Bellyboard riding

Bellyboard riding is as old as surfriding, and yet most surfriders have only a limited knowledge of how to ride one.

To ride a wave at maximum speed, your board must be as far inside the curl as possible, because there is less friction, due to the steepness of the wall in the curl. Because of the bellyboard’s shorter length, compared to a surfboard, it is easier to ride it much closer to this fast area in the curl and so it provides a fast and thrilling ride.

The bellyboard is usually three to four feet in length and fitted with either one or two skegs. One may ride it lying down or kneeling, although a kneeling position is preferred by experienced riders. To prevent nosediving or pearling, the bellyboard is shaped with rocker in the nose.

A bellyboard rider should wear rubber flippers to reach the breakers and to gain sufficient speed to catch waves. Once on a wave, the board will turn when pressure is exerted on the rail facing the desired direction of the turn. Turns can also be made by placing one’s hand in the water next to the board, on the side you are turning.

George Greenough from California USA is regarded as the foremost exponent of bellyboard riding today and is credited with inventing the deep flexible skeg and helping to develop the new era surfriding techniques now being practised all over the surfing world.

Body surfing

As its name suggests, bodysurfing is surfing with the body. There are no other aids to make progress through the water any easier and is therefore an interesting challenge to anyone who tries it.

Although one’s body has poor flotation qualities and is difficult to keep rigid for planing purposes, body surfers have a great deal of success on waves.

If you want to try bodysurfing, it can be exhausting work, so fitness and swimming ability are essential. Before entering the water, study the waves carefully and the possibility of rips. To reach the area where the waves are starting to break can be hard going. Remember to dive beneath broken waves and do not swim against rips, they will only take you a short distance out to sea before fading out.

Once you are out behind the breakers, choose a prominent landmark and try to stay in line with it, while you are in the water.

To catch a wave for bodysurfing, time your takeoff so that you are swimming towards the shore as the wave is peaking up behind you. Once on the wave you can either ride straight down the wave and head for shore or you can broach along the wave. To ride straight to shore, keep your hands by your side and throw your head and chest forward. When the wave becomes smaller and slows down, thrust your arms out in front of you and kick with your legs. To retire quickly from a wave, just roll over on one shoulder and the wave will pass over you. To ride along in the unbroken curl of the wave, place your left arm forward to travel left and your right arm forward to travel right. There are also a number of tricks one can perform whilst bodysurfing in the curl. If the wave is large enough you can roll over and surf on your back, which can be a lot of fun looking up at the breaking wave. On a large wave it is also possible to spread your arms and legs out and make like a bird in flight.

When bodysurfing larger waves, which travel up to thirty miles per hour, one must use a surfboard to catch the wave, then pearl the board and slide or dive off the front onto the wave.

When bodysurfing remember how much more exposed you are to shark attacks, so follow the instructions on sharks I have outlined in Chapter 4.

Man made waves

I have explained some alternatives to surfriding which require some assistance from man. However, in Japan where ocean waves are cold and difficult to find, engineers have developed a machine at one end of a large swimming pool which produces perfect left and right hand waves. The machine pushes water down and out through the wall of the pool and can be regulated to form different sized waves, which roll up onto a man made beach at the other end. What next?

At Noose Point, Australia, rider G. Greenough. Photo A. McAlpine.