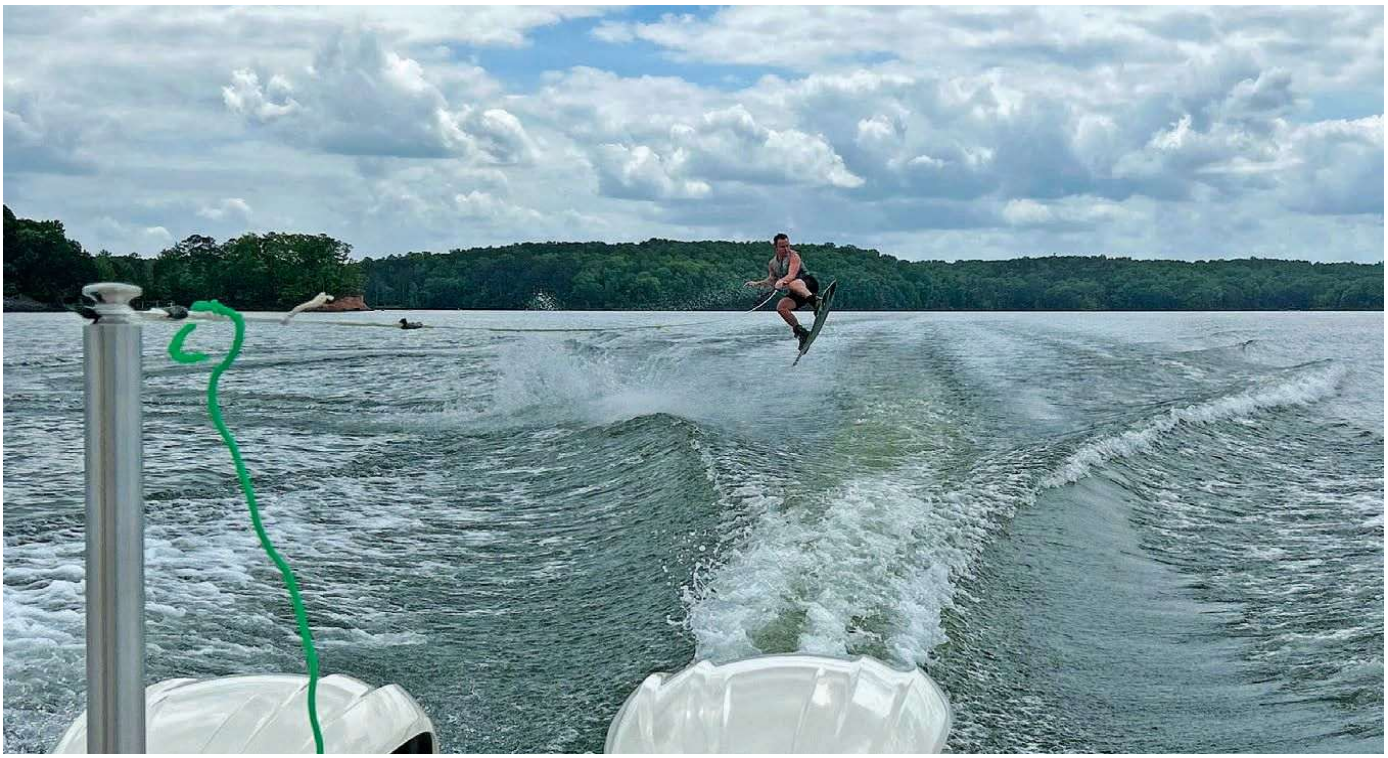


Game Changer: Wakeboarding Without A Wakeboat

A champion water skier discovers the joystick-enabled boat control systems designed for easier docking and running precise headings also make for a better tow experience

ARTICLE & PHOTOS BY ZENON BILAS, BOATU.S. CONTRIBUTING WRITER

My curiosity was sparked when I took a test run on a center-console at the Miami International Boat Show. The test boat featured the Yamaha Helm Master EX, a sophisticated boat control system that harnesses GPS precision, the boat's propulsion system, and automation to make docking easier, run at precise headings, hold position, or run trolling patterns. Since its 2020 introduction, Helm Master has been marketed toward cruisers, dayboaters, and anglers to make for easier boating and fishing. But, I thought, wouldn't some of its features – specifically the precise autopilot and speed control functions I just witnessed – make for a better tow ride?

