

Phil's time period, he was *much* better, and it lasted longer. I think that at my time I did okay: finished second the First Annual Brooks Street Contest, won the next one, finished third at Makaha, the next year fourth. Later generations only knew me as a board builder rather than a surfer. One guy published I was a marginal surfer and that I was a tandem surfer and paddler. I did like paddling and tandem because it kept me involved. Not many of the manufacturers participated by then, and it kept me in tune with what was going on. But I didn't like what he said; it wasn't very kind. But it was an era when the quality of surfers was going up fast and leaving you in your place. When you're starting off, you're starting from a higher point than the existing surfers started from, and you cut off most everyone below you right on the spot. Surfboards and surfers are improving; standards are constantly higher.

*On contests: "It seemed to me that the really hot surfers of that time, the upper echelon, the Deweys and Phils, that the farther up the line they got, the less they were interested."*

### **Going big:**

I opened my store on Coast Highway in Dana Point in February 1954. Actually it opened in January, but I started keeping books in February. Velzy had his shop in Manhattan for a couple of years before that, but mine was the first building custom built to hold a surfboard business. I shaped every balsa board I made. A mistake I made was to not pursue Yater when he left in 1957 to work for Velzy. He'd been working for me, glassing and making boards outside me, too, but he was more into abalone diving and lobster fishing. Velzy got him down there, glassing and shaping. If you ordered a Hobie board, you knew I shaped it. That held me down volume-wise. I glued up blanks the first of the week. Then I had Dick Hazard (who went on to become lifeguard captain in San Clemente) rough out the boards for me, mainly the bottoms, cutting the meat off of the noses and tails. I had a router jig mounted overhead that I'd bring down to do the cross section and bottom rocker, and, eventually, some work on the decks. The balsa blank already had the (rough) surfboard shape. After a while I gave the router up because it was somewhat dictating what I was doing. But you started with this big square thing, and you had to outline it and then mow down the nose and tail. You had to carve that whole surfboard shape that was floating somewhere inside that block. So the jig helped me keep that process squared away. It got me close, then left enough that I could go from there.

I'd do the bottoms and the tops and then Phil [Edwards] would block sand. With balsa you did cross

sanding, first one way then the other. That took out the planer marks. He did a good deal of those; then you'd come back around the rails and finish the board off. Then I had the glassers: Yater was glassing, Grubby too. Sixteen-year-old Jimmy Lomas swept the floor. I was only 21 myself.

### **Foam cometh:**

After seven years of balsa, we started working on the foam board. A guy named Kent Doolittle came by the shop. He lived in Three Arch Bay in Laguna and was a fiberglass rep from Reichhold, which was where we bought our resin and cloth. He came down one Friday afternoon with a small chunk of foam. "I think you'd better look at this." I was thinking that it was Styrofoam or something. Everyone always had something they wanted us to look at. He said, "This is pretty tough." I asked, "Acetone won't dissolve this?" He said no, but I'm thinking "bull!" I took a bucket of acetone, dipped it in. Nothing. *Nothing!* I put some resin on it. Nothing. "Jeez that's good. What's the price of it?" He gave me the price per pound and I thought, "That's doable." We'd seen Styrofoam that acetone dissolved, and a guy brought some "struts" by, which is a Styrofoam product. It had a three-and-a-half pound density that felt pretty good, so Yater and I each shaped a board out of it. There were two ways that people handled Styrofoam: Either they glassed it with epoxy or sealed it with Weldwood glue, then glassed it with polyester. He did one and I did the other. Neither one of them worked very well, but Joey Cabell rode the