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MAKING THE MOST OF SURF MATS AND FLOATS

REAL SURF-RIDING starts here on a modest but admirable "vehicle." It consists mostly of air, slightly compressed and retained by a leakproof skin, usually of stout rubberized cotton fabric.

Though its appearance probably is familiar, it is known by various names in different surf areas. Sometimes it is called a surf "mattress," sometimes merely a "mat." Along the Atlantic coast it is more likely to be known as a "float." In Australia the fancier name of "surfplane" is used. And sometimes it is referred to as a "raft."

A good mat—as we'll call it here—has many merits: it is light, handy, safe, and relatively inexpensive to rent, purchase, repair, or replace. Used with reasonable care, it can be ridden in areas where beginners and even small children bathe—areas where it would be illegal or insane, or both, to attempt surfing on full boards, belly boards, or other surfing "hardware."

Many a user of mats is unaware just how versatile and adaptable they are. Some discoveries and demonstrations along this line must be credited to enterprising youngsters, aged anywhere from six to thirteen or fourteen. They have proved that a firm, well-fitted mat can be used for stand-up rides, steering, walking, stalling, kneeling, and some other maneuvers usually associated only with the standard Malibu-type boards ridden by nimble "hot-doggers."

Many of these mat maneuvers, including a genuine headstand, were

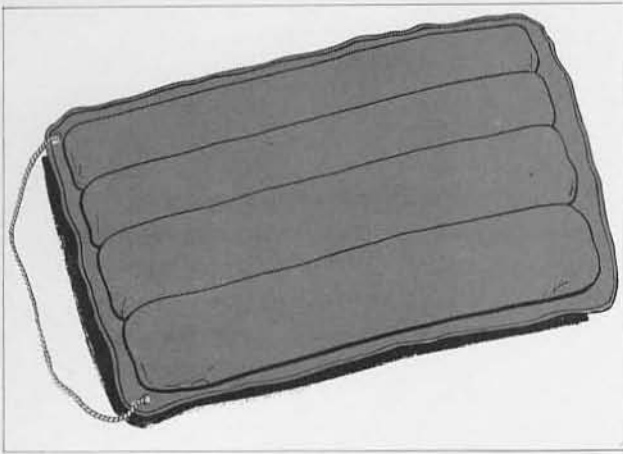


Figure 10. A typical surf mat or mattress.

This mat has four cylindrical air compartments, which are filled from a single air valve (not shown).

shown in photographs taken at Redondo Beach in 1963. They illustrated an article appropriately entitled "Here Come the Mattresses" in the first issue of *Surfing* magazine that year.

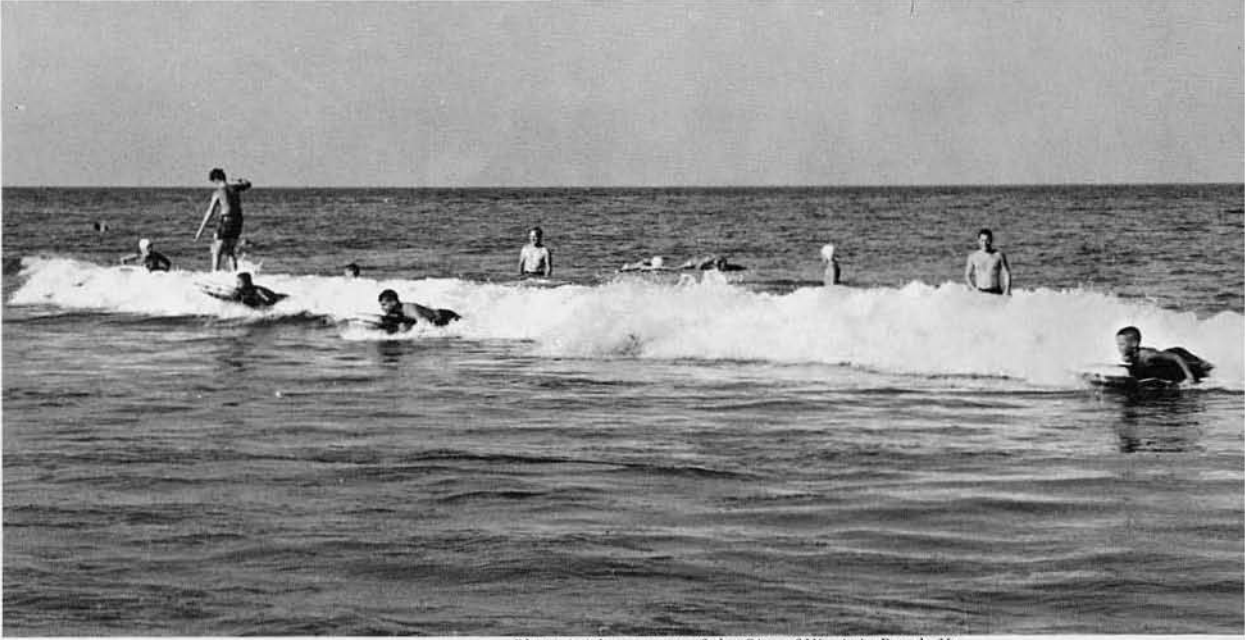
The youngsters, both boys and girls, had all begun mat-riding in the usual prone position, then had learned to kneel, to stand upright with feet fixed, to shift weight from side to side in order to steer, and to walk to the nose and back. Also, and inevitably, they had been wiped out many a time and had learned how to convert an unwanted fall into a painless dive at the last instant.

Such mat skills are acquired through repeated trials and errors. A

Kneeling on an inflated mat is one of the first upward steps on this versatile and adaptable surf vehicle, especially suited to the possibilities and pleasures of young surfers.

Photograph courtesy of the City of Virginia Beach, Va.





Photograph courtesy of the City of Virginia Beach, Va.

Youngsters learn fast on mats. One of them (*left*) has found that he can stand on his for a while. Note the tendency of the mats to ride out ahead of the white water when their pilots are in prone position.

late teen-ager or a grownup may find standing or even kneeling on a mat more difficult than on a board, for the mat is flexible, while the board is firm. It is not essential to develop this kind of skill on a mat before approaching a board, but anyone who does learn to manage sufficiently well on a mat has a fine head start for board-surfing.

So, don't sell short the humble surf mat. Some truly stellar performers have spent substantial parts of their surfing apprenticeship on mats. One instance among many is Bud Browne, now known as the pioneer photographer and producer of major genuine surfing movies. Before he assembled his first cinematic surfing thriller, he had twice won the mat-surfing championship at famed Makaha Beach, on the western shore of the island of Oahu. And now, when he wants to make close-up shots of sensational surfing on 12- to 18-foot waves in places like Sunset Beach and elsewhere on the Islands, his equipment consists of a waterproof movie camera, swim fins, and a simple surf mat.

What makes a mat surfable? Mats are beautifully buoyant and compact. The author's present mat, for example, encloses about 5,100 cubic inches of air, yet weighs only four pounds. This means that it can support a weight of 180 to 185 pounds before it is awash in sea water. And in fresh water, noticeably lighter than the salt, it can support 170 to 175 pounds. Yet it measures less than 2 feet wide (22 inches, to be