

Chapter 11

SURF MATS, BELLYBOARDS, AND DORIES

ONE of the fascinating aspects of surfing is that waves can be ridden with all sorts of floats, boats, and other aquatic devices. A wave can be caught with almost any floating object that will slide down the front of a breaker. The white water can also be used to push along inflated things such as cloth, air-filled mattress covers, inner tubes or other types of buoyant floats. However, surf mats and bellyboards are the primary surfing devices for riding big waves and performing tricks. The surf mat is a rubber-coated canvas float that is rectangular in shape. Surf mats are quite strong and when rigidly inflated they slide with almost the same speed as a surfboard.

Bellyboards are really little surfboards. Several types are now in use—some are simply flat pieces of wood with a rounded nose and others have one or two skegs. The modern commercially made bellyboard is like a full-size surfboard, except the dimensions have been scaled down. Both mats and bellyboards are propelled with swim fins on feet and arms paddling.

Waves can also be ridden using canoes, kayaks, dories, sailing catamarans, and with certain types of outboard motorboats. If the surf is breaking gently and spilling gradually forward, almost anything that floats, and can develop

sufficient speed to start the slide, will catch a wave. The author has surfed a 28-foot powerboat, dories, and once rode a wave in an eight-man oceangoing lifeboat. Even an amphibious truck can be surfed. Surfing a boat, or even a specially designed surfing dory, takes skill that can only be learned from long exposure to waves and surfing. Most boats are not designed to surf and it's just not safe to try it unless wave conditions are perfect. Anyone bringing a boat in to the beach had better keep it just behind the breaking wave and not get tangled up in the white wave. A boat broaching in the surf line (turning sideways) will normally dump over and toss the passengers out or trap them inside the hull; if the surf is big the boat is usually destroyed. Surf mats and bellyboards are a different matter, however; they are both fun to surf and quite safe.

Riding the Surf Mat

Surf mats have long been a favorite surf-riding device on both coasts of the United States, in Hawaii, and in Australia. Many of today's top surfers had their first wave ride bouncing along atop a rubber-canvas surf mat. The mats normally come in two sizes, junior and adult. Some are moderately priced, but the best cost up to \$18 or \$20. The imported mats are inferior in quality. The best ones are made by the U.S. Rubber Company and the Hodgeman Company. A good surf mat lasts many years, if kept out of the sun after use and allowed to dry slowly.

Mat surfing on small mats is ideal for children provided they remain in the white water. Experienced swimmers can take the mats farther out to catch full-size waves and ride the shoulder at an angle—just like a surfboard. Lightweights and experienced children can also ride mats on their knees and some youngsters have even learned to stand while riding.

The simplest way to catch a wave with a surf mat is to stand in shallow water and as the broken wave approaches

jump on the mat. When jumping on, give a push with the legs so the mat shoots forward. At the same time kick energetically. The push of the inrushing wave will scoot mat and rider right up to the dry sand. As the mat surfer gains experience he can make deep-water starts for the larger unbroken waves. A deep-water start requires the mat to be moving just like a surfboard. To get the mat going, fins are a great help. Fins also aid the mat surfer in kicking out to where the surf is breaking. If the surf is big and the inrush of broken waves quite strong, it is difficult to work the mat through the white water position. Most mats have a rope bridle at one end which can be used to tow the mat seaward. The rope is also used to pull the nose of the mat up while sliding. This keeps the front end from digging in and pearling on the slide to shore. Some mat surfers toss the mat over the incoming wave, dive under the break, surface on the other side and recover the mat. Once the mat and rider are outside the breaking surf and ready to catch a wave, there are a few points to remember: 1) Mats don't paddle as fast as surfboards and the rider must place himself as close to the break as possible; 2) when the wave comes the mat is positioned so the takeoff will be straight off from the wave, and the turn, if made, is done after the wave is caught; 3) the weight is kept forward during the initial part of the ride to start the slide down the wave face, and 4) when the slide actually starts, the weight is shifted back and the nose of the mat is pulled up to prevent pearling.

Mat surfing is relatively safe. Bad wipe-outs in crashing shorebreak surf present the only real dangers. If the waves are curling and dumping right on the beach, surf somewhere else or wait till these conditions change. Another hazard of mat surfing, or any kind of surfing where children are concerned, is that strong offshore winds sometimes blow the mat and rider seaward. On some public beaches where offshore winds are common, any kind of floating object, such as inner tubes, is prohibited.

Mats can be repaired with a tire patch if they develop a leak. A mat can be stowed in the trunk of a car, inflated, and used whenever visiting the beach. It's best to roll up a mat after use instead of folding it; some wear will occur at the corners where the fold bends the fabric.

The Bellyboard

The bellyboard is really just a short surfboard. Years ago bellyboards were short wooden planks with rounded ends. Surfers made the start while standing on the bottom and always rode the bellyboard in the white water.

The modern bellyboard has grown a skeg, a covering of fiberglass and an inner core of foam. These are very fast, and on the right wave they can go faster than a surfboard. In Hawaii the bellyboards are called *paipos* and are ridden right along with surfboards, even in the big surf at Sunset Beach. Because the bellyboard is much lighter than a surfboard the ride is somewhat rougher on big waves, but equally thrilling. On medium-size, well-formed waves the little boards are ideal; in fact they're almost as much fun as riding a conventional surfboard. The terrific speed obtained on a bellyboard makes it somewhat harder to pull out of a breaking wave. So pullouts should be started a little sooner, before the wave closes over the surfer.

Since bellyboards are harder than surfboards, wipe-outs and collisions are potentially more hazardous. Bellyboards pearl more easily than mats because trim is more critical and they are less buoyant. The fat forward edge of a surf mat doesn't dig in as easily as the sharper and thinner nose of a bellyboard. In fact mats can take a very steep drop without pearling. In many cases surf mats will turn end over end before they pearl, but of course mats aren't as fast or as maneuverable. Bellyboards are also a little harder to move through the water and fins are needed to kick to where the surf is breaking, and to make a deep-water start. It's also important to position the bellyboard as close to the breaking

portion of the wave as possible. The principle of the start is the same for bellyboards and surfboards, except that there is less margin for error in positioning with the bellyboard.

When the ride is almost over, remember to pull out before the wave breaks up on the beach. A wipe-out in the shore-break can tear the board away, and it may fly into the air and land on your head. Pulling out of a wave is simple: you roll into the face of the wave and let it pass by. Try to retain the board. If it gets away and bounces in to shore with the white water it may strike someone.

Dory Surfing

Dories have been standard surfboats for hundreds of years. The current Cape Cod dory, for instance, evolved from an eleventh-century Scandinavian design. The dory, sometimes called a *double ender*, can be identified by its raised and pointed bow and stern (the modern dory has a sharper bow point than stern point). The high sharp bow and the deep V sides that flatten on the bottom explain why dories are such good surfboats. Heading into surf, the high bow knifes through waves and then, on the way back to shore, it prevents pearling. If a wave breaks to the rear, the sharp stern splits its force so that the water cannot break over and flood the boat.

Rowing or surfing a dory is an art. Most dories have two-man crews, a bowman and a sternman. The stern oarsman is captain; he makes the decisions and gives the order to take a wave or not. On the way in through the surf, the sternman steers the dory and in his hands lies the safety of the boat and the oarsmen. He usually stands and rows when launching through the surf or coming back to the beach. This position gives him better vantage for watching and judging the surf. When a wave is caught, the bowman ships his oars and sets himself for the ride in. It's a thrilling sight to watch a good doryman come through the surf. If the sternman is experienced he'll stand with great composure and commit