

The Swain family water skiing history

I was about 11 and my brother Murray was 8 around 1961 when I remember our first water skiing experience. It was down at Twin Lakes. There was an old car in the middle of an island. The car had a bar with a wheel attached to the other end. There was a circle of muddy water around the island. The idea was to put water skis on and hold onto the bar while the car went round in circles. I remember my father hanging on for grim death. Murray and I both managed to get up as well. My father Frank wanted to get the rope and handle that was running in the water. He fell and the next time the bar came round it nearly ran over him. I also remember getting out in knee deep mud.

This was all because my father, a shearing contractor, worked on the Highton Barwon Bridge in the off season and saw the water skiers on the Barwon River.

The next year, Frank was hooked and he bought an American blue and white Bell Boy boat with a new 100 h.p. Mercury 2 stroke outboard motor. This was the largest available at the time. Frank named the boat FAMES. This stood for Frank Austin, Murray, Edith and S for Swain. He also bought a set of Vel Aqua water skis. Somehow we learnt to ski. At the time the Fyans Street section of the Barwon, near Queens Park, was open for skiing. We would get there early and set up a camp. My brother and I soon mastered the single ski and were hooked.

I loved the feeling of being on the water.

My uncle Noel came down from Melbourne to join us. He soon mastered the disc; and then came the chair on the disc. People would drive down the mile and watch him perform. They would wave to him and he would then turn around to the amazement to the crowd.

Meanwhile we mastered the single ski.

The next year, a lady ran a campaign to get the skiers off the Fyans Street section of the river. She succeeded. So we ended up on the mile having to share with the rowers; they were not happy. My father was approached by a band of keen water skiers from the newly formed Geelong Water Ski Club in about 1962.

Having learnt to barefoot, we were the youngest members of the Barefoot Club so we knew what a club was like. Some of the early members I can remember were: - Dr Taylor, the Roydhouses, the Bells and the Carltons.

The club members decided to buy a site down the end of Wilsons Road. Debentures were raised (Frank bought one) to buy the flood land. I can remember the first time we took the boat to the Wilson Road site. We launched it through the reeds after we managed to cut them back. About three boats would ski on our new stretch of water. The members of the new Geelong Water Ski Club were a more competitive lot. They had track suits made up in green and yellow with Geelong Water Ski Club on the back. Both my brother and I covered ours with various water ski labels. Steve Kittelty came back from America with a large Mercury label which we sewed on the back. The members put in a slalom course and jump.

Guy Carlton was a Victorian trick champion and so we wanted to try trick skiing. My father asked Guy to make us a pair of trick skis which he did. Blue and white stripe, they were fairly basic but we manage to do a few tricks mainly 180, 360. We also had a go at getting though the Slalom course. We soon realised that the outboard was not a competitive boat and Frank decided to by an inboard. In about 1969 he went to Lake Eppalock to test a Nankervis. We also tested Mirage and Ramsey boats. Frank settled on a Ramsey Lynx with a Holden 253 V8; still FAMES on the side.



There was a ski tournament on the mile. Chuck Stearns skied. He was a U.S and world slalom champion. We noticed that his ski was concave. We had a Ron Marks wooden slalom skis and one had warped and had concave at to bottom. Both of us used this one until Ron Marks came out with a concave ski the next year. The ski club was popular and managed to get Kevin Bell and his company Bell and Fulton to construct the club house and a rough launching ramp. We were both getting into tournament skiing. We both were in B grade.

Murray managed to win the B grade slalom event. We also bought some Ron Marks wooden jump skis. They were heavy and would just barely float. By this time we were into tournament skiing going to events all around Victoria. There was a large band of skiers from the Geelong Water Ski club following the tournament scene. I can remember Rod Bell, Peter and Nicole Smith, Trevor, Helen and David Cortous, David, Joan, Mark and Chris Beretta, Billy Gregory, Norm, Daryl and Debbie Moore, Steve, Sharyn and Ashley Shaw, Slim Batty and Peter and Mark Schreuder. Geelong was the strongest club in Victoria at the time.

