

# Secrets To Their Success

**Matt Heilman and Chris Coupland discuss how show ski teams should already be preparing for the 2010 season**

**T**he Mad-City Ski Team of Madison, Wis., has won four consecutive national titles. Chris Coupland, president of the Wisconsin Water Ski Federation and a former co-show director of the Mad-City Ski Team, recently discussed the team's keys to success with show director Matt Heilman.

**CC:** So Matt, congratulations are in order for another successful year for Mad-City.

**MH:** Thanks, Chris. We have had a great run of success lately – four consecutive national championships and five of the last six. It is hard to believe actually.

**CC:** Wow, that is impressive. What is the key to the off-season that helps ensure success in the summer?

**MH:** The off-season to me is always the hardest part. I am always dying to get the season started and get the off-season stuff over with. But the reality is, the work you do from October to May is critical to making the summer months the best they can be. On Mad-City, we set up a timeline of things we want to complete in the off-season. We set target dates for when we want things completed, with the goal of having most everything done by our first water practice in May.

**CC:** From a show production standpoint, this planning and preparation is the most important part. What sort of things do you try to get done during the winter months?

**MH:** We try to have the theme and act order selected by November; the costumes designed by January to begin production on them; the ballet dance choreography done by our first land practice in January; and the music selected, backdrops built, script finalized, and boat patterns written by our first show for Memorial Day weekend.

**CC:** Hey, don't forget; I was there and I know that these deadlines are not always carved in stone.

**MH:** That is true, but we really do use that timeline as a guide for getting things completed in the off-season. There's no reason to be wasting time in the summer if you can get all of it done between October and May.

**CC:** That seems logical, but some teams are more of the summer weekend teams. Is that really a realistic timeline for all teams.



**MH:** Absolutely. It's incumbent on the show director to get these things done. Whether it is by himself or herself, or with a committee of people, the show director needs to get the theme rolling in order to delegate tasks such as costumes, choreography and backdrop. All of these things should be done in the off-season. Whether the team is together in the off-season or scattered all over, these things can still get done.

**CC:** You are right about that. With today's communications, there is no reason that a team scattered for the winter cannot accomplish these goals. In fact, haven't you had the choreographer post Mad-City's ballet dances on [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com) so that everybody can practice at home?

**MH:** Yes, two years ago our choreographer, Taryn Garland, was studying abroad in Spain and she sent the new dances to us via [YouTube.com](http://YouTube.com). Technology can be a great tool for getting stuff accomplished.

**CC:** I also saw in that list of yours land practices. You know everybody hates land practices. I hate land practices. Go ahead and try to defend those.

**MH:** Well, I can't defend land practices that you ran, but I can defend mine. We try to accomplish two main things in our land practices – work on pyramids, both bigger and better pyramids with our veterans and teaching new people how to climb, and we try to get our girls to learn the ballet dances. The key with land practices is to get people to buy-in to the idea that the more

we get done now, the more we can maximize our time on the water in the summer months. We do not want to be wasting water time working on dances and climbing pyramids on land. If you want both the skiing and the stage show to be perfect, the off-season is critical for that. If you save everything for summer, something eventually has to give.

**CC:** I agree. I think it is important that you try to make the land practices as fun as possible as well. I know we have played some games when it comes to climbing and working on crossing over and that helps as well.

**MH:** Another thing that can help is to get the team to come up with new ideas. It is always a challenge coming up with new lifts, moves or intros, but if you ask for help and try all of the new ideas at land practice, it gives everybody a sense of ownership.

**CC:** And I see shows time and again with sloppy dances, sloppy intros, and messed up boat patterns. All of those things can be tackled prior to hitting the water. It takes more than three months to put on a compete production.

**MH:** The other thing we found success with in our land practice was actually having competition for pyramid spots.

**CC:** Do you mean to say you actually had tryouts for pyramid spots?

**MH:** Not exactly, but at least for our girls, we had more girls than we had available pyramid spots. They all want to be in pyramid, so they were very committed to attending land practice, learning, and working hard. They all get along great, but they also want to beat out the girl next to her and earn that important pyramid spot.

**CC:** That works great for consistency, but also gives you flexibility in case somebody can't make it to practice or a show.

**MH:** But we expect everybody to make it to every practice and show.

**CC:** Yeah, right!

**MH:** A show director can always dream.



Chris Coupland



Matt Heilman

*If you'd like to submit a question to Matt and Chris for a future article, send your questions to [showdics4life@gmail.com](mailto:showdics4life@gmail.com).*