

The b-boy of 2009 freestyle keeping it real.

PHOTO PATRIK LINDQVIST



SIMON SAYS PARTY

SIMON HIRTER STEPS UP TO HOST THE FREESTYLE WORLDS

SIMON HIRTER is not a familiar name to most North American whitewater boaters, but this self-assured 32-year-old Swiss paddler is the man behind the scenes at the 2009 World Freestyle Championship in Thun, Switzerland, later this month. It's an event, he promises, that will be the best in the sport so far.

"What we have planned will blow everyone's mind—not only the kayakers, but also the spectators," he says.

Growing up in Bremgarten near the mighty River Rhine, which runs north over 1,000 kilometres from the icy ramparts of the Swiss Alps to the wide sea level plain of The Netherlands, Hirter's interest in kayaking began at age 10 when his parents presented him with his first kayak. In 1996 he became the Swiss slalom champion and seemed destined for the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Somewhere between the gates, however, Hirter's attention shifted to kayaking's wilder, less constrained disciplines—freeboating, extreme paddling, freestyle and boater-cross. Expeditions to Patagonia, Tibet, Norway, Africa and Canada soon followed.

Everything changed in 2004 when Hirter's good friend Roland "Role" Gasser died in a moun-

taineering accident in Switzerland. Gasser was known to the kayaking world for his burning commitment to organizing numerous whitewater freestyle events in Thun over the past eight years. His loss had a great effect on Hirter's life.

"When [Gasser] passed away he left a big hole in the sport here and I felt it was kind of my destiny to jump in and take over his dream to bring the Worlds to Switzerland," Hirter says.

The first step in realizing this dream was to get some event management experience, says Hirter. So he organized his first event—a kayak freestyle and big air competition and memorial for his good friend. Hirter followed this up with many others including last year's Freestyle World Cup, two years of Thun River Jams, the World Breakdancing Championship and 2005 and 2006's Waves & Wheels, a m el e of kayaking, surfing, skateboarding, BMX, graffiti and music. "I have a lot of different interests," he explains. "My aim was to gain experience so I would be able to organize the World Championship."

Hirter says the role of Worlds chief organizer brings with it plenty of pressure and responsibility. "I come up with the ideas for what should be done

and how to do it, I am responsible for the budget and I look for sponsors and media partners."

For Hirter, it is very important that the World Championship be environmentally friendly and sustainable. Athletes who travel by bicycles instead of cars and climate compensation for all emissions generated by the event are essential parts of his vision.

With the Championship now just around the corner, Hirter has announced that this will be his last big event. "I love organizing and on a small scale I will every now and then," he says, "but the days of me trying to push the kayak event sector forward are definitely over."

Hirter says he has concluded an incredible five-year adventure and is looking forward to getting back on the rivers and into competing. He also plans to bring the skills and networks he has developed through organizing sporting events to more environmentally focused projects. "The countless hours, energy and inspiration it takes to organize an event like the Worlds could be used to help improve so many things."

—Anders K onigsson