Why don’t you try the harness?” Suggested Walter, the owner of the Manor farm windsurfing school on the shores of Lake Thun in Switzerland’s Berner Oberland. The date was the 24th June 1980. I know this because I kept a diary. I’m not especially anal but this was my first instructing job at a time when the sport was about to go nuts. Major developments, personal and otherwise, occurred daily. It was crazy not to record them and this day was especially special.

The lake of Thun is not a windy mecca. Force 2 was a good day. However, the surrounding mountains and the heat of summer would produce the odd storm. A good one lasted an hour if you were lucky. The super-organised Swiss had ‘Sturmwarnung’ lights around the shore that started flashing when one was imminent and gave you time to prepare.

My boss Walter was well ahead of the game. As soon as the first wave jumping pictures drifted in from Hawaii he got hold of some custom ‘jump boards’ from Surfline Sylt in Germany. Laying on the glassy calm shore they looked as out of place as a rack of snow skis in the Sahara. However, no sooner had they arrived than we got smacked by three storms in three days. Lessons were cancelled and off we launched into an extraordinary period of trial and discovery.

By the third ‘storm’ (to be fair, it was probably all of 22 knots) my palms looked gorier than a Four Seasons pizza and my forearms were only slightly less knotted than a hundred year old oak tree. It was then that Walter arrived on the shore with a harness. He’d used one before for racing and so knew about the lines and how to set them up … well he knew a couple of knots at least.

I will never forget that first time I hooked in. My diary entry that night was punctuated with more exclamation marks than a teenage schoolgirl describing her first date.

“This was AMAZING!!!!! Praise to the harness!!! NO EFFORT NEEDED!!! My life has changed FOREVER!!!!”

It seemed that this simple garment had instantly opened a door to high performance windsurfing. But actually what I was describing was the ecstasy of temporary pain relief. It wasn’t all good.

Rewind to that windy afternoon and the harness Walter handed me was in fact that of his wife. It was an early shoulder harness (it was also pink). There was no spreader bar just a single hook on a plate. As you hooked in, the plate pulled away from the body and the sides squeezed the last breath out of your aching lungs. A medieval torture could not have come up with an ill-fitting device. The ends of the line were about a metre apart and the loop about 4 inches from the boom. The hook nosed at about epiglottis height so in sailing mode, my chin was millimetres from the hardware. With no room to react, catapults were a way of life. With the lower back totally unsupported, one could around the world rub raw their hands in anticipation of a new revenue stream. When the honeymoon period was over I quickly realised I’d swapped one set of pains - granite forearms, ravaged hands – for another - chronic back ache and deep soft tissue bruising. And as a means to help refine technique it was a disaster. I’m not sure I’ve ever been the same since.

A good balanced harness set-up is fundamental to everything you do. Without it, you never have the stable platform from which to either manipulate or drive the board to new speeds.
The harness should be so much more than just a hand/arm saving device. The harness should be your primary planing tool. For that reason, the harness needs to offer comfort on all points of sailing.
TIMES ARE A CHANGING

There is no right and wrong in this game. Lots of things work, some better than others. The changes over the years, you might argue, have been prompted by fashion. Perhaps a bit. On the whole, however, things have moved on greatly. The pics below represent a jump from 1994 – 2015. In both I’m blasting on off-the-shelf kit. In the ‘90s we were obsessed with speed. Most sails over 5.5 had cambers. The mantra was ‘don’t move, lock yourself in the rig – to move is to lose power.’ So wearing a seat harness with a chest high boom and 26 lines, we locked numbers to the rig with high hips and a straight, immobile body and pushed all the power straight into the rails. Move on 21 years (can you tell the difference?), and it’s all a lot more relaxed. A higher boom, longer lines and waist harness allow a lot more movement within the harness and put you in a far better position over the board from which to react and manoeuvre. The trade off would be that getting planing, going broad and doing any hooked in moves, you’d feel uncomfortably close to the rig.

