

The ski life is an international one for Brad Able and Mike Kusiak, both of whom have coached at Mofam River Lodge on South Africa's western cape in Elgin.



**SKIING CAN BE AN ADDICTION** and, for some people, one that completely takes over. Their careers, friendships and almost every minute of their lives are dedicated to the sport. Here's what it's like to live

# THE SKI LIFE

By Sarah Kinbar





Left: Wade Williams at his childhood home site, Flax Pond in Lynn, Massachusetts. Right: Mike Kusiak where he lives, skis and coaches — Bell Acqua Lakes in Rio Linda, California.

**Wade Williams** grew up in Lynn, Massachusetts, 12 miles north of Boston, on a lake called Flax Pond. He was in seventh grade when he saw Wade Cox on the cover of *WATERSKI*, which really motivated the 13-year-old to give his all to the sport. “That was a big influence for me,” he recalls. “I thought, ‘A guy with the same name as me is at the top of this sport!’”

Williams started skiing more aggressively. The two-liter Coke bottles that he dropped in the lake with fishing weights were eventually replaced by actual buoys, though he didn’t know the official slalom course dimensions.

Eventually, someone drove past and noticed the course. Williams recalls, “This dude went knocking on doors looking for the ski boat on the lake. He was a clear addict. After we shared some sets, he encouraged me to go to New Hampshire to ski in an upcoming INT tournament. When I got to practice, I realized how whacked-out my hand-set course was. It wasn’t even close to the proper measurements, but I adapted quickly. Thanks to the INT’s ability-based scoring, I won my division at my first tournament. I was hooked,” Williams says.

Fifteen years later, Williams lives a life built on water skiing. He runs a couple of ski-related websites ([proskicoach.com](http://proskicoach.com) and [yourskilog.com](http://yourskilog.com)), coaches at various sites around the United States and, like

his fellow international ski bums, will roam to the ends of the Earth looking for his next ski adventure.

#### LIVING ON THE EDGE

Despite his father’s advice that ‘you can’t just play your whole life,’ Mike Kusiak gave up an accounting career after getting his master’s from Michigan State University to pursue coaching water skiing. After instructing a few years at Trophy Lakes in Charleston, South Carolina, and at Back Bay of Lake Winnepesaukee in Wolfeboro, New Hampshire, he got a call from a friend, Kevin Bishop, informing him that there was a coaching job open at Mofam River Lodge at South Africa’s western cape in Elgin.

Kusiak applied and got the job, and began what he describes as a life-changing experience: “We built a family of skiers there. Coaching kids on the water in South Africa was fun, but the most amazing part was seeing them build their character and confidence. I could see positive change in their lives.”

At the end of the summer of 2008, his host family, the Oosthuizen’s, threw Kusiak a going-away bash at their house. “I flew my dad out to share that last week with me, and he was there for the party. He heard as kids got up to talk about how meaningful it had been for them. One kid, Conrad Erbe, had come to the school



FROM LEFT: COURTESY WADE WILLIAMS; BILLDOSTER.COM



This page: Mike Kusiak cuts glass at Redwood Shores, a private water-sports facility in Roseville, California. Top right: Brad Able assumes the captain's chair for another day on the job at Twin Lakes in Monroe, New York. Bottom right: When Williams isn't coaching and running ski-related websites, he's powering through heelside turns like this one.



## It's No Sacrifice

► **Corey Humburg** proudly says that "skiing's role as number one has always been so clear and obvious to me, I've hardly bothered to note the things I've passed up." And as Wade Williams explains, skiing is by nature a selfish enterprise — the one way to improve is to invest copious amounts of time — so something's gotta give. In no particular order, here are some not-so-small trade-offs the skiers have made, all for the love of the sport.

"I skipped my graduation for my master's degree at Michigan State University to ski and be the forerunner of the MasterCraft pro water ski championships at Trophy Lakes in South Carolina, May 2002." — *Mike Kusiak*

"I've lost two romantic relationships, given up any shot at wealth in my lifetime and missed out on time with my family for the six months of the year that I'm working in Acapulco." — *Corey Humburg*

"My wife is pregnant and wants me to stay in Germany with her for the last three months of her pregnancy, but I'm going to New York to ski like usual. Of course, I plan on being back for the delivery." — *Brad Able*

"I missed my girlfriend's children's birthday parties when I was coaching and training, and I miss all my friends' weddings during tournament season." — *M.K.*

very shy. Introverted. During his time at Mofam, he came out of his shell with a lot of confidence and self-esteem," Kusiak says. "That night, my dad heard firsthand why I had passed on a secure job with Pricewaterhouse Coopers."

