

BODY SURFING AND BELLYBOARDING

The fun and excitement of competing with waves and surf and harnessing them for rides can be had in ways other than with a surfboard. Some of the most popular ways are body surfing and bellyboard surfing, although canoes, sailboats, kayaks, longboats, air mattresses, and other devices have also been used to ride waves.

Body surfing is the form of wave riding that requires the least equipment. Technically, it could be done with absolutely none. In practice, however, a swim suit is generally employed. Also, one or two swim fins may be helpful, or even necessary in certain kinds of waves.

Body surfing can be, and frequently is, practiced in waves unsuitable for board surfing. However, waves suitable for board surfing can also be used for body surfing if they are steep or hollow enough. I have seen islanders body surf down the face of ten- to 12-foot semi-hollow waves that would have been perfect for a rider on a board, but most body surfers stick to small waves relatively close to shore. Shore-breaks, in fact, are often preferred by body surfers, especially less skilled ones, whereas board surfers

seek reef and point breaks that offer longer rides.

Body surfing is more nearly just what the terminology implies than many people realize. The surfer's *body* becomes his board. That is, the front of his body planes on the water's surface, just as the bottom of a surfboard does. Beginners often get only half rides or submerged rides because they do not realize that their body can, when it begins to plane, actually ride *on* the wave like a board. The body, being less buoyant, doesn't lift as completely above the water as a board, but it will plane on the wave under proper conditions.

Beginners, especially on the east and Gulf coasts, usually put their arms out in front of them and their faces down into the water. In this way they *feel* the sensation of motion but do not experience the added thrill of *seeing* their movement through the water. The experienced body surfer, on the other hand, keeps his face above water and sees where he is going. There are several styles or ways of doing this. One of the most rudimentary is to put the arms down by the sides, with palms open and facing to the surfer's front, so that arms and palms add to the

planing surface of the body. With this much additional planing surface, the body surfer can keep his head and shoulders above water simply by arching his back and neck.

When a wave catches a beginner in this position the first few times, the sensation is quite frightening, for he feels as if he is being thrown through the air with no hands or anything in front of him to break the fall. However, if the wave is not too large and steep, the planing of his body will keep his head above water even during the break. If the wave is large and steep, the surfer will have to learn to sense just when the break is about to occur so that he can roll into a ball and sink or dive under just before the break.

Admittedly, all of this sounds easier than it is. It must be acknowledged that in body surfing, as in board surfing, there are some dangers. One of the main dangers is being smashed on the bottom—especially head first—since much body surfing is done in relatively shallow water. Neck and back injuries are not uncommon, particularly among novices. But practice and experience can teach the learner when and how to stay in the wave or to get out of it by diving under, depending on conditions of the location and of the moment.

Of course, one must catch the wave before he can surf it. Relatively steep waves are necessary. One begins to swim with strong, fast strokes when a suitable wave builds up from one to three yards away from him. Being in just the right spot is often crucial.

Because the waves are caught only after they are steep, most body surfing rides are quite precipitous and short, although skilled body surfers can ride long walls of wave diagonally, like board surfers, or even ride white water for long yardage following the break. The more common ride, however, is simply a plunge down the face of a wave that is just about to break.

If the waves aren't steep enough or well shaped enough to be caught with ease, a surfer may use one or two swim fins to give himself more propulsion. Actually, these large flat fins also tend to add to the total planing surface once the wave is caught. They can also be used for propulsion to stay in a temporarily flattening wave that might otherwise escape even after it has been caught. And skilled body surfers learn to use the fins something like rudders to help themselves turn and maneuver as they desire.

Once the beginner has learned to catch and ride a wave, he will find that he can even angle across it, much like a board surfer who is trimming. If the wave breaks gradually from one side to the other, this angling away from the break increases the length of the ride. On such a wave, a body surfer, like the board surfer, can even get into and stay in the most critical and exciting part of the wave—the curl. However, many of the shorebreaks ridden by body surfers characteristically close out all at once across the whole line of surf. Under such conditions, any trimming or angling is but momentary.

Various styles of body surfing can be developed.

One of the more popular styles involves using only one arm at the side for additional planing surface, with the other arm (usually the one in the direction of motion if there is any trimming) extended ahead of the body or held with bent elbow much like a boxer fending off a blow. Such a style provides some degree of protection to face and head if the surfer is smashed to the bottom by a wave, but perhaps not much. However, the extended arm may also act as a lever to draw the surfer ahead faster, much like the additional weight at the nose when a surfer walks forward on his board.

