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World's best compete at Pistol River

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Written by Ryan Sparks, Curry Coastal Pilot
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Pro division winner Levi Siver carves up a wave during the 2014 Pistol River Wave Bash held near Gold Beach this past week. Photo courtesy of Si Crowther/American Windsurfing Tour.

The Wild Rivers Coast is known for its blustering winds, challenging ocean conditions, and the hospitality of its people; making the area prime real estate for the best windsurfers from around the globe to compete in the American Windsurfing Tour's fifth annual Pistol River Wave Bash held in Gold Beach last week.

"I love coming back here because the atmosphere is good, the sailing is good, and it's a beautiful location," said eight-time windsurfing world champion Kevin Pritchard, who has competed all around the world during his decorated 15-year career.

Levi Siver, the 2012 Wave Bash winner in the pro division, won the event for a second time, outdueling Pritchard,

current AWT world champion Marcilio Browne, and last year's Wave Bash winner Camille Juban in the final heat to take home this year's title.

"In the final, I didn't feel like my jumps were as strong as they could be but my waves scores were just enough (to get the win)," said the 33-year-old pro who has been windsurfing for 24 years. "It's just a special feeling. Pistol River has challenging conditions. The conditions are changing with the waves and the wind and you always have to be prepared to adapt. It's wild."

Taking home the women's crown was Quebec's Ingrid Larouche, who has now won the event every year since its inception, though she admits that this year has been tougher than most due to a recent injury.

"I would say I was about 70 percent," said the three-time women's champion who recently recovered from a broken right foot a high-ankle sprain and two broken metatarsals. She has been back on the water for only one week prior to the event. "I was surprised to win because the girls have really been stepping it up. The girls are all solid."

Larouche, who makes her home in Hood River, admits that the injury had shaken her psyche.

"With the injury I didn't really have my confidence up so for me to go hit the lip and do the more radical stuff is scary. I did push myself to do forwards for the heat and it's a scary thing because I injured myself doing a back loop, but I knew I needed some jump to be competitive at all so I had to push myself," she said.

Larouche pushed through the injury to land a flawless forward loop that helped her secure her fifth straight Wave Bash title, outdueling young upstart Fiona Wyld for the second consecutive year.

"I came into this event just hoping to pick up a few points to stay competitive in the tour and I didn't expect to win because the girls have really been stepping it up," commented Larouche on her victory. "Today I just think I put the injury in the back of my head and tried to have fun and be as competitive as I could."

17-year-old Casey Rehrer won the amateur title as well as taking home a second-place trophy in the youth division.

"I turned around on a good wave with about five seconds left (in the heat) and had a really good run and thought it could be a really good score," said the Maui native who is mentored by his godfather and former world champion Josh Stone. "You can't panic out there. You have to wait for a set or do a jump and get in what you haven't done. I was lucky to find that wave."

In the youth division, 14-year-old Loick Lesauvage, rode comfortably in the blustery winds and performed some gigantic back loops to take the top spot on the podium over Rehrer and Harley

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Stone. Lesauvage said the weather was similar to the conditions he rides in while practicing in his home country.

"I'm happy and pretty stoked about winning," said Lesauvage through an interpreter. "Pistol River is pretty similar to where I sail in France. It took less time for me to get used to the conditions so it made it easier to get comfortable."

Canada's Dan Thompson won the Masters event by landing a clean loop in the over 30-knot winds. Dana Miller won the Grand Master division over second-place Colby Deer and third-place James Lundin.

Being the second leg of the six event tour, the Pistol River Wave Bash competition was heightened due to the fact that riding conditions were non-existent for the tour's first event in Santa Cruz, California, a week earlier.

"Santa Cruz was the 20th event in the history of the tour and the first time we didn't have rideable conditions," said women's pro windsurfer and AWT Tour Director Sam Bittner. "In Santa Cruz we got skunked with no conditions at all, unfortunately, but Pistol has been really nice for about three weeks, it's been real consistent wind."

The pros agree, as Pistol River has become a reliable spot among the windsurfing community.

"We drove a whole day (from Santa Cruz) just hoping we could get out on the water," said Siver, who also came to Pistol River for a Red Bull promotional shoot in 2013. "You can always count on this place, this time of year this place produces. It's a staple for American windsurfing. It's a place where everybody meets up and shares some sessions together."

"Pistol is awesome," declared Larouche. "Pistol is known to have really strong winds and the jumping is amazing. For wave riding it's little harder because of the direction of the wind being more offshore. It demands a different technique, but this event is challenging and cool."

The prime conditions are not the only reason the AWT keeps coming back. The tour began in 2009 with Pistol River being the only event on the tour. Now, five years later, the tour has grown and expanded to include more exotic locations such as Baja, Mexico, Peru and Maui, but the AWT is less about chasing the money and more about finding the perfect spots and perfect conditions for the sport of windsurfing. Thus, according to Bittner, Pistol River will always be an AWT destination. Though they had no title sponsor for this year's event, there was no chance of cancellation.

"I just feel like I'm passionate about making these events happen and I'm not going to let anything stand in our way," said Bittner regarding the tour's dedication to having an event on the Wild Rivers Coast. "People appreciate the events when they happen so it's worth it to me to have the events just to see people and families come together and enjoy the event."

Bittner also explains that Gold Beach and the local community has always supported the Wave Bash and her, and many of her fellow windsurfers, feel a connection to the area.

"It is really nice to have the community support for the event," she explains, stating that many local entities, such as the Beachcomber Inn and Curry County Fairgrounds to name a few, welcome them with open arms. "It's definitely unique and special."

For Siver, the area reminds him of home.

"I'm a country boy at heart. I love country," he admitted. "I'm originally from Sun Valley, Idaho, so I know this style of living: small town, good people, good value system. The people are so nice to us every year and I love coming here, for sure."

Guaging the response of the community, the feeling is mutual.



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