Longboarding the lines to say 32” or longer – the instant bonus is ease planing because you can hook in and move back while leaning the rig upright where it creates the most power. Freeriders and wave sailors go long because it’s all about getting going and then holding the maximum freedom of movement within the harness. These beautiful no-handed, arched-back hand loops by luminaries such as Alex Mussolini are only possible with huge lines. But they don’t suit all because you find a load on your arms and it’s easy to hook out by mistake. That over-sheeting is the biggest trim sin, so I like always to feel the back hand of the lines so they are balanced and the apex of the foot harness by your ribs and the harness keeps riding up. If the one side of the harness is overloaded, even across the wind, the line is too far forward or forward.

As you play with a new set-up, be aware of the position of your hook relative to your feet. In manoeuvre based sailing on boards with tiny fins, you need to sail off your front foot – so most of the time the harness line should be over that foot – and vice versa if you’re tucking a speedy board off the fin.

AND FINALLY – A SIMPLE CHOICE – SPEED VS. MOVEMENT. The way to go fast is to sail between your feet and limit your movement – in which case you want the harness set-up to hold you rock solid. If you wish to turn, carve and generally change direction in imaginative ways, then you want the harness set-up that allows the maximum free aft and windward forward movement.

Line Positioning The eternal conundrum. Everyone in the class will offer the irrefutable advice “place the lines so they are perfectly balanced and the apex of the foot harness by your ribs and the lines, high hips, short boom, high hips, tack solid with feet shall set you up making it a bit less frantic.”

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This whole game is about FEEL! There’s a simple objective. Look at your harness and see where it’s supporting you. Then as you’re sailing, bend and stretch the legs, twist the hips this way and that and find the position where you’re lining the sail’s power up with that spot of maximum support.

Keep feeling where the sail is pulling from and where the load is on the harness. For example in a waist harness, if the hook is always pointing up and the load is on your ribs and the harness keeps riding up, you need to stop squaring and stand taller. If that still isn’t working, lower the boom. If the line side of the harness is overheaded, even across the wind, the line is too far back or forward.

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Back in the day when harnesses emerged from torture chambers and rigs were anything but reliable, you developed a hunch to wind a trapeze out stance. In the former you looked vaguely normal with extended arms and dropped hips; in the latter you looked like a chicken trussed for the oven – all tied up and very worried. The sign of a great modern set-up is that if you isolate someone’s upper body you shouldn’t be able to tell if they’re hunched in or sail on or off the plane.

Is the Stance Working? I urge you to booms of obeying systems too stringently. As you see, there are ways to check lines on the beach, but those, along with measuring tapes and booms resting on tails, are just starting points.

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Should the spreader be able to slide up and down a webbing? I think, especially spreader. If every on the load on the back and allows you to perform forward movement your personal preference issue's.
**THE UGLY, THE BAD AND THE GOOD**

The mast mount reveals exactly how you’re lining up with the power and loading hands and feet, and therefore what adjustments need to be made. It’s always interesting to note the position of the harness hook relative to the feet.

**Masterclass Technique**

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**VIEWS FROM THE BEACH**

We talk in the 70s love to pontificate, but it’s always interesting to see what has informed the harness decisions of the man and woman on the beach.

**RECCY – learning to plane.**

I chose a waist because it’s far cooler! I wear it really low like Levi Siver. A boy on our beach (Norfolk) said to use longer lines – made a big difference to my stance and style perfectly.

**JOHN – good free-rider getting into waves, who took a break from windsurfing.**

I used to wear a seat and then came back and went on holiday to Club Vass.

**BECCY – learning to plane.**

They gave me a waist and it seems to work much better with the modern kit. It also feels safer in the waves.

**GEOFF – very proficient small board sailor.**

I chose a waist because it was what we were using for level 2. I reckoned it would always work! This is a 20 year old seat model with a sliding elasticated hook. The model worn by the lady, Rhona, is actually pretty high and it suited her stance and style perfectly.

**INSET – A SPEE DY VIEW FROM THE LARGER MAN**

I once had to sail Whitey’s speed gear back up the course (hull injured himself) and it nearly broke my legs. One set of lines in the 80s was really long but then we wore our styles and shape. But today, although his speed bent makes him the prime candidate for a seat harness, he now favours a seat, even our style as well.

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