

# The Jumping Controversy: A Talk with World Overall Champion Brett Wing



by John Gillette

John Gillette, 25, barefoots professionally at Sea World, in Orlando, Florida. He's been barefooting for over a decade, honing the skills that made him a member of the last two US World Barefoot Teams.

John, a past president of the American Barefoot Commission, is also a member of the WWSU Barefoot Commission. In addition to helping design Correct Craft Boats' Barefoot Nautique, he has exercised his powers of explanation in the recent book, Barefooting: John Gillette's Guide to Barefoot Water Skiing. To order it, send a check for \$7.90 to John Gillette, PO Box 4779, Winter Park, Florida 32793.

There has been little knowledge of proper barefoot jumping technique, and many questions remain regarding its safety. Many footers are adamantly opposed to the event, citing several paralyzing neck injuries, while others strongly support it. What's the truth behind this event? No one could provide better insight into barefoot jumping than World Champion Brett Wing.

I hope this interview will promote safer and better jumping by encouraging proper respect for, and correct technique on, the ramp.

**The controversy over barefoot jumping safety centers around the possibility of falling head first on the jump. What's your feeling about the danger of barefoot jumping?**

First, let me say yes, I do feel jumping is dangerous to a degree. Now when I say "to a degree," I mean that it is the jumper himself who makes it dangerous.

If you went out and jumped in water conditions that are undesirable, and in your own mind think that you could possibly fall before the jump, then you shouldn't be jumping. Also, for competition's sake, I don't think you should ever train for jumping in rough water. It is the sort of event in which you shouldn't take any risks whatsoever. A jumper *must* know when the water is too rough to jump safely. Therefore only experienced barefooters should jump. Jumpers should have high ratings in wake crossing, tricks, and start methods, and even be able to back barefoot. This may sound a bit silly, because it's got nothing to do with front barefooting, but it does mean the skier is quite solid on his feet.

So going back to the original question—is jumping dangerous?—I don't think it's dangerous for anyone at World level. But for just anyone to go out and barefoot jump, it's most certainly dangerous.

**Have you ever declined to jump in competition because the water was rough?**

Yes I have. It was in New Zealand at the World Group III Titles. I went over the jump once and fell. So I had to make the second jump to win the overall (World Rules state that a skier must score in all four events to be considered in overall standings). Basi-

cally any jump would do, but I decided it just wasn't safe.

When I did that, a lot of the other guys decided not to take their jumps. The event was then postponed for about two hours. I was later granted a re-jump and skied away with the overall title. In fact, I think the entire event was run over again.

**Have you ever fallen on the jump?**

No, never fallen before the jump and hit it. I have seen a few people do it, though. **Many people think that, to spring off the jump, the skier must approach the jump in a dangerously forward position, otherwise your feet would slip out from under you. You aren't that far forward when you approach the jump, yet you're still able to spring without your feet slipping out. What's the trick?**

I think a lot of people come up to the jump trying to get their shoulders over their feet and their feet and their hips way

back. This bent-over position is very dangerous. The dynamics of it also keeps them from getting lift off the jump.

What you've actually got to do, and it's really quite hard to do, is kick (spring) off the ramp. This can also be very dangerous if you time it wrong.

**So when you approach the jump, your shoulders are behind your feet, almost like a regular barefoot position.**

Yep, almost a regular barefoot position. All you're doing is squatting down. The crouch is from the lower body down.

**Some people say you have to start your spring actually before the jump. Do you do that?**

No, I think about it instantly on the jump. **So it's a spring straight up, just like off a ski jump.**

Right, exactly.

**What about landing these long, 18-plus meter jumps? Is that a problem?**

The world's best barefooter, Brett Wing, shoots for 19 meters—a distance that can't stay shy for long.



The landings aren't really a big problem if you just land and keep yourself real square. Sometimes you land with a lot of slack. What you've got to do is slow yourself down to gather up that slack. The best way to do this is to put your feet in the water, and the slack will take up. It really slows you down quickly. Even if you're sitting on your butt, keep your feet in the water.

