

LIVING TO FREERIDE

Supported by experienced friends, senior Mark Gomez strives to make a name for himself in the world of Jet Ski freeriding.

By Stacy Suh and Elaine Tang
STAFF WRITER and EDITOR IN CHIEF

The salty ocean air fills his lungs as the warm California sun soaks into his skin. In the horizon, he spots a wave rushing towards him. His hands on the throttle, he drives into the wave, flipping in the air and landing gracefully on the surface of the water.

For senior Mark Gomez and his fellow Jet Ski Freeriders, the thrill of Jet Skiing comes not only from the sport itself but also from the deep camaraderie present between skiers and the freedom and individuality the sport allows them.

Participating in freeride as opposed to racing and freestyle, the two other types of Jet Skiing, Gomez's style of riding resembles surfing but also includes back flips, barrel rolls, double rolls, "no handers" and other stunts.

Though Jet Skiing has long been a part of Gomez's life—at age five, he said he imagined himself out on the waves by mimicking professional riders on a weight bench and broomstick—it was not until his sophomore year that he was actually able to make that dream a reality.

"I really got hooked when I got my own ski and saw that there were a lot of people riding," Gomez said. "I realized how much fun it was. When I found out that Jet Skiing could be a lifestyle, I was all for it. I couldn't wait to do it every day."

Eager to discover more about Freeriding, Gomez began attending various competitions and soon found a welcoming community of other riders, including professional Ross Champion, and discovered a way to connect with them even off the beach.

"I went to the World Finals at Lake Havasu to watch the professional racing and Freestyle," Gomez said. "I met people from all over the US and that's where I found out about [the website of Jet Ski riders]," Gomez said. "I come home and the first thing I do is check the website. Everything's created for riders by riders. I'm truly addicted to it, whether I'm just reading about other people's ski [or] whether I'm reading about different things and seeing what's going on. You can learn about everything on that site."

Though Gomez is only an amateur in the sport, he has had the opportunity to ride and spend time with profes-

sional riders. "Everyone's got [each other's] backs. It's an expensive sport, yet everyone's willing to help each other out."

The generosity of his fellow Freeriders is a critical factor in keeping Gomez in the sport despite

hop on to ride. You're unique. It's your paint job, your engine. People look at it and every part of the Jet Ski has a little bit of you in it. A lot of the skis are customized for different people's types of riding styles, stances, the way they like their engine set up. It's all different and, when you bring it all together, the whole community thrives on it."

Just as every Jet Ski is unique, so is every wave and ski trip, Gomez said. Rushing to the beach at every opportunity after school and wrestling practice, Gomez cherishes the challenge and freedom each wave brings.

"The thing I like most about it is, you can maneuver away from the waves, you're not just confined to surf or you don't have to fight through the waves," Gomez said. "It's easy in a way, but it's so manipulative, your skill with your

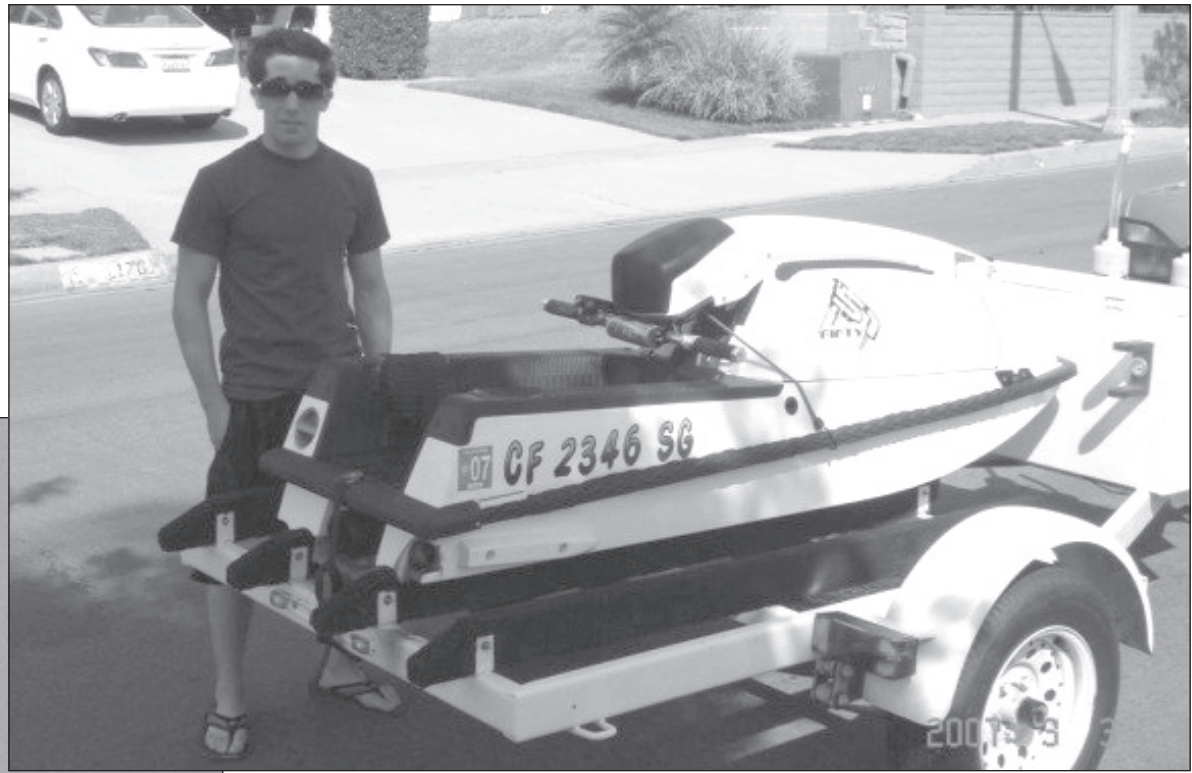
ski and the ocean, whether the surf is small or huge. You never know what you're going to get and it's different every time. I wouldn't trade it for the world."

