

“The Raging Bull”

In the world of barefoot water skiing, there is one name that stands alone for excellence and dedication. Ron Scarpa began his skiing career at the age of 12 when his family moved to Winter Haven, Fla., from Miami. He weighed about 40 pounds less than his two older brothers, who played football. “I knew I would never grow to be their size,” he recalls. “Water skiing was the first sport I found where size didn’t matter.” Soon he got rid of his skis, and let the boat pull him along on his bare feet. That was in 1976. At that time no one was teaching barefoot techniques. No one figured out the different techniques for slalom, tricks and jumping. Scarpa learned by watching exhibition skiers at nearby Cypress Gardens. But he also figured a lot out for himself.

One day he heard about two guys doing a toe-turn, so he hooked up a handle to a stair rail at home and stood on the carpet and practiced until it felt right. When he finally went to the water he made it on the second try.

Within weeks of learning to barefoot, Scarpa was winning local tournaments. In 1980 at the age of 17 he entered the Barefoot Water Ski World Championships for the first time. Australians were the skiers to beat. Unfortunately, he fell down some steps and tore ligaments in his ankle prior to the Worlds. He decided to ski anyway. “I jumped poorly, only took fourth in tricks, but somehow managed to tie the world record in slalom,” he recalls. “Overall I finished third. It wasn’t what I’d hoped for, but it was the best result any American had ever had.” That competition earned him the nickname of “Raging Bull.”

Scarpa received a great deal of media attention. He has appeared in national newspapers and magazines as well as television commercials for Juicy Fruit Gum, Mitsubishi, Pepsi-Cola and Mountain Dew. In addition to his appearances, Scarpa also worked behind the scenes as a technical advisor, site locator and story developer. He earned a place in Guinness Book of World Records for his Outstanding Barefoot Accomplishments. His magnetic personality made him a popular athlete with the media and fans alike.

Scarpa won his first national overall title in 1980. His innovative tricks and training techniques have secured him more Open Men national overall titles – 12 (plus one Open Pro Men national overall title) – than any other athlete in the history of barefoot water skiing. He also has won four men’s world overall titles, the most of any other athlete in barefooting. In addition to the world overall titles, he won five world trick titles, four world slalom titles and two world jumping titles.

Scarpa won his fourth and final world overall title at the 2000 Worlds in Fergus Falls, Minn. In leading the U.S. Elite Water Ski Team to its eighth consecutive world team title, Scarpa won gold medals in tricks, jumping and overall, and the bronze medal in slalom. He was the only men's competitor at the Worlds to medal in every event. "The Barefoot World Championships is always a dogfight and it's not an easy tournament to win," Scarpa said at the time. "That's how I always approach the Worlds, but this year I went after it a little more and I ended up skiing better than at any other time in my life."

Scarpa was selected USA Water Ski's Male Athlete of the Year in 1992. He remained active in coaching after retiring from major competitions in 2005.