A word might be said about safety and conditioning. Body surfing can be, if anything, even more exhausting than board surfing, for the surfer is completely immersed in the water, contending with all its forces at all times. Some body surfing is done at spots so shallow that the surfer can stand before take-off. Here the dangers of exhaustion are lessened as the dangers of being smashed on the bottom are increased. But other body surfing spots keep the surfer in water over his head at all times. Here simply treading water and fighting currents while waiting for waves can completely drain a novice's energies. The currents at some body surfing beaches are deceptively strong and dangerous, too (the famous Makapuu Beach on Oahu is a case in point). For these reasons, body surfers, even more than board surfers, should refrain from ever going into the water alone, and anyone who undertakes body surf-

ing in a place where the water is consistently over his head should be—and should know most definitely that he is—a *very* strong swimmer, in every sense of the word.

The advantages of body surfing are that almost anyone can participate, with almost no equipment, at almost any place where there are waves. The disadvantages are short rides and, frequently, proximity to shallow bottoms.

A means of riding waves similar to body surfing is the use of a bellyboard. Although types of bellyboards differ, the basic principle is that part of the body is rested on a flat board of some kind in order to increase the area of planing surface and make it smoother. With such a board, a larger part of the body can be lifted free of the water, thus decreasing resistance or drag. In fact, it has been asserted that because their low position also decreases wind resistance, some bellyboard riders have been known to outrace riders on standard surfboards in large surf.

One advantage of the bellyboard is that its greater planing area enables the surfer to catch and ride waves not quite as steep as those usually ridden by body surfers. This means that rides are longer (more than just a plunge down the face of a breaking wave) and more varied. Bellyboard riders can, and do, more often exploit waves that break gradually from one side to the other. Thus they, like standard board surfers, can and do trim across waves.

To catch a wave, a bellyboard rider needs swim

fins even more than a body surfer. The board is held with one arm on the front of the board, with elbow and wrist crooked around its front edge. The board is mostly under the rider's chest at this point. The other arm is used to stroke as the wave approaches, and the feet add propulsion with the swim fins. Once the surfer feels the wave lift him and propel his board, he pulls himself further up on the board so that it is, literally, mostly under his belly. Skilled riders can so position themselves—with their backs arched, their knees bent, and their free arm lifted—that only the board is touching the water, along with one fin, perhaps, for stability and maneuvering.

There are various kinds of bellyboards, or paipo (pie-po) boards as they are called in Hawaii, ranging from \$40 or \$50 custom jobs made of foam and fiberglass like surfboards, down to unadorned slabs of plywood cut to suitable size. In between are both the molded or dish-shaped plywood boards that cost from \$15 to \$25 and the homemade plywood boards so popular with kids in Hawaii, each with its owner's own specially planned shape and size, carefully mounted skeg, and elegantly painted decor. Another kind of board that will serve as an adult's paipo in a pinch is the inexpensive foam board sold for kids in any dime store and most drug stores.

Dyed-in-the-wool body surfers and bellyboard surfers are a special breed. They take their sport as seriously as board surfers, if not more seriously.

The fact that any and every inland tourist may frolic in the shorebreaks at the beach's edge creates a misleading and deceptive image of body surfing and bellyboard surfing, both of which are actually genuine athletic and sporting activities. The hard-muscled, single-minded individual who challenges the surging sea with nothing more than a well-conditioned body, a certain amount of guts, and a pair of swim fins is a man deeply involved in a special way of life, a particular branch of that way of life known as surfing.

Another somewhat surprising fact is that very many of these dedicated body surfers are men, not kids. The percentage of mature adults among serious body surfers is considerably higher than the percentage among board surfers. Maybe only a few are pushing 40, but many are older than 25. The reasons for this could be several. Body surfing is less flamboyant; the surfer is hardly even seen, for that matter; all the gaudy and commercialistic hoopla of fancy boards and special equipment is absent; and the teenage snob-appeal of identification with a special "in" group is not a factor. Paradoxically, then, whereas sub-teenage children who can hardly swim may engage in rudimentary forms of body surfing at almost any casual beach outing, the real boardless surfer is usually a mature adult of thoroughly athletic body conditioning who finds participation in the activity a very serious business and a necessary part of his life.