

Champions jet in to demonstrate their skills at top Teesside venue

By Scott Wilson

THINK of Britons on jet skis and you'll probably think of sun-burned holiday-makers frolicking in the Mediterranean Sea.

It is an image that will be repeated in countless holiday resorts this summer, but it is also one that masks the reality of a sporting success story that few know exists.

This weekend, the Tees Barrage will host the opening round of the Jet Sport British Championship, a six-race series comprising a range of different classes for competitors as young as ten and as old as 50.

Among the competitors on the River Tees will be Lisa Barsby, the reigning women's world champion, and 16-year-old Anya Colley, who was crowned junior world champion in the United States last October.

Two world number ones going head to head in their homeland. And people will still say there are no success stories in British sport.

"It rankles every now and then when people don't even realise the sport exists," said Barsby, recently turned 40 but still holding her own against competitors less than half her age. "Britain is very good at it, we're just not so good at telling people we are."

"We've had a lot of world champions over the last few years, and we're one of the biggest countries in the world when it comes to jet sports, along with the United States and one or two other places in Europe."

"It would be nice for more people to take in an interest in what we're doing, but the British Championship grows bigger every year and this weekend's event provides a great opportunity for people who have never seen the sport before to find out what it's all about."

It also enables the Tees Barrage to cement its reputation as one of the leading water sports centres in the whole of Great Britain.

Opened in 1995, the barrage has



THE BIG THREE: Ben Wells, Lisa Barsby and Anya Colly

created a ten-mile stretch of clean water that hosts sporting activities as varied as water-skiing and dragon-boating, kayaking and fishing.

Its status was enhanced when it was chosen to host the opening round of this year's Jet Sport British Championship, and would blossom further if it was to be selected as a canoeing training camp for the 2012 Olympic Games.

It was recently included on a provisional list of possible training-camp venues, and events such as this weekend's can only help to entice overseas canoeists to Teesside.

"We're still having to battle against the stereotypes of the past," admitted Alan Slater, British Waterways river manager for the Tees.

"People still think that this stretch of the river is dirty, polluted and dangerous – in fact, the very opposite is the case."

"Talk to anyone who comes to compete here, and they'll tell you this is one of the best stretches of water anywhere in the country. We're attracting world-class competition here in a variety of different water sports, but we want

to do so much more.

"At the minute, I'd say we were at five out of ten in terms of where we would hope to be in the future. We don't want things like this to be a one-off, we want to be at the very forefront of water sports in this country."

But won't it be strange for this weekend's jet skiers to be competing in front of Teesside's industrial backdrop? Not according to Barsby, who experienced a much more incongruous environment when she won her world title.

"Believe it or not, I was crowned world champion in the middle of a desert in Arizona," she explained.

"The championships were held on Lake Havasu – it was formed by a dam on the Colorado River – and it's crossed by the original London Bridge. An American guy bought it in the 1960s and shipped it over there."

"So when I won my world title, I was in the middle of America looking at London Bridge."

"If you can take that in your stride, I don't think you should have too many problems jet skiing in Stockton."