

on the rocks at the end of his ride, discovered that he could ride the waves with his head up and arms at his sides, and body surfing was born.

The history of body surfing falls into three rather sharply defined parts, or periods—pre-swim-fin, post-swim-fin, and the present.

In the pre-swim-fin days—roughly prior to World War II—the art of body surfing was severely limited by the inability of the surfer, no matter how skilled, to generate enough quick speed to control the wave. Thus, in the 1920s and the 1930s, it was “straight off” or “over the falls,” with a reckless disregard of consequences, a fine arch of the back, a great gasp from the crowd on the beach, and—inevitably—disaster. It took a strong man, a brave man, or a fool to body surf, but it drew a crowd—the same crowd which watches troubled persons trying to decide whether or not to jump off of tall buildings.

But with the invention of swim fins, body surfing developed into a true art. Now the body surfer can develop enough speed to cut across the face of the breaker on the diagonal, or get on a shoulder of green water and stay just ahead of the soup or white water, or “hot dog” it with all of the modern tricks and techniques of spinners, outriggers, and layouts.

Within the last few years, body surfing has acquired a new and surprising popularity. In the summer of 1968, a body-surfing contest was held in Newport Beach, California, which drew over one hundred entrants. This is a larger number of entrants than the United States Board-Surfing Championship Contest, held in Huntington Beach, California, drew a few years ago. Today, body surfing is popular and becoming increasingly more popular.

Of course, as with board surfing, those great natural watermen, the Hawaiians, pioneered body surfing (Kaha Halu in Hawaiian). When King Kamehameha invaded the Island of Oahu with his fleet of outrigger canoes, legend has it that he landed at Makapu, now one of the shrines of body surfing, where several of his more hardy warriors body surfed ashore. To bring the Hawaiian aspect of the history of body surfing down to date, it is historically accurate to

surfer could surf all day in the coldest water and never get cold. Theoretically, it was possible to surf without even being able to swim. The 12-foot flat top of the jetty was covered with a thin, slippery moss which gave it the consistency of glass. This is the same growth that exists today on the old concrete breakwaters at the public beach at Waikiki. Thus, one could slide off the edge of the jetty into the wave and go into the beach without taking a stroke.

That same slick surface gave rise to what was probably the original game of chicken. Two surfers would run toward each other on the top of the jetty, throw themselves down on fingertips and toes, and slide toward each other on a collision course. The one who chickened out at the last moment dropped to his belly and the victor slid over him. Sometimes, neither chickened. Heads were bashed, necks were crunched, blood ran. Some subsequent bizarre behavior can probably be attributed to brain damage sustained during this primitive form of chicken.

During the middle thirties this great surfing machine came to an end when the authorities stuck a hundred yards of rock on the seaward end of the concrete jetty.

Thus, prior to World War II, body surfing was the sport of a select few at Balboa, Long Beach, Huntington Beach and La Jolla in California, Makapu in Hawaii, and a few beaches in Australia. There probably were not a hundred proficient body surfers in the world.

It is not historically accurate to pick World War II as the advent of the swim fin. Fins had been developed several years before, and the body surfers had grabbed them instantly, realizing their great contribution to the art. But it was during World War II, and particularly through the use of fins by the Amphibious Scouts and Raiders and the underwater demolition teams of the United States Navy, that their popularity began to spread.

And so it was that by the late 1940s and early 1950s, swim fins were becoming widely used. Still, the technique was basically the same—straight off. Fins were great for transportation—to get out of the trough, to catch a wave from outside—but the surfer still went straight off.

in churning water, so water will come sloshing in in large amounts around the neck and armpits. It can't be helped, but a wet suit is better than nothing in cold water.

Next, we come to the most important part of a body surfer's equipment—his swim fins. The fin is here to stay. Its existence makes body surfing so much easier. With fins a very ordinary swimmer can swim circles around an Olympic champion and the thrust generated by a pair of good fins has brought body surfing to its present status of a true art.

As long as you're going to get a pair of fins, get good ones. The cheap, drug-store style don't have any thrust. They won't stay on and they don't last long. Go to a sporting goods store and get a good pair of fins.

Probably the most popular fins in body-surfing circles are Duck Feet. These are the long, slim fins with a strap over the heel. They are manufactured by a number of companies, but those made by the Voit Company seem to be the ones seen most on experienced body surfers. Probably 8 out of 10 body surfers at the Wedge wear Voits. Duck Feet, when properly fitted, are comfortable and secure (in everything but big surf), but be sure to get a pair that fits. If they are too big, you lose them; if they are too small, your feet will cramp, and it's no fun floundering around in the trough trying to pull a cramp out of your foot. So don't be embarrassed. Make the clerk open the boxes and try the fins on until you get a size that fits. Don't let him tell you that because you wear size 10 shoes you automatically wear fins of a certain size.

Another popular fin is the Churchill—triangular in shape, rather than oblong as in the case of Duck Feet. These fit just like Duck Feet, with a strap over the heel, and it's just a matter of personal choice between the two. A few years ago everybody wore Churchills. Now, most surfers seem to be using Duck Feet, although those who use Churchills swear by them.

Another popular type is the shoe fin, in which the entire foot is enclosed—like a pair of loafers with fins attached. The most popular of these kinds is the Italian-made Cressi-Rondine, ordinarily called

Cressis. These have great thrust, but for the body surfer, they come off too easily. Just about the time you are screaming down the face of a good wave, water gets in the shoes and the fins pop off. However, there is a rubber gadget, which goes by the trade name of Fixe-Palm, that fits over the instep and under the sole of the fin. This will keep the fin on. Its use is strongly suggested for anyone using the Cressi-type of fin for body surfing, otherwise he is going to spend most of his time diving for his fins. In big surf a Fixe-Palm is a good idea for Duck Feet or Churchills, too. Big surf will tear off the best-fitting fins. Some people secure their Duck Feet or Churchills by shoelaces through the strap and around the ankle (for obvious reasons, you can't do that to a Cressi). It's a good idea in big surf to secure the fins by one means or another. There must be dozens of fins floating around the bottom after a big day. They are supposed to float, but none seems to float very well. They appear for a moment in the soup and then disappear, and they don't reappear until they wash up on the beach the next day. It's a pretty good idea to be the first person on the beach the morning after a big day. Most of the fins eventually wash in and the pickings are good. Unhappily, people who have drowned the day before have a tendency to drift in the next morning too, but, you get your name in the paper if you find a body.

This brings us to the subject of marking fins. All fins look alike, therefore, fins should be marked. You can lose your fins in the surf and someone may find them but you may not be able to identify them. Also, thievery is not unknown on the beach. Therefore, when you buy a new pair of fins, buy a can of spray paint and paint your name or initials or a picture or a diagram or something on your fins so that they will be distinctive. The paint will last a couple of summers. A good pair of fins will last as long as eight or ten years.

A lot of fins are on the market now which are manufactured specifically for scuba diving. Most of them are large and heavy, and have a lot of thrust, but not much maneuverability. They are great for the scuba diver. All he does is slog along in deep water, but up top where the action is, Duck Feet and Churchills are the best.

One last word about fins. If you are not used to fins, they are going to hurt like the devil at first. It's like breaking in a pair of cheap shoes, but everybody has to go through it once. Some people's feet never do toughen up and they must wear socks under their fins. However, starting off with socks under the fins is not the remedy, because this way the feet never will get toughened.

That takes care of the equipment. One of the beauties of body surfing is its economy. The water is free and fins are cheaper than surfboards, scuba gear, skis, golf clubs, tennis rackets, guns, or polo ponies.