

Hardy Branstotter and Alois Egger checking out the goods in Sardinia
Photo Lukas Prudky



LOWDOWN

JN ARE ONE OF THE LONGEST STANDING BRANDS IN THE INDUSTRY, AND HAVE A VERY DEDICATED FOLLOWING. KNOCKING OUT SOME VERY WELL CONVEIVED KIT... SINCE 2003, THEIR SIGNATURE FREESTYLE KITE, THE PRIMA DONNA, IS NOW ON TO V6. **RICHARD BOUGHTON** AND **THE JN TEAM** TAKE US THROUGH IT.



Bernd Jochum - The Boss Man

→ This is Version 6 of the Prima Donna. Can you talk us through where it began and what has changed for this incarnation?

The vision behind Prima Donna has always been an accessible high performance freestyle machine, and there have been four main platforms over the last 10 years. The original PD was released to market in 2005, it was the first kite we produced geared for competitive unhooked freestyle and it won a couple of PKRA

titles. It was a traditional 5 line C-shape with seven struts, battened tips and great handling. The PD2 was developed in 2007 and this was a more hybrid-ised version also with seven struts. We removed the battens, and gave it swept tips and a little more span, this improved its wind range and made the kite a little friendlier.

In 2009 the PD3 came along and was a very successful platform, adding the creature comforts of a one pump system and reconfiguring to 5 struts, and with an all new profile that gave a lot more punch when unhooked. With a popular formula in place, since then it's been incremental changes. For the PD4 we added the even sizes, 6m through to 14m which helps riders of different weights create the perfect quiver. In the PD5 we refined a few manufacturing techniques and materials, making the kites lighter and stronger, and stiffening up the wingtips. In a practical sense, this had most effect on the larger sizes, improving low-end range. In the PD6, we have used new material to stiffen the tips and stabilise the air frame even further, and have refined and smoothed the canopy of each size again. It's amazing the change a few millimetres of rip stop can make and the R&D process is always ongoing.

For a smaller brand, the competition pedigree of the kite over the years is impressive, especially in the UK where it has helped claim at least six BKSA freestyle titles in the Pro Womens and Seniors and the Women's Wavemasters title in 2011. And Jake Scrace used a PD3 7m to jump Worthing pier back in 2009.

→ Who would want to ride V6 of the Prima Donna?

Most of our Prima Donna customers are intermediates and above, people who want a true do-it-all kite. In its modern form, to say the kite is versatile would be an understatement. We have clients that use them for technical tricks in bindings, and others that ride them as a dedicated strapless wave kite, some just want a good handling kite and use them to freeride. It's a very easy access performance kite that people seem to progress quickly with and gain a lot of confidence. The development focus has always been about maintaining the bar feel, and making the kite very responsive. All that lift and power is easily accessible, and easy to turn off when you need it to.

→ What features can we expect to find that are unique to JN and what benefits do these offer?

We have had a unique feature, the perfect curve leading edge design, in the Wild Thing and Prima Donna range since the PD2 and WT2 in 2007/2008. If a kite's leading edge is heavily segmented with harsh elbow joints, at each segment you have a vortex and more drag slowing your kite down and decreasing stability, and extra material and stitching adds unnecessary weight to the wing without increasing durability.

"Yes, this is a very important test. It's not just about attaching a freakin' flare to a kite because it will be fun."



From direct comparisons of prototypes, there are a lot of benefits to making the leading edge super smooth. The lack of drag and turbulence, extra stiffness and lower weight of the leading edge improves the forward flying speed of the kite and the stability of the wing shape at its top wind range. The kite also generates more power at lower wind speeds and you get a much more dramatic generation of lift from sheeting and redirection. The upwind ability is also improved, as the kite flies further forward with increased stability. From a simple durability perspective there is also less stitching to wear on the beach. The manufacturing technique also adds stiffness to the airframe, as it distributes the load on the leading edge more evenly, rather than stressing a few points.

Another feature unique to JN is the floating batten system, a precision cut piece of rip stop joining the back of the strut to the canopy. We have had this on the kites since 2005. It produces a very accurate wing profile and it also means we can have thinner, lighter and more aerodynamic struts. It also vastly improves gust handling and enhances the kite's downwind drift ability.

