



# Back In The RACE

***58-year-old Jon Cole came out of a two-year retirement to win the 51 and Over Men division at the 5th U.S. Open Water Ski Racing National Championships, Oct. 9-11, in Parker, Ariz.***

Written by **Scott N. Atkinson** • Photography by **Daren Van Ryte**

**T**he green flag dropped and Jon Cole shot out of the water. With world-renowned driver Randy Davis at the wheel, and Cole's eldest son, Graham, observing, Cole and his race ski quickly graced the surface of the water and began barreling down the straightaway. After trailing Dave Chandler for the first two of the race's four laps, Cole – at times reaching 90-plus mile per hour speeds – made a move for the win. "I really just went after it," he says matter-of-factly. "I signaled for Graham to push me harder and I never looked back."

Cole went on to victory in that race, as well as the second race to win the 51 and Over Men title at the 2009 U.S. Open Water Ski Racing National Championships, Oct. 9-11, in Parker, Ariz. Nearly 100 athletes competed in 21 divisions in two



## Bemis Returns For U.S. Open



Mike Bemis of Lake Arrowhead, Calif., returned to compete in the U.S. Open this year for the first time since 2007. Bemis was diagnosed with brain cancer in September 2008 and did not compete in the 2008 U.S. Open. Doctors gave Bemis between three to six months (without treatment) and 12 to 14 months (with radiation and chemotherapy) to live at the time of diagnosis. After undergoing a little more than six months – five days a week – of treatment, Bemis says he was feeling fine enough to compete this year. “I don’t have any issues right now,” Bemis said in late November, a little more than a month after finishing ninth in the 51 and Over Men division at the U.S. Open. “I was given at best 14 months to live, and we just passed the 14-month mark. I’m very happy with how I am feeling right now. There was really no reason for me not to ski. I couldn’t be competitive, but arthritis in my knees was the big reason for that. I was just happy to be out there on the water.”

**LEFT:** Jon Cole came out of retirement to win 51 & Over Men.

petition this year following a two-year retirement. “When I put that ski on, I’m not just going out to race, I’m going out to win.”

Cole is the quintessential ski racer. Life has always been full speed ahead for him. Off the water, he is a hugely successful attorney who has argued in front of the United States Supreme Court. On the water, he is both an accomplished and trusted driver, and fearless and competitive ski racer. “Looking back” isn’t a phrase Cole likely will utter often, particularly when you consider what he has endured since announcing his retirement from water ski racing after finishing runner-up at the 2006 U.S. Open. In June 2007 he was involved in a near-fatal accident when a fuel leak blew up the boat he was in. He suffered third degree burns over 22 percent of his body, underwent skin grafts, and spent 30 days in the Grossman Burn Center in Sherman Oaks, Calif. A year later he underwent hip replacement surgery on his ailing right hip. “I retired from ski racing because of the bad hip,” Cole says. “Skiing wasn’t helping it, and my family thought I should give it up. They thought I was going way too fast.”

And why did he come out of retirement? “I decided I wanted to give it a shot,” Cole says. “I did some free skiing in Parker, Arizona, in March and my new hip felt great. I was like, ‘Wow, this feels pretty good.’”

When Cole showed up at the U.S. Open seven months later, he hadn’t been on a ski since that free skiing endeavor in March. But thanks to a steady workout regimen of mountain biking, weight lifting and plyometrics two-to-three days a week, he showed up in great physical condition. In round one, Cole finished ahead of Bob Grande by about 7 seconds and Chandler by nearly 10 seconds. In round 2, Cole sprinted to a lead that he never surrendered, finishing ahead of Chandler by 7 seconds and Grande by nearly 16 seconds to clinch the overall title. “In round one I developed confidence as the laps ticked off,” Cole says. “By round two, the butterflies were totally resolved and I had a lot of confidence. I think one of the

**BELOW:** Katelin Wendt, pictured here racing Mallory Nordblad in the 17-29 Women division, won overall titles in 17-29 Women, Formula 2 Women and Women’s Open.

rounds of circle-sprint races on a 2-mile course. The athletes drew for pole positions, made a deep-water start at the drop of a green flag and raced in lanes for a designated number of laps. Overall placements were determined by total number of points. In the event of a tie, total time broke the tie.

