

How to do a Back Toe Hold

By Richard Gray, photos by Ivan Godard

Just like the front toehold, the back toehold is one of the strongest foundation building tricks in barefooting. That's not to say it is a beginner level trick, though. If you are ready for the back toehold, then you are a great barefooter. By foundation building, I mean that it is a trick that will help you build strength, balance, body position, consistency, and increase your own learning curve for other tricks. It is widely accepted that working on both back toeholds, on both sides of the wake, is a sure way to accelerate your learning on back one foot slalom. Turns will come easier too. No matter how good you get in barefooting, you will find the back toehold to be one of the best training tricks you will have. You will use it forever, and that will help you progress much further than you can imagine. And, just like the front toehold, the back toehold is a really cool trick.

If you have read my article on front toeholds you will notice that this article is very similar. The reason? That's easy: the same principles apply. Toeholds (front or back) are simply really, really good one-foots. How do you know if you have a good back one-foot? Well, can you ride it indefinitely? Knee bent, head up, chest out, handle shifted and angle in your upper body? Lifted foot up high (parallel to the water) by the strap while doing this? Can you bend your knee and move up and down while riding the back one-foot? If you can do all of these things, then you can likely do the back toehold on your first attempt! It is really that easy if you have a great one foot. If you are not that solid yet, then you had better practice more on the back one-foot before attempting a toehold.

All the same principles apply for the back one-foot. The back one-foot position has the same good glide that you have in the back two-foot position. We do not want to plow! Keep your knee bent, butt out, low back arched, chest up and head up. Angle (or shift) the handle slightly so it points down to the foot that is on the water. If you are going to ski on your left foot, then your left hand and handle should be shifted down slightly on your left hip. Your right hand and handle should be shifted towards the centre of your butt and up higher. This creates angle in your body and helps shift your weight over the foot on the water and off the foot in the air. You must keep this angle at all times. If you flatten the handle out, your shoulder will drop and your foot in the air will come back to the water as you tip back over that way. You can practice this on dry land. Try holding one foot off the ground and behind you as high as you can. You will notice that you naturally angle your upper body and lean over the foot you are standing on. The same principle applies while you are on the water. Lift your foot (heel to your butt) by bending your knee.



Now that you are riding a good one-foot with good angle (handle shifted), and good knee bend, we can move on to the easy part — the Back Toe!! That's right. It actually is easy if you have the right set-up. Get your lifted foot up by the strap, and about 2 inches past it. You will have to "feel" for the strap. Keep the angle and knee bend! Try this a few times to get really comfortable with where the strap is and ride with your foot there. There is no need to stick your foot in there and let go the first time you feel the strap. That will ONLY result in a heel catching back flip avec groin flexibility testing "whipper." If you are not the type to heed to my advice (translation: you are too good to learn that slow...or visa versa) then MAKE SURE you have someone video your set. Crashes like that are just too good to waste on the few that witness them from the boat. Plus, the doctors may find the video helpful.



Anyway, back to the lesson. Here we are with the lifted foot up, and touching the strap. The strap should be positioned so it is deep on your foot. I know it is called the "Toehold", but let's think of it more like "rope on foot." You are now ready to let go. Keeping your knee on the water bent, low back arched, and holding the angle in your upper body, you simply need to slowly open up your hands. Transfer the pull to the strap, and let the handle rest in your palms. Ride in this position. DO NOT take your hands

away from the handle. Keep the handle resting in your open palms and ride a short distance then VERY slowly regrip the handle, unload your foot from the strap, ride a back one foot, then, and only then, set your foot down. You did it! Your first back toehold!



Sounds easy, and it is, but there are potential trouble spots. We will go over them at the end. Right now, let's make it better. Once you have done a few with your palms resting on the handle, we can move on and really make this trick perform. You will always want a slight arch in your lower back while doing this trick. This arch will keep your weight over your foot and prevent you from getting pulled out away from the handle. Again, you can try this on dry land to get the feeling. Now, with the handle resting in your palms, low back arched, slowly let your hands move to either side of your hips by simply bending your elbows. This is not a big movement. The position of your upper arms should stay the same. The handle will rest on the back of your leg right where it was when you were riding with it resting in your palms. A few passes like this and we can move on.



Remember to always regrip the handle SLOWLY, keeping your good position. Take your foot out of the strap and ride a back one foot for a short distance, then put your foot

down. Move too fast and you will lose your angle and make bad decisions. The birds you see flying around the stars you are seeing will be a good indication of fast movements.

It is now time to ride this trick...and keep riding. Practice riding your toeholds (YES BOTH!) with one hand down slightly lower than the other. If your left foot is on the water your left hand should be low. This is a good way to keep the angle in your body. When you are really **really** comfortable, try bending your knee while riding in the back toe. Go down low then up again. Move your hands up in front of you so you can see them. Rest your palms on the spray. Look over at the boat. Remember to move slowly! Make a game out of these exercises. They will help you stay in great skiing shape and make you a much better skier. When you have mastered the back toehold on the boom, then take it out behind the boat and ride, ride, ride.



Richard Gray has been a member of the Canadian Barefoot Team for 16 years and is the BCWSA Barefoot Coach. His sponsors include The Barefoot Company, Lake Elmo Sports, and ECI. Feel free to e-mail him any questions or comments: glfooter@aol.com.

ADDITIONAL TIPS:

Definitely use the boom if you have one. Add a 2 foot section of rope to your handle. The extra length will make it a little easier to get your foot up to the strap.

Practice the back toehold on shoe skis first to get the feel of it. Use all the same instructions as for your feet.

A back toe handle with a "Drop Strap" will make it much easier and more comfortable to load and ride the back toehold.

TROUBLESHOOTING

- ▶ Problem: Can't reach the handle to recover.

What's Happening: You are losing your low back arch and dropping your shoulders.

Solution:

1/Go back to the exercise of riding with the handle in your palms and concentrate on the position you need to hold.

2/ Try reaching with one hand only first. If your left foot is on the water reach with your right hand, grasp the handle then grasp with your left hand.

▶ Problem: Can't hold your foot up.

What's Happening: You are losing angle and tipping back over that foot in the air.

Solution: Keep LOTS of angle in the handle and ride more back one-foots.

▶ Problem: Can't reach the strap.

What's Happening: You are leaning away too far.

Solution:

1/ Get a good knee bend & glide with low back arch.

2/ Keep your chest up.

3/ Lower the boom slightly.

▶ Problem: Falling over to the side.

What's Happening: You are likely tipping to the side of the foot in the strap.

Solution: Keep the angle in your upper body!

Guaranteed success: Sign up for a Barefoot Camp or Clinic!