

Fins, Finders, and Founders

120 to 140 square inches, or very nearly 1 square inch for each pound of board-plus-rider weight.

We can suggest here a sort of Surfing Law of Lightness: "The lighter a surfboard is, compared to the weight of its rider, the greater the role of fin area in providing either course stability or ease of turning."

There are inevitable limits to efficient fin area. The bigger a fin, the greater its skin friction, or drag, when the board moves fast over the water. Tom Blake recently warned that fins in general have become too big, for "they hold the rider back when he needs speed to beat a fast break."

In fact, fin areas have noticeably decreased on the popular "gun," or "elephant-gun," boards designed especially for big-wave riding. The gun boards are not only longer, heavier, and narrower (especially toward the tail) than the Malibu or hot-dogging boards, but also their fins are far smaller, more tapered, less obtrusive. They sacrifice the maneuverability suited to smaller, slower waves in a beach-type surf for the speed essential to escape a wipe-out when the white water threatens to pour down from the crests of truly big waves.

A few advanced surfboard designs now permit interchangeable fins and enable the surfer to adapt his board to the particular type of surf awaiting him.

Boards of lightest balsa. World War II ended in 1945. The constant quest for better boards then led to a period, lasting into the 1950's, when balsa wood came into greater use, and many all-balsa boards were built.

Balsa is so light and pulpy that, depending on the type, it weighs only from 12 to 20 per cent of its sea-water displacement. Thus a balsa board displacing only 3 cubic feet could support from 150 to 165 pounds before it became awash.

At first, balsa bars or beams were glued and doweled together to form "blanks" that easily could be shaped and then protected by some kind of waterproof coating or covering. Balsa, bare, tends to soak up sea water.

Interesting experiments were made in varying board shapes and contours. The first really radical experiments were undertaken mostly in the Hawaiian Islands. They are associated especially with avid and enterprising surfers like Tom Blake, Woody Brown, George Downing, Wally Forsyth, and Henry Lum.

From their shared experiments and experiences, Tom Blake says, were born the deservedly famous Hawaiian "hot-curl" boards, definitely