I arranged a test with Yamaha on Lake Allatoona, near its North American headquarters in Georgia. My test boat was a Grady-White Freedom 255 with twin Yamaha 200-hp outboards. At 24 feet, 9 inches, with an 8-foot, 6-inch beam, the 255 is a family and fishing boat – far from a specialized inboard ski- or wakeboat that provides precise speed control and optimal wake conditions for specific tow sports. I specifically picked a general-purpose boat to see how the Helm Master EX would perform while an experienced wakeboard rider aggressively jumped the boat's wake.

As a world champion barefoot water skier with five decades of skiing, riding, and surfing behind boats, I know that both success and safety in tow sports depend on a collaboration between the driver and the person in tow. For all tow sports, maintaining a consistent speed, wake shape and size is essential. Ideally the boat's speed is fixed, and the path is perfectly straight because even a slight wheel turn can alter the wake's shape.

The Helm Master EX has four different autopilot modes. We used the Course Hold mode for the test because it provides a straight path while compensating for wind and current. Once engaged, the Helm Master EX controls the steering and keeps the heading locked until the driver moves the wheel,

This experienced wake rider gets some serious air behind a 25-foot dual-console family fishboat.

which immediately disengages the system. For slight course adjustments, the system allows for small corrections – in 1- or 5-degree increments. In Speed Control mode, the system permits fine speed adjustments by increments of just 50 rpm, or a fraction of a mile per hour. This feature enables the driver to fine-tune wake characteristics by adjusting the boat speed, optimizing the experience for the rider.

From The Helm

The wakeboard rider hit the water first while I observed the boat's wake and speed, and the rider's performance. It was strange at first to sit at the helm without needing to move the wheel or throttle, but this allowed me to focus on boating traffic and fine-tune the speed to create optimal wake characteristics for the rider. Another standout feature of the Helm Master EX is its joystick control that simplifies docking, but on this test, the precise maneuvering helped when picking up the rider.

Our designated Yamaha test driver accelerated, set the speed control, and engaged the autopilot mode. The Grady-White's 20-degree deadrise hull, combined with its 4,744-pound hull weight, created a substantial wake without the need for ballast beyond the contents of our 135-gallon fuel tank.

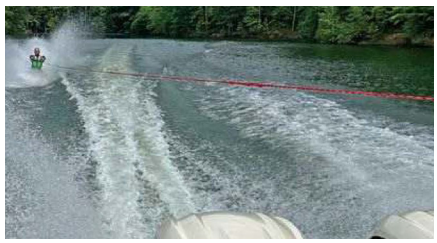
We started at 19 mph, a typical wakeboarding speed. As the rider jumped the wake, aggressively edging to gain height and distance, I could feel his pull against the boat. The Helm Master EX quickly compensated for the rider's pull, maintaining the exact speed, and kept a straight path. Observing the GPS speedometer, I noted that in most cases, speed fluctuated by only 0.2 mph before immediately rebounding to the set speed.

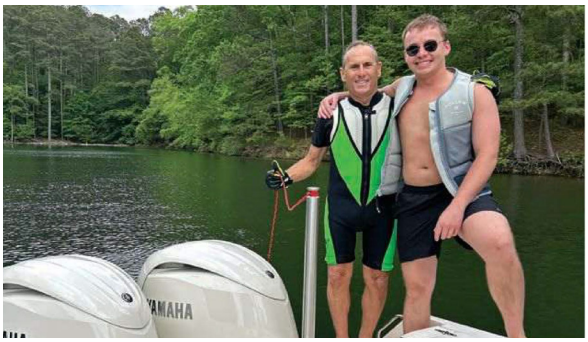
I watched as the rider jumped and easily cleared the boat's wake from port to starboard and starboard to port. The Freedom 255 held a perfectly straight course, keeping the wake's shape consistent. When a boat tracks precisely straight, a wakeboarder or slalom skier experiences a more solid feel when edging toward the wake. This allows the wakeboarder to jump farther and higher, allowing for midair rotation tricks for capable riders. Slalom skiers also benefit from a boat that tracks exactly straight, as they can achieve a more aggressive angle when crossing the wake. And even beginners can shorten the learning curve with consistent speeds and straight course lines under tow.