Cole, who turned 59 two months after the U.S. Open, was one of 15 athletes to win a title at the 5th annual event, held for the first time on the famed Parker Strip of the Colorado River, a favorite location of ski racers, which was proven by the boost in participation of approximately 50 percent over the previous year’s event in San Diego. “It was really a positive, fantastic experience for me,” says Cole, who won the 51 and Over Men title at the inaugural U.S. Open in 2005 and returned to com-





keys was that I was so good in the turns. My new hip allowed me to turn better. I didn't have to favor it, and I wasn't in any pain. It made for a great weekend."

Several of the top U.S. elite racers were in action throughout the weekend. Katalin Wendt of Huntington Beach, Calif., who earned the women's silver medal at the Water Ski World Championships last July, won three divisions – Women's Open, 17-29 Women and Formula 2 Women – for the second consecutive year at the U.S. Open. "This was probably the most fun I've had at a U.S. Open," Wendt says. "The weather was great and the water was smooth."

Wendt won all six of her races, but not before holding off several challenges from fellow U.S. Elite Team member and best friend Mallory Nordblad. Wendt won two of her six races by an average of nearly 9 seconds, and she held off Nordblad by less than a second in the other four races. "Mallory and I always have great races," Wendt says. "We're pretty equal in speed, but for whatever reason I was able to get that little extra at the end. It was a lot of fun."

Wendt's younger, brother, Trevor, and father, Scott, also earned titles. Trevor, 15, won the most divisions of any skier during the weekend with four, while Scott earned the drivers' hi-point award. Trevor, who earned the bronze medal at the Junior Worlds last July, won the 13-16 Boys, 60 MPH Open, Hands Out Front and Stock Boat – ending Corbin Heinbuch's four-year reign – divisions. Trevor won all eight races in claiming the four titles, and he placed fourth overall in the highly competitive Formula 2 Men division.

Cameron King of Manhattan Beach, Calif., who earned the silver medal in Men's Formula 2 at the 2009 Formula 2 Worlds, was the only other racer to win multiple titles at the U.S. Open. He swept four races in winning the overall titles in 17-25 Men and Formula 2 Men. He also placed fourth in Men's Open.

Todd Haig of Redlands, Calif., won the Men's Open title for the second consecutive year and third time in his career. Haig, the men's silver medalist at the 2009 Elite Worlds, was the class of the Men's Open field, winning both rounds by an average of nearly 25 seconds.

There were seven first-time U.S. Open winners – Patrick Benjamin of Mesa, Ariz., won 0-12 Boys; Heidi Werstler of Huntington Beach, Calif., won Women's Novice; Russell Rothner of Manhattan Beach, Calif., won Social; Tyler Murray of El Segundo, Calif., won Men's Novice; Luke Watts of Australia won 26-32 Men; Dennis Hall of Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., won 43-50 Men, as well as the U.S. Open title given to the top-scoring observer for the second consecutive year; and Lindsay Phillips of Los Angeles, Calif., won 0-12 Girls. Other athletes winning U.S. Open titles in respective divisions were: Rose Kinslow of Oakley, Calif., 30-39 Women; Glen Anderson of Studio City, Calif., 33-42 Men; and Chelbe Kinslow of Oakley, Calif., 13-16 Girls. Rose Kinslow won her first U.S. Open title since 2005; Anderson won his first U.S. Open title since winning Formula 2 Men in 2007; and Chelbe Kinslow, who earned the silver medal at the 2009 Junior Worlds, won her second career 13-16 Girls' title.

For complete results, visit [nwsra.net](http://nwsra.net).



**TOP:** Trevor Wendt won overall titles in 13-16 Boys, 60 MPH Open, Hands Out Front and Stock Boat.  
**MIDDLE:** Grace Cox finished runner-up in 0-12 Girls. **BOTTOM:** Andy Anderson finished runner-up in Formula 2 Men.