→ Can you talk us through the kite development process at JN, who is involved and how does this work?

The JN R&D team is quite a wide network of people riding very different styles, conditions and environments. A next generation kite is born from feedback on the existing product lines. This comes from the dealers and team riders in France, Japan, the US, UK, Germany, Austria, Italy. It's good to have so many opinions, and there is often a lot of overlap which gives a clear development direction. It's a very collaborative approach which works well. These new requirements and design directions are then collated and sent to Michael Nesler (the N in JN), our aerodynamics specialist who also happens to be a very successful paraglider designer. He then uses software he developed himself to produce 3D models, he measures the new kite's attributes and produces a template for the factory to build prototypes.

Prototypes then come back to Alois Egger in Austria, an engineer who handles all the bridle and line geometry, and also does the control bar and quick release design. He gets the kites rigged and working, and once he is happy then the team in Austria, including snow kite legends Hardy and Heinar Brandstötter and snow race legend Eliska Parma, test the kites in fairly harsh mountain and lake conditions and fine-tune further. These tough gusty lake and snow conditions used for testing at the early stages mean the stability of the kite is really enhanced and this always shows in the production models.

After this, pre-production kites are sent out to selected riders dotted around Europe for feedback and further tweaking. Once we are all happy, it will go to production. Bernd Jochum is in charge of sourcing, production and pulling everything together and he still has time to test and help with R&D. The graphics side is handled by Christa Flora (Bernd's very long term girlfriend) who runs design agency Flora and Partner from Merano in northern Italy. She helps the kite have the distinctive JN look to stand out in a sea of block-colour mediocrity!



Business meeting



The curved leading edge...

A fair amount of testing is done in the UK, more recently with smaller sizes because of the varied wind strengths and water conditions, you can really test kites to their limits in real world conditions. Plus our longer development cycle, and not having to rush into production annually, means that the kites are very thoroughly tested before they hit the market and you get a very fine-tuned final product in all sizes.

→ JN were established in 2003, can you give us a bit of background about the brand?

As a team we have been employed in the kitesurf industry since 1999. Bernd Jochum and Michael Nesler (The J and the N) provided brand management and some major design innovations for one of the big name manufacturers until 2003, before that they were involved in brand management and design of snow sports equipment and paragliding since the early 90s.

In 2004 they decided to start out on their own and JN was born. Initially, a lot of this was to do with not wanting to relocate to Hong Kong. Since then the company has grown and distribution partners and team riders have become like family. The current team is a real European mix.

→ What else might we want to take a look at if the Prima Donna's not for us?

Kite wise, we have another high performance freeride model currently with the Wild Thing Revival. This has had a serious reworking from the last incarnation, and is a highly evolved open C platform. This takes a lot of its DNA from the handling and performance elements from the PD range and makes it even more user friendly with a more linear bar feel, and extended wind range. The key difference and the design challenge was to do this all on a 4 line platform (although it runs on 5 lines as an option). We have had the final prototypes in small sizes here at Bantham in the UK over the winter and it has exceeded our expectations. It somehow manages to be very boosty and yet tame enough to use strapless and extremely efficient upwind, so if you want a lot of performance which is very easy to access then this is the kite for you.

Coupled with this we have the Mr F aimed at beginners. This is geared completely around simplicity, ease of use, and accessing the sport. Focus is on easy re-launch, robust build and high stability, but also maintaining good bar feedback where you can fly the kite intuitively which we feel is important to people who are new to the sport. It incorporates a lot of the design elements found in the PD and WT kites and is a lot of fun to fly.

→ Looking forward, what is in the pipeline for JN and what is the vision for the brand?

We have a pure light-wind kite 16.5m coming later on in the year. Our new twin tip range is just in from production, including a board more geared for wakestyle, and all the inserts have been redesigned to accommodate the swing towards riding bindings.

Overall, we want to continue to innovate and make unique products which stands out from mass market both in terms of performance and visually! ☺