From The Water

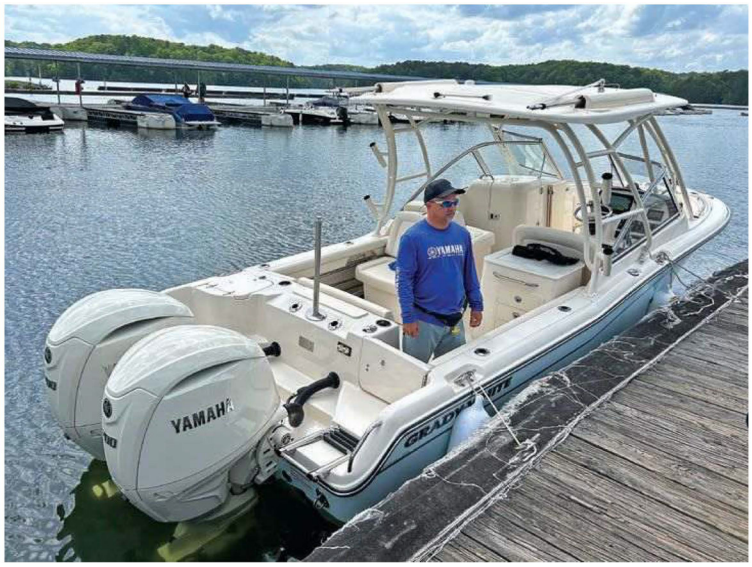
When it was my turn to get behind the boat, I requested a speed of 37 mph for barefooting. Once I was on my feet and we reached the set speed, I could feel how the speed control kept the speed exact throughout my run, allowing me to focus on skiing instead of adjusting on the fly.

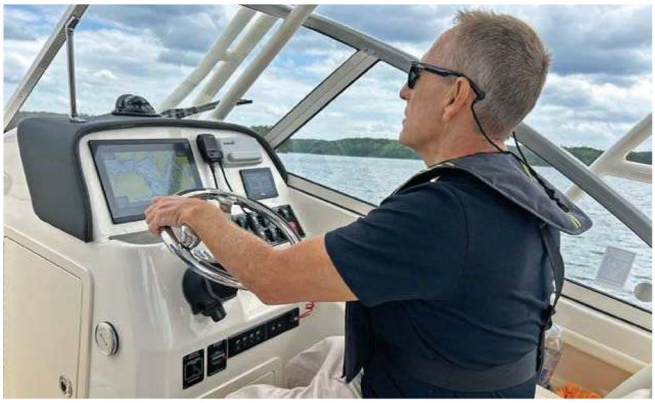
As the test concluded, I was thrilled to confirm that my presumption was correct: The Yamaha Helm Master EX is a game-changer for tow sports, transforming a family and fishing boat into an excellent option for wakeboarding and water skiing. It makes for a better tow sports experience for the person in tow while allowing the driver to focus on providing a safer and more enjoyable ride. The ability to hold an exact speed without constant throttle adjustments will even make towing a tube rider safer and more enjoyable.





The author (left) with Connor Ashberry, a digital marketer with Yamaha WaterCraft Group and enthusiastic wakeboarder. Above: Zenon favors barefoot water skiing.





Left: The test boat, a Grady-White Freedom 255 dual console with twin 200-hp outboards. Above: The author takes the wheel to begin the controlled speed tow test.