

Sailboarding: It looks easier when standing on the beach



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Sure, I think, you're back on land, nice and dry.

The lesson also began nice and dry, a review of terminology, physics, safety proce-

dures and the like. But on go the sneakers and wet suit, in goes the sailboard, and there's no more putting it off: It's show time.

When you first pull yourself up to stand on the board, the sail and mast are lying in the water. You're supposed to straddle the middle of the board, feet spaced equidistant from the mast, and pull the mast up. That's not too difficult if you stand up, but the swells are rocking the board under your feet and instinct tells you to keep low.

Once the mast pops up, you let the sail go where it will while you steady the mast. "Don't sail," Livingston calls out. "Just get your balance."

Livingston looks pretty balanced back on the shore. He's a lithe, bearded fellow who's

been sailboarding for nearly a decade. He combines a pleasant, easy-going nature with a patient concentration for detail.

"You're pointing upwind," Paul calls. "Lean the mast forward."

If the board were a car, the mast would be the steering wheel and the sail would be the gas pedal. One hand goes on the mast. Pulling it toward the stern points the board upwind; leaning it forward turns the bow downwind.

The second hand holds on to the boom and is called the power hand. Pulling in to catch the wind supplies speed; letting it out slows everything down.

All easier said than done. "When you first

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The visual image is deceptive.

A man wades into the water and jumps on a board. He pulls a line, raising a colorful sail, and instantly goes whipping across the lake.

Easy as pie, right? Just jump on a sailboard and try to instantly master the latest chic, high-tech yuppie sport.

Maybe yes, maybe no. A brief lesson on the art of sailboarding shows it to be an activity a novice can learn relatively quickly, but also a subtle sport of finesse and balance.

This thought occurs the first time you go flying through the air and land on your dignity in the goo of Westchester Lagoon.

"You're doing fine," calls out Paul Livingston of Windsurfing Alaska. "I hope you're not getting discouraged."

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try it, it's like trying to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time," Livingston says. "It takes awhile."

And that's just while you're reaching across the wind, about the simplest thing you can do. Making an upwind turn requires more careful timing, as you pull the mast in, walk the board around under your feet, switch hands and try to head back the other way, the whole time the swells rocking the board.

At some point while learning the process, your brain overloads. The mast dips away, you hesitate, then suddenly you are flung off balance backwards and are sitting in mud — muckraking at its lowest.

"You're doing fine," Livingston calls out again. "I hope you're not getting discouraged."

Paul climbs on another board (he calls them boats, but I don't call anything a boat I can't get in my bathtub) and sails out. He tells me my balance is great, and says male students usually are too impatient to jump from one step in the lesson to the next and therefore take longer to learn than women do.

We try again. And again. The first few falls I dig up so much dirt I feel like I'm working for the National En-

quirer. But gradually the trips across the water become longer, the trips underwater become shorter, and I am almost feeling cocky out there.

"Straighten your back more," Paul yells. "Pull your power hand in."

I do what he says and instantly I'm riding high and steady. The power of the wind provides balance. I lean straight back and crank across the water. This is a rush, like surfing or skiing.

Feels so good I decide to try another high speed upwind turn. Mast in, ease the sail out, step around, start to switch hands...

Paul sails up as I bob in the water next to my board. "You're doing fine," he says. "I hope you're not getting discouraged."