**1) Can you introduce yourself to our readers? Tell us a little bit about your history with water skiing?**

Hey all, Michael Woodgate here! I started water skiing with my family recreationally as a child. I really enjoyed being behind the boat and quickly got interested in competitive water skiing. I used to train at Whitworth Water Ski Centre with Andy Knowles as a child, before moving on to skiing at Hazelwood’s and all the great coaches there. I skied on the junior team for GB when I was 17. Following graduating from my undergraduate degree from the University of Lincoln, I trained at Bennett’s in Zachary, Louisiana for 3 years, before going back to school and moving to Monroe, Louisiana to work for the ULM Water Ski team.

**2) You are currently working as the Head Coach of the most successful university water ski team ever, the University of Louisiana at Monroe (ULM), what inspired you to become part of this team?**

Really it was their reputation, both their history of success as a team, and the people that have been there. ULM has been synonymous with success since the start of collegiate water skiing, having won 29 out of the 41 previous National Championships. I grew up with a lot of good friends that had been part of the program at ULM and loved their time there. It was always a dream of mine to ski collegiately, unfortunately injury stopped this idea when I was looking at schools for my undergraduate degree. In 2017, whilst I was at Bennett’s, I was approached by the Head Coach at the time, Joey McNamara. Joey knew me well from my time at Bennett’s and he asked me if I would be interested in coming to work as a Graduate Assistant for the ski team and come get my Master’s Degree at ULM. I applied the next week! The opportunity was way too good to turn down and I am now the Head Coach of the team and have graduated with an M.S in Exercise Science, with a concentration in applied exercise science and sports management. I’ve been pretty fortunate!

**3) As part of your studies at ULM, you conducted various research projects, can you tell us about the results you found out? Or anything you would like to share or found interesting?**

I completed two theses in my time at ULM, my first one was titled “The Physical and Physiological Profile of a Collegiate Water Skier”. I conducted a battery of tests inclusive of anthropometric measurements and several performance measures and compared scores to collegiate rankings. The research was really interesting and I found several significant differences between males and females, and some tests that correlated with performance in slalom, tricks, and jump. Without going into much detail about my findings, the slalom score was related to body composition, trick score correlated with handgrip strength, and jump score was correlated with left-lateral flexion (side plank) time. The testing I used was pretty extensive!

My second Master’s thesis was titled “An Assessment of Mental Toughness in Water Skiers”. I distributed a questionnaire that people completed to help me further understand the role mental toughness plays in the participation and performance of a water skier. The questionnaire calculated overall mental toughness and 3 subscales of the overall construct.

I found a lot of significant differences in various components throughout the study. Mental toughness correlated with age and there were significant differences in confidence and overall mental toughness between males and females. I found it very interesting that confidence was related to a skier’s competitive standard and their performance satisfaction from skiing in a tournament. I also found the level of education was related to overall mental toughness which I thought was pretty cool.

**4) You are one of the few who went to University in both England and Louisiana, what would you say were the big differences?**

I completed my undergraduate degree in Lincoln, and my graduate degree at ULM. The way the undergraduate degree is delivered at home compared to the US is certainly quite different. People tend to have much more of an idea towards what they specialize in at an undergraduate level in the UK. You go to study Sports Science, you take all Sports Science-related classes as an undergrad, be that exercise physiology, biomechanics, nutrition, etc. In the US you take classes in your concentration, but you can also register for classes outside your concentration, as long as you complete the degree requirements. Undergraduate programs are much more flexible in the US, there is way more room for you to tailor your degree program as you wish. Otherwise, university life is pretty similar, some people live in halls, some people live off-campus in houses, apartments, etc. People certainly have a lot of fun at university wherever you are!