We holidayed at Bruce Mason's caravan park at Deniliquin each Christmas for 25 years. We taught all the kids to ski. I remember being in the boat from dawn to dusk with the Bells and Buckinghams. Rod Bell, Peter 'Bucko' and I would get up early and use the slalom course then trick down river when it became busy. Then we had breakfast and onto the kids skiing. We yabbied and shot rabbits. We would cook them in the camp oven. We just had tents by the river. Heaven. A great simple holiday.

In the off season' Rod Bell, my skiing training partner and I decided to go ski racing to get us fit for tournament skiing. Geelong Ski clubman Geoff Birtles also wanted to have a go. He had a fibreglass boat with a Mercury outboard Boo 2 which he hotted up. He had a special prop made for it which just got us up out of the water but flew once it got going. We mainly raced on lakes which were mostly rough but because we were seasoned skiers we could manage to hang on. We won a couple of races the first year then Geoff went all out hotting the boat up so it would go faster. The next year we won our division.

I remember there was a new race at Painesville down at the Gippsland lakes. It blew up rough just after the start and around the first buoy there were capsized boats everywhere. We had to lift the rope up to get through the waves. We noticed that one of the locals headed for the other shore where it was calm so we headed in the same direction. It was a long way off the course. Geoff had the boat humming and we were in the calm water just off the shore. It was very shallow as the sand was being churned up it took us about 4.00hours to complete the course, normally a 2hour max race and when we came in thinking we would be last everybody applauded us. We thought that was nice to encourage us. When we were out of the water we soon learned that only 3 boats had finished and we won our division. We also raced at the Robinvale to Mildura up on the Murray. This really was a boat race with very fast speeds around tight corners. That year a skier was killed running into a log. Geoff came second. He did not like anyone to have a faster boat so he ordered a motor from America. A 350 Chevy motor and high ratio gear box and a new boat. We only did a couple more races with him as he was getting out of hand just racing and not looking after the skiers. But it was an adventure. We were short of an observer so Frank got a seat and we won that day. Frank received a trophy which was on the mantelpiece for a long time.

It wasn't until I turned 30 and became a "Senior Man" (or 2nd division man) that I was picked in the Victorian team the first time in 1980. I was a competitor at the national titles was at South Australia's Patawolonga River at Glenelg. Ian Faulkner was skiing and on the first day he run into 32 off. I managed 5 at 23 off which was my personal best. On the second day I managed the same score. Ian was the last competitor and fell on the first buoy at 23 off so I managed to win the slalom. I was third in tricks which Ian won and third in jump. The Victorian team also won.

The next year the Australian titles were held in Queensland. I managed to win the overall with my best jump 121 feet. After that I managed only 3rd places as some of the gun skiers moved up to Senior Men's ranks. I also competed and made the trophies for the Veteran Moomba Master for about 8 years. It was great fun just before the gun skiers competed.

I was a committee man when my father was made a Life Member. 5/6 years on the committee with Slim Batty as president, then Dave Beretta as President.

I remember

- Putting the water to the club all the way down Wilsons Road. Dave's trencher worked overtime.
- Planting trees and fencing off the river bank on the other side of the river to stop the cattle from eating the reeds. Most of the trees have died (mainly salt affected) but fencing the area off was a winner.
- Buying the land where the jump is. Slim managed to talk the subdivider into selling that section where the jump is now.
- Slim put the tower on the jump site.
- Cleaning up after the floods.
- Planting and tending the trees around the club house.
- Putting water to the jump.
- Laying the slalom course one year and bring up three long eel traps and having a boat full of eels.

- Teaching our children and many others to ski. I am onto the grand children now.

Water skiing is a great family sport. Although it is an individual sport you need a driver and an observer, most likely a parent and a sibling

You can have little wins every day as you get more confident.

I have made many lifelong friends at the Geelong Water Ski Club. It seems only a short time since we started skiing but 60 years is not a short time.

I hope future generations get to enjoy the club. There's something magical about being on the water.

Austin Swain. December 2021.

Murray Swain was the inspiration for the club logo.

