

# Water fun pulls 3 into business

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Written for The State Journal

WISCONSIN DELLS – Three fraternity brothers from the University of Wisconsin-Madison have taken a calculated risk in introducing a watersports business in this already-congested tourist haven.

They've been warned that businesses in the Dells are vulnerable to weather, the economy and competition from other scenic areas in the state. At stake are a \$250,000 investment, months of careful planning and hard work, and admittedly some pride.

But while they cross their fingers and hope for better weather, Bruce Ruedig, Michael Peterson and Curt Post are having fun, too.

"Can you think of a better job to have during the summer?" asks Ruedig, 24, president of the trio's enterprise, Aqua Sports, Inc. "We enjoy the water. But down deep, I guess Michael, Curt and I are entrepreneurs. We want Aqua Sports to become the 'Hertz' of boat rentals."

Aqua Sports, located on the Wisconsin River in the 45-acre Holiday Shores Campground at County Trunk Q and River Road, rents brand-new watercraft and offers professional ski instruction. It is open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. each day.

With three of its instructors – Jim Elliot, Perry Love and Ted Thailer – each affiliated with the Tommy Bartlett Water Ski Show, Aqua Sports boasts that it is the only professional ski school in the state.

Peterson, 24, the firm's assertive vice president of marketing, said Aqua Sports can conduct water-skiing lessons with some protection from the wind. But it also profits from its proximity to the Wisconsin River, which has "six times the surface of Lake Delton," Peterson claims.

In planning the business late last year, Peterson says he visited professional ski schools throughout the South, particularly in Florida, to get ideas.

"We can teach you anything – from getting up on two skis to doing a front or back somersault on a jump," contends Ruedig, a certified instructor himself. "We can have you slaloming (skiing on a single ski) by the end of the first hour.

"So far, we've had four people get up on their first try," Ruedig continues. "Everyone got up on their skis within an hour – even the priest from Minnesota who was overweight."

A member of the American Water Ski Association, the school issues certificates and rates its students. It offers free water-skiing clinics each morning, weather permitting. It recommends private instruction, especially for beginners at \$35 an hour.

As for boat rentals, Peterson and his partners approached their newest venture with experience from last summer. Last June, Peterson and Ruedig bought a cabin cruiser, which they operated on Lake Mendota out of a parking lot near their Phi Delta Theta fraternity house on Langdon Street.

Within a month and a half, the partners were running two cabin cruisers, three ski boats and two jet skis under the name, "Lake Mendota Charters, Inc." The corporation is now owned by three members of the fraternity.

Buoyed by the success of that small-scale operation, Ruedig recalls that

he and his buddies felt "it would be neat to expand into the operation you see today. We thought we might be able to do it."

According to Ruedig, they first set their sights on the old Hoover boathouse on the shore of Lake Mendota in James Madison Park. They submitted a 93-page proposal to convert the landmark to a commercial boat livery, but failed to convince the Madison Park Commission that the facility was needed.

Undaunted, Peterson turned to Holiday Shores, a campground three miles north of Wisconsin Dells where he had worked five years ago. He and his partners met with the campground owners in February and leased 250 feet of shoreline and the site of the nearby pro shop. They obtained permits for the jump and slalom course.

Peterson, Ruedig and Post, a 25 year-old electrical engineering major and former construction foreman, then rolled up their shirt sleeves. With four friends pitching in, they started building the beach in April's freezing rain. They dug out rocks, brought 350 tons of sand to the site and "started shoveling," Ruedig recalls.

The partners also dynamited more than 40 underwater stumps that would have been hazardous to boaters, Ruedig adds.

In addition to building the pro shop, Post designed the two docks – one 78 feet long with a 30-foot wing and the other, 36 feet long. Both float with the shifting levels of the river.

"It's sort of neat with the three of us," remarks Ruedig. "I keep the books. Michael handles the marketing and Curt is our builder who maintains the equipment."

About 45 boats comprise most of the "equipment." The fleet includes seven ski boats, two pontoon boats, four jet skis, two sailboats, four paddle boats, six canoes and 10 fishing boats. A \$16,000 Ski Nautique is used for water-ski instruction and for para-sailing. In para-sailing, a person equipped with a specially-designed parachute soars about 250 feet above the water as he or she is pulled by the boat.

Ruedig remembers outfitting the ski boats with 70-horsepower engines shortly before Aqua Sports' opening. "The first one took us two days, but the next four took only one day. We learned through practice." Each boat is supplied not only with enough gas and oil to make the trip, but life vests, a first aid kit, anchor, flare and plug. Aqua Sports' owners present a five-minute safety lesson to renters before permitting them to leave the dock.

"We want people to get the full service," says Ruedig, explaining that even his friends who have driven boats before must listen to the safety instructions.

Boats can be rented for an hour, half-day or an entire day. For instance, ski-boat rental rates are \$22.50 an hour, \$75 for a half-day and \$130 for a day.

Peterson and Ruedig theorize that boat rentals represent the recreational wave of the future.

"People can't afford boats of their own any more," says Peterson. "Insurance and maintenance costs are high, and boats have only seasonal use in Wisconsin. Besides, compact cars are too small to pull boats."

"People just don't want the cost or hassle of owning a boat," he continues. "We want to take that totally out of their hands."