During his time in South Africa, doors to more travel opened for Kusiak. He went to Namibia, where he skied in the national championships. At Mofam, he skied with Norwegian team skier Susi Varming, who would later fly him to Norway to coach clinics, and he's been going back every year, whenever he's not at his home site of Bell Acqua Lakes in Rio Linda, California.

Enter the front door of his house and you immediately encounter — perhaps trip over — a skier or two, getting ready to hit the lake or waking up from a nap. What would be a living room doubles as a workshop, where Kusiak makes his equipment adjustments, and a fitness area where he keeps free weights, a stability ball and a mountain bike. It is truly a ski house.

### THE KIDS ARE ALL RIGHT

Wade and Mike both grew up skiing. Early development of a passion for skiing and having parents who cultivate the ski life are common themes among those who ultimately make a full-time commitment. Brad Able is no different. His dad was a competitive water skier who raised his son on the water.

"I started skiing when I was 2 years

old. Of course, the skis were tied together and the rope was tied to the skis, but I could go round and round the lake we lived on," he remembers.

Now the club coach at Twin Lakes in Monroe, New York, he only regrets that he waited as long as he did to get into coaching. He devoted four years of his life to building really fast street and race cars at an automotive performance shop that he owned and operated. At 25, he turned to skiing and coaching, and he hasn't looked back since.

His days from May to September, when the lakes in Monroe are open for skiing and local kids spend long hours behind his boat, echo his memories of circling the lake as a youngster.

"The best thing about coaching is working with the kids. I worked with one who couldn't do a wake-o but wanted to learn a flip. We worked on it for about a week, and he landed one in a tournament the following weekend. When it comes to kids, it's that look of shock on their face, followed by a wicked, huge smile when they land their first flip, that keeps me hanging around."

Corey Humburg lives for those same kinds of moments. In March of last year, he was coaching at Okeetee Park in West Palm Beach, Florida, on a Saturday morning, working with a spirited teen named Hope Brummitt. Some people might be distracted by or even consumed by an ongoing photo shoot for *WATERSKI*.





Not Humburg. All morning, he gave 100 percent, coming up with analogies on the fly to help Brummitt perfect her turns in the slalom course.

Humburg makes a living year-round by coaching at the Whitlocks' lake in Bumpass, Virginia, where he runs a training center from May to October, and working as a staff coach at Ski Paradise in Acapulco, Mexico, the rest of the year.

**PAYING THE PRICE**

At first glance, the ski life is all sunny skies and glassy water, and means routinely getting to travel to an exotic destination where there's always a driver ready to pull you and a cooler of cold beer to throw back. Nice idea, but not the whole story. The options for a career related to skiing are few, and they boil down to these: coaching, skiing pro events, selling ski equipment and creating sports media, or some combination of these things.

The patchwork of jobs still can't stave off the financial worries and periods of unemployment. Over the span of 40 or more working years, relying on family for financial help is the reality. That, or living out of your car from time to time.

Williams, who doesn't have a home site to ski on, has to depend on friends to get sets in. This past summer, that meant a stint of couch surfing. "I traveled to the pro events and did some clinics along the way. Between skiing, mountain biking

and bringing my dog Delton along for the ride, the only way to make it work was to live out of the car," he says. "I remember sleeping at a friend's lake house that had a really bad flea infestation. That made for an instant downgrade from sleeping on the sofa to tenting it."

It turns out that the ski life may have a shelf life. At 30, Able's long-term plans are "definitely up in the air." He wants to continue at Twin Lakes for at least another couple of years, "but beyond that is anyone's guess," he says. "My wife gets out of medical school in two years, so a lot depends on where she gets a job."

Humburg is challenging the world's best slalom skiers at pro events, and plans to ski and coach for as long as he can. For the time being, a serious romance is on the back burner and skiing is the lone priority. "I have certainly had friction between skiing and relationships. Notice which won. No regrets," he says, maybe half kidding.

Kusiak also admits that chasing down every ski opportunity has "made it hard on relationships, especially with the travel," but it doesn't have to be that way. Williams found the love of his life through skiing. As of this winter, he is looking for a job in the tech industry. "Gotta pay off those credit cards," he explains. One would suspect that a future with a certain Alicia may also have something to do with it.

Bottom: Corey Humburg's animated coaching style in full effect at Ski Paradise in Acapulco, Mexico. Right: Humburg shreds the lagoon at Ski Paradise.