Gomez's love for Jet Skiing extends beyond the present. His dreams include becoming a professional Jet Ski freerider or performing at Universal Studio's Water World attraction. Yet even if these dreams fail to materialize, Gomez said his passion for the sport will drive him to continue attending competitions, and he hopes to someday create a program to introduce young people to the sport and help expand the future of Jet Skiing.

"I'd like to open up a clinic," Gomez said. "I could teach little kids to do flat water tricks, just for fun. I don't even want to charge as long as they want to be part of the community. We're all doing our part to build the sport up to the great potential it has."



COURTESY OF MARK GOMEZ



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WE FLY HIGH: Senior Mark Gomez launches off of a waves while he takes his 550 SX Jet Ski out into the ocean to perform freeride tricks and practice for upcoming competitions (left). Gomez loads his Jet Ski onto a trailer connected to his car in preparation for one of his weekly trips to go riding in the ocean with his professional freeriding friends (right).

the frequent damages his Jet Ski sustains. As a full-time high school student, Gomez does not have the money needed to repair his Jet Ski, even with his job at Pacific Motor Sports, and thus relies upon his sponsors to support him.

"It's a hard sport to keep up with when you're in high school," Gomez said. "I don't have a lot of money to blow and I'm not working for the cheap way out. I am truly blessed to have these people who see my potential and are willing to get me there with their sacrifice of funding and resources that I may never have any time soon."

With the encouragement of both his sponsors and fellow riders, Gomez said he not only develops his skill but also uses Jet Skiing as a medium through which he expresses his individual identity, which then fuses into the identity of the Jet Skiing community.

"These types of watercrafts are really personal," Gomez said. "It's not something everyone can

Popular Jet Ski Models

Compiled by Mark Gomez



Kawasaki 550 SX: The most popular of the Jet-Ski hulls, this old school ski was around when racing and freestyle competitions began.



Kawasaki 650 SX: The next generation hull released in the mid-90's with the bigger and more potent 650cc engine than its 550 SX predecessor.



800 SX-R: The most current and only stand up still in production, the SX-R is most popular with racers because of its superior hull design.



Polaris Octane: The only stand up that Polaris ever produced. The Octane was made popular by racers because of its race-ready, modified 777cc engine.



650 Super Jet: Yamaha's first stand up with their 650cc engine and superior handling that put the company's foot into the ski racing scene.



701 Super Jet: It is current best-selling watercraft due to its light, flat-bottom hull, powerful 701cc engine and modification-friendly nature.

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Ski Competitions Types

Compiled by Jordan Lejuwaan

Freeride

This style of Jet Skiing, like the name suggests, gives the rider complete freedom over technique. It mainly takes place in the surf, or the area where waves come up and crash near the shore. A major constituent of freeriding is surfriding, which, like surfing, includes snapping in and out of the lips of the waves. Other tricks include re-entries, surf slashing and tube riding, all of which are shaped by the rider's individual riding personality. There are also many aerial stunts such as big airs, 180 nose-stabs, supermans, no handers, 50/50's, single and double barrel rolls and single and double back flips which riders can attempt.

However, this competition-based list of tricks does not quite do the sport justice. Freeriding is prided on the rider's ability to do whatever they choose to in the water. The waves in the surf allow riders greater potential for stunts than in the flat water in which racing and freestyle events take place.

Freeriding is also relatively new to the Jet Ski scene and is only now becoming more popular due to a growing community of "freeriders." More information concerning this up-and-coming sport can be found at www.x-h2o.com.

Racing

Racing is the root of competitive Jet Ski riding and the most popular type of contest. These competitions usually take place on flat water surfaces but are sometimes located in the ocean. All races are divided by engine class and design. For example, sit downs and stand ups compete in different races. All races start with a line of racers behind a delicate bungee line that quickly snaps out of the way when the first racer touches it from the hole shot. A hole shot starts with the racer's pit crew holding the back of the Jet Ski out of the water while the racer runs and revs the engine to clear the water out of the it. This temporarily decreases the resistance in the exhaust pipe in order to maximize the rotations per minute for quick initial acceleration. When the flag is dropped, skis take off from zero to 60 miles per hour in a very rapid two to four seconds in a straight away until the first turn buoy. This is compared to automobiles, which on average can only reach 60 miles per hour in a slower nine to 10 second range. Attaining such speeds in a water craft makes Jet Ski races extremely fast-paced and in some cases very dangerous for the participants.

Freestyle

Freestyle is a timed event in which riders attempt a series of tricks in front of a panel of judges. It is judged on the combination, skill level and flow of the tricks, as well as the showmanship of the rider. Freestyle is more of a performance than the other two types of events. A vital part of the competition is getting the audience excited in order keep the tempo up for the run. There are many different types of tricks involved in freestyle riding. Riders are restricted to the capability of their ski based on weight and power. Some of the more simple tricks include hood tricks, during which the rider places him or herself on the hood in the air. For example, a cowboy involves placing the hands on the hood while controlling the throttle with the feet. Other tricks include hand stands, submarines, nose stabs, big throws, tail stands and fountains. In the last few years, bigger engines and lighter hulls have been created by third-party freestyle Jet Ski companies to allow for more difficult stunts. These tricks include flat water barrel rolls, flairs and back flips. Riders can also increase their ability to "get air" by creating their own waves to launch off of with complex riding patterns.