

WAKEBOARD'S 2020 VISION

Eight sports will battle for a place on the Olympic programme from 2020. The prize, says International Waterski and Wakeboard Federation president Kuno Ritschard, is worth the effort.

> The biggest news to come out of the 123rd International Olympic Committee (IOC) session, held in Durban in July, was the selection of PyeongChang as the host of the 2018 winter Olympic Games. The representatives of eight sports in particular, though, might disagree. Baseball, karate, roller sports, softball, sports climbing, squash, wakeboard and wushu took a step forward in the battle to gain a place in the Olympic programme, shortlisted by the IOC executive board for addition to the roster in 2020.

Only one – and perhaps none – of the eight will be added to the list of sports that will be contested at the 2020 Games, to be staged in Baku, Doha, Istanbul, Madrid, Rome or Tokyo. Baseball and softball – both dropped after 2008 and looking for reinstatement – as well as karate, roller sports and squash all lost out in the race to golf and rugby, which were added to the Games from Rio 2016. Sport climbing, wushu and wakeboard are being considered for the first time.

That they are so keen to make the cut comes as little surprise. “The biggest impact, in my opinion, is that all our national federations will be recognised and supported by their own National Olympic Committees,” says Kuno Ritschard, the president of the International Waterski and Wakeboard Federation (IWWF), of the benefits that would come with inclusion. “To be a sport at the Olympic Games would also certainly have an enormous impact on raising the profile and promoting the image of our sport. This in turn would result in even greater levels of participation and public interest.”

Ritschard and his colleagues and peers

have long worked to see their sports brought into the Olympic movement – waterski has appeared just once, as a demonstration event at Munich 1972, and wakeboard has never featured at an Olympic Games – and the response from the IWWF to the IOC’s announcement was swift. “On hearing the IOC decision to shortlist wakeboard, our world congress immediately voted to back our programme fully to take on this great challenge,” says Ritschard. “We feel strongly that our sport should be in the Olympic programme and we are working constantly to raise both our international profile and popularity. It is also important to fulfill the expectations of the IOC for a new sport. In our opinion any new sport should be a youth-focused lifestyle sport, exhibit full gender equality, be environmentally friendly and bring real additional value and appeal to the Olympic Games.”

Of those criteria, the popularity of wakeboard amongst a younger demographic is likely to be one of its greatest strengths. With the average age of an Olympic Games television viewer or spectator increasing with each edition, the IOC’s need to appeal to younger fans has never been clearer. “Wakeboarding is a real youth-driven lifestyle sport which can strongly contribute to the attraction of the Games, especially for the younger spectators and sponsors who value this audience,” says Ritschard, comparing its potential impact to another sport to have made waves since its addition to the Olympic programme. “Having enjoyed the thrilling spectacle of snowboarding in the Vancouver Winter Olympics, I am certain that wakeboard can bring that same level of genuine excitement and freshness to the Summer Games in 2020. It should also

The IWWF has already put an international task force in place and begun work on the strategies, narrative and imagery needed for its 2020 campaign to rise above the competition

be pointed out that the construction cost of a special Olympic cablepark is very low compared to other sports requirements. Cableparks will also leave a guaranteed legacy in any Olympic city with a very attractive and proven high level of return on investment.”

The development of cable wakeboarding has been a clear boon to the IWWF’s overall hopes for Olympic inclusion. With athletes pulled by an overhead cable rather than a boat, past prejudices that the skill in waterski and wakeboard is in machine as much as man are much easier to counter. “The current IOC Charter no longer makes any reference to sports relying on mechanical propulsion,” notes Ritschard. “Also in 2002 the IOC programme commission has specified that in cases such as waterskiing – where the mechanical propulsion allows the athletes to perform the competition but is not an element of the competition itself, and it is provided in an equal way to all athletes – it can be considered as technical support for the competition.”

Nor, in an age when both economic and



Photograph: Daniel Deck Bortos, Germany

environmental legacy are increasingly under scrutiny, are they as easy to criticise as a fleet of speedboats. “Fortunately for us, cableparks have practically no impact on the environment and in fact have been shown in specific cases to improve it,” says Ritschard. “To further showcase wakeboarding at the cable we now plan to add two or three cable events yearly to our successful Waterski & Wakeboard World Cup Series. We also will start a promotion campaign to show how easy it is to build a cableway. There are two pylon systems available which can be installed on a water stretch of 100 metres and which cost around US\$30,000, providing an excellent return on investment. They can be used for recreational skiing or wakeboarding and also for competitions. Such a mobile cableway was installed for two months this summer on the Olympic lake in Munich for the public and for a Cable Wakeboard Masters. Judging by the response from the large numbers of spectators and riders, we are certain that this has opened a very exciting new chapter for our sport and

hopefully for the Olympic Games.” Two boat manufacturers, Ritschard adds, are already making electric boats, with competition tests underway this year.



IWWF president Kuno Ritschard has Olympic plans

With an international task force already put in place focused on the strategies needed for the 2020 campaign – to be run under the title ‘Wakeboard 2020 Vision’ – the IWWF is keen to take its chance, despite the fierce competition. “I am quite confident that we

have a great chance to be the new sport at the 2020 Games, but we fully appreciate that a lot of work needs to be done to prove that we really merit this place,” says Ritschard. “The IWWF is a healthy, expanding, well managed federation with a long history. We organise a total of 11 different major World Championships around the world every second year, all involving both male and female athletes and covering all age categories. It is very encouraging to see the growing number of young athletes taking part in our competitions and how their level of performances are greatly improving. This is particularly the case in wakeboard.”

That the challenge will be tough is appropriate, given the prize on offer. “Each of the seven other sports have their own strong components,” acknowledges the IWWF president. “At this point we are focusing solely on our own objectives and what we believe the IOC will value most and can only hope that our 50 years of contact and dialogue with the IOC will soon reach a happy conclusion.” ■