

One of the BEST

Shawne O'Neill

by Eric Hoffman



Photography by Bob Barbour

Santa Cruzan Shawne O'Neill has sailed her windsurfer in 55 mile per hour gale winds in the open ocean near Point Conception, on numerous occasions crossed treacherous Pailolo Channel between Maui and Molokai in the Hawaiian Islands, and spent endless days alone skipping over waves offshore near Ano Nuevo in waters frequented by great white sharks.

In just three years, she has risen in the ranks to become a world-class windsurfer. She spends five to six hours a day practicing for international competitions; to the petite and athletic Shawne O'Neill it's been more than worth it.

Achieving prominence in the sport has been no easy feat, considering windsurfing is the fastest growing water sport in the United States and has been a long established sport in Europe with international meets commonly attracting 100,000 spectators. Stephan van den Berg of the Netherlands, the reigning men's world champion, enjoys the fanfare given professional football stars in this country. Windsurfing - in Europe known as boardsailing - was an Olympic event for the first time this summer in Los Angeles.

Shawne O'Neill's rise to prominence can be attributed to the obvious and the sublime. She is the fifth of six

children of Santa Cruz's most aquatic family. Her father, Jack O'Neill, is the inventor and world's leading manufacturer of the wetsuit, and is internationally recognized as an innovator in water sports and a person with a colorful, if not eccentric, persona. With a patch over one eye (a result of a surfing accident), a sixty-five-foot catamaran with "Team O'Neill" emblazoned in three-foot high bold lettering on each hull, and a van with duel palm trees protruding above the vehicle's roof line, Jack O'Neill's presence is hard to miss. His company, O'Neill, Inc., has enjoyed fabulous success.

"My earliest memories are of riding

air mats, then surfboards and sailboats," says Shawne O'Neill. "I suppose it was because my father was always in or on the water. Whatever the reason, I've always felt attracted to the ocean. The whole family lived on a schooner for two years." The success of the company has freed O'Neill from the daily grind at the work place, and "I'm fortunate to get enough time to practice," she says. Officially she works for O'Neill, Inc. promoting products, but more often than not, her charcoal grey BMW is parked at Waddell Creek north of Santa Cruz, where twenty-five knot winds commonly blow the ocean into a foamy frenzy—the perfect conditions for an expert windsurfer.

Waddell Creek offers optimum practice for wave jumping and wave riding, which are two of the three areas judged in most competition. For the third area, racing or slalom, O'Neill practices on San Francisco Bay, where last year's men's World Cup was held in thirty-five-mile-per-hour winds. "The way the sport is evolving you need a lot of wind to get the best performance," she says.

Having the free time to practice doesn't guarantee becoming one of the best in the world. There must be physical ability: balance, stamina, and the intuitive sense of reading the wind and waves while racing along at nearly thirty-five miles per hour while teetering on the brink. As well as total physical involvement, there must be the tactical sense of a sailboat skipper, but probably all the best traits would fall short of world-class performance if there wasn't inner competitive tenacity.

At first Shawne O'Neill's diminutive stature and calm disposition don't reveal this trait. But when she begins talking about learning to windsurf it appears, "Some days I'd get really angry at myself. When I thought I wasn't learning or getting better I'd tell myself I'd quit, but I always went back and made myself improve. Looking back on it, I guess, I was more impatient than anything else." But most of O'Neill's talk about windsurfing focuses somewhere past the clinical analysis of what it takes. "There's no greater experience. I love it, especially when it becomes radical (turbulent conditions). The sport has the best of everything. There's the thrill of surfing without paddling back out or being stuck on a wave with twenty people.

You're free to go anywhere as long as there is water and wind. After you buy a windsurfer you have all the fun of snow skiing, sailing, and surfing in one sport, and with no tow tickets, boat trailers, or berths. To me it's just awfully fun."

On one crossing, O'Neill became separated from her two companions midway; four hours after reaching land there were no signs of them.

O'Neill's windsurfing obsession first saw daylight in 1981 when she represented O'Neill, Inc. wetsuits at a windsurfer manufacturer's promotional meeting. She took a few lessons, was hooked, and literally set high goals for herself. "I began jumping waves. There's really nothing else like it. It's real thrilling." By riding the wind into the surf at high speeds, top windsurfers often shoot fifteen feet into the air and remain airborne for forty feet before landing and racing off in search of another swell.

While she was learning, O'Neill often went alone to Waddell Creek, near Ano Nuevo State Reserve. "It's a great place, just right because of the wind and easy access." Expert windsurfers now consider Waddell Creek one of the best windsurfing areas in North America. However, beneath the water are great white sharks that gobble down harbor seals and elephant seals that frequent Ano Nuevo. But talk of a *Jaws* scenario causes O'Neill to shrug and say with a grin, "I can't worry about that. They're north (about two miles) eating seals, I hope."

During the winter the ideal conditions at Waddell Creek are interrupted by Pacific storms, so she packs up and heads to Hawaii. "Actually, when a storm first hits, the conditions are exciting, but once it hits full force things get gnarly." In Hawaii she hooked-up with some of the top men windsurfers in the world. "I found that

windsurfing with people who pushed me helped. The best men are awfully strong in this sport. I usually practice with men."

On regular occasions she and a handful of top windsurfers began crossing seven-mile Pailolo Channel between Maui and Molokai. In Hawaiian, "pailolo" means "crazy wind." The channel is also renowned for strong currents and surface turbulence. Many expert windsurfers consider the risks too high for the thrill of crossing it. On one crossing, O'Neill became separated from her two companions midway; four hours after reaching land there were no signs of them. "All of a sudden the ocean began looking awfully big and awfully empty. I knew if they'd been separated from their boards they'd be carried out to sea." Luckily, the ordeal had a happy, although sobering, ending. One of her companions' boards had become inoperable and, by lashing it to the one good board, the twosome slowly made their way to safety, arriving after dark far down the coastline from the regular beaching point. "By the time I found out they were safe, I thought they'd drowned. It was a reminder of how important the buddy system is. It was also probably the first time one windsurfer towed another one halfway across the channel."

By late 1983 O'Neill began placing high in international and national contests. First she placed fifth in the prestigious Hoopika Invitational, which includes the best windsurfers in the world, then she placed second in wave riding in the O'Neill Invitational, and in June she found herself alone again at Waddell Creek. But this time she was alone in a different way, having taken first place in wave riding after beating the best women in the world in a meet that is on the newly formed World Cup Tour. She has turned professional, which eliminates her from ever competing in the Olympics. "The Olympic style is entirely different and I'm not that well suited for it," she adds.

This winter O'Neill will be preparing herself for the newly created Women's World Cup Circuit and will compete against sixteen top women competitors in a circuit that includes stops in Australia, Japan, Holland, Germany, San Francisco Bay and, of course, Waddell Creek where it all began for Shawne O'Neill just three years ago. ▀