crisis that befalls many comfort-seeking windsurfers is one of confidence. Their rig according to instructions. It doesn’t feel right—it therefore must be. (And you know what? It might be.) However, to have reached the stage where you are planing, you are already a good windsurfer. You have feelings and you must trust those feelings to the point of saying: “I don’t care what the book says, I don’t feel comfortable and I’m going to change something.” The question is: What? This may sound like a ridiculous use of your time but when you have nothing better to do, move around with the extremes of your adjustment options. Put the boom right up – and then right down. Let the downhaul off and then exerts it and do the same with the sailhaul. Slide the mastfoil to the front and back of the track – so you can slide each tweak to a new sensation and feel how it effects the power and your ability to channel it.

Harness lines never feel right

Harness lines are the messengers. Don’t shoot the messenger. Harness lines never feel right, and efficient stance. (And you know what? It might be.) However, if on your beam reach you look down and see the harness hook over your back foot, you know you’re in trouble. Moving the mastfoil forward can help – but only a little. The board eg match is the biggest issue. Recently a guy with comfort problems handed me his 125 loaded with an 8.0: all good kit, well rigged and the sail was within the recommended range, albeit at the top. I could make it work by employing old racing strategies of bearing right off and sailing really fast, the top. I could make it work by employing old racing strategies of bearing right off and sailing really fast, but as soon as I slowed down a little, it felt horrible. The fin was a little too small. A slower speeds it lost lift and grip. And as the sail crabbed sideways, you fell against the back foot. We tried a 7.5 and balance was immediately restored between the foot.

Constant, unwanted force in the arms and… everywhere.

Assuming you’re committing to the harness, the culprit is usually a ‘draggy’ sail, which is catching the wind but not releasing it. More downhaul allows the sail to open and softens the whole feeling. A lack of onhaul can also make a sail feel ‘pully.’ John from www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwfZB4CQ3hw. Check the trailer by emailing harty@peter-hart.com.

Next month Peter addresses the Daddy of all technique subjects, how to achieve the first planing carve. If you want a heads up on the subject you can order his acclaimed new DVD ‘Ten Steps to Gybing’. If you want a heads up on the subject you can order his acclaimed new DVD ‘Ten Steps to Gybing’ by emailing harty@peter-hart.com.

One subtle detail can make a huge difference. To tab one of the few places left on his 2014 tour to the UK Peter Hart Masterclass Facebook page.

Andrew Bringdal, flying with 50 knots, is a study of calm symmetry. He’s on a very broad board with the 14/16 perfectly balanced between the foil with equal loading – the most comfortable and efficient stance.

The ‘angan’ line isn’t everyone’s cup of tea but it is making you vastly conscious to where the sail is pulling from. Perky may help – but releasing one or both hands is the best way of taking the tension off your arms.