There are times that I'm actually up on my feet before the slack comes tight.

**So you do land on your feet first.**

Yes, definitely—feet then bum.

**What's your feeling toward the "bumming" technique—bouncing off the jump on your butt—for getting distance?**

I think some rule should be made that no other part of your body, apart from your feet, should be allowed to touch the jump. **Do you think "bumming" is dangerous?** Yes I do. It's probably selfish of me to think it, because I don't use that technique. But it seems to me that it's a bit of a hit-and-miss method, and probably an unfair way to get a winner.

**Has your jumping style changed any since the 30% feet-to-feet bonus was taken out? [Feet to feet means you land directly on your feet without sitting down.]**

Sure has. It probably hasn't changed my spring a whole lot, but it's just made it so I don't have to tame it down. This makes it kind of fun.

I was pretty worried when they pulled the 30% bonus out, because that was my style of jumping. But it has worked out fine because now I can do what I want to on the jump. Before I had to hold back and contain it. If you contain it, and then you do happen to butt out, well, then you've lost it all.

It's now the sort of event that you go out there and spring like crazy. And we're getting longer distances, which is better really. It's putting more into the event, I think. I like the idea.

**So removing the feet-to-feet bonus hasn't affected your stance before the jump or on the jump; it's just that now you not so concerned about the landing.**

Right.

**What other changes do you think would improve the event?**

It wouldn't hurt to make the ramp a little wider.

There are a lot of people talking about cutting to the jump and things like that, but that's definitely adding danger, especially if people start double-wake cutting.

**There has been discussion about lengthening the jump.**

I don't think it is really necessary, although it would give you more time on the ramp. That's all it would really do. It's not going to add a whole lot to technique. It wouldn't make it any more dangerous, because it's pretty fast. Once you hit it, I don't think you can fall forward.

**Some people have talked about using**

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**more of a textured, slower surface, so you don't have to be quite so forward. Do you see an advantage in that?**

Some ramps are faster than others, just like in ski jumping. I think if a person jumps enough, he would get so much control on that ramp that it wouldn't matter what it was made of. I've been on really fast surfaces, and you still use the same technique and you've still got the same control on the ramp.

It would be interesting to survey how many times people who compete do jump. I know at home there aren't too many guys who train in between tournaments for the jump.

**Do you think barefoot jumping will become as accepted in barefoot competition as ski jumping has become in three-event (classical) competition?**

Because it doesn't have the height and distance that ski jumpers have, it's not going to be as good a spectator sport. Although I think in barefooting when a long jump is performed, it really does look quite good. In fact, if you remember the World Titles, it climaxed into a good event, and the crowd really did get off on it. It goes without saying that if the crowd gets off on it, the spectator appeal is definitely there.

Personally, I would rather watch a ski jumper. I don't know about you, but that's my honest opinion.

**Oh sure, I don't think there can be any comparison between the two. But do you think the safety of barefoot jumping will be as accepted? For example, right now only the men are allowed to jump, while in classical skiing there are no restrictions.**

In that case I don't think it will. Although there's no real reason why others couldn't jump, it's just that the depth of the men is a whole lot greater.

I've got so much respect for barefoot jumping that I wouldn't like to see juniors and women and everybody going over it. **I feel the same way.**

Yeah, I don't think it can take the place that it has in classical ski jumping. Barefoot jumping's great when men go over it when they're solid, but I just have to turn away if I see a guy coming up to it all shaky. In fact if I were the chief judge at some tournaments, I would've stopped the event before the water gets as rough as it sometimes has.

**One of the problems with the event is that it is so dependent on calm water. It can be constantly on or off depending on the weather. The other events can usually be carried on no matter how rough the water gets.**

Right. It's quite a bit like kite flying in that respect. It's a shame that the safety factor stands in the way of it so much, because I really do get off on the event. But that's the way it is.