The main difference though between studying in England and the US is the sports facilities. Collegiate sport in the USA is barely comparable to the UK, in any sport. The best a water skier can do in the UK is live close to a great site to train, like I did when I went to Lincoln and skied at Hazelwoods. Going to school at ULM as a water skier is incredible. The University supports the water ski team at ULM better than a lot of countries around the world can support their pro athletes. Alongside our on-campus slalom course and two jump courses, we have a purpose-built boathouse and ski house, current model year MasterCraft, and ski jump maintained to the latest specifications. We also have access to athletic trainers and a team physician, all within walking distance of the center of campus. The facilities at ULM are incredible.

**5) What has been your most embarrassing cultural difference at university in America?**

My Yorkshire accent regularly gets lost in translation with locals!

**6) You have crashed and had more serious injuries than a lot of people from skiing, what inspired you to stay in the sport?**

This is a difficult question because saying “stay in the sport” implies that I ever had a decision to make in walking away. Water skiing isn’t a professional sport nowadays, it’s a lifestyle. A lifestyle that I love. Unquestionably my journey in the sport has changed a lot from where I was intending. I love skiing, be it hitting the ramp, running buoys, and even putting my foot in the toe hold! I can honestly say even though I haven’t skied since my last Achilles injury 3 years ago, I am enjoying my time around the sport as much as ever right now.

**7) Collegiate water ski tournaments are unlike any other tournament within the sport, paint a picture for those who have no idea about collegiate skiing tournaments?**

I can do my best with words but for those who want to see what collegiate skiing is like, check out Marcus Brown’s FlowPointTV. He captures the essence of collegiate skiing the best. Collegiate skiing is so much fun. The team aspect of collegiate skiing is amazing and the energy around collegiate ski tournaments is intense. I am convinced collegiate Nationals is the best tournament in water skiing. Imagine the banks lined with skiers from around the country, cheering and screaming for their teammates, running into the lake to congratulate or console them, whether they are one of those from a school competing for a National title, or a team that made their way to Nationals as a Wild Card. The overall energy around these tournaments is what makes them special.

**8) What would you say to those who are struggling to decide between whether to go to university in America or the UK?**

Research them both properly and ask around! If you have skied in a competition in the UK, you will know someone who has studied in Louisiana. If you have a clear view of what you want to do as a career, make your decisions based on which will open up the best doors to a job in your chosen field. If you can make your way into your career by using your talents on the water to gain a scholarship into a university in America, even better!

**9) Tell us about a special and stand out memory from collegiate water skiing?**

I have so many amazing memories from collegiate water skiing. I don’t know if I have one that stands out but I cannot emphasize enough how many truly amazing people you meet in collegiate water skiing. Whether they be on your team, on rival teams, tournament organizers, previous alumni, just so many great people, and great memories. Collegiate water skiing is a stand out memory!

**10) Collegiate skiing is the biggest growing sector in water skiing within the USA, what can everyone learn from this?**

As a sport, we can learn a lot from collegiate skiing. I continue to applaud how the NCWSA works with their attitude towards rule changes. They have a progressive view and are willing to try out new ideas. Obviously, the nature of collegiate sport means athletes are always coming and going, teams do a great job of recruiting new people into the sport and increasing participation. The most valuable thing I think we can learn though is the importance of catering for all and creating an enjoyable environment to compete in. A large part of the attractiveness of collegiate skiing to college-aged guys and girls is the fun they have at tournaments. I believe it is very important for us to have elite skiers to look up to, but it is equally important for the sustainable growth of a sport to have a strong base of amateur and semi-competitive skiers. Collegiate skiing manages to do this, it attracts some of the best athletes in the world, both men and women in all 3 events, as well as those who manage to stand on the start dock and put their jump skis on the wrong foot. Whilst I don’t have all the answers, so to speak, I do understand that when you look at the performance pathway for a sport, they follow a pyramidal structure with the professional athletes at the top of the pyramid, and the recreational/grassroots at the bottom. Equally as important are those parts in-between to support the top of the pyramid.

**11) What is your favorite water skiing site in the world?**

This is impossible. I have to cheat and say Hazelwoods Ski World and Bennett’s Water Ski & Wakeboard School in Zachary, LA. I have so many amazing memories and opportunities that have come about from skiing and spending time at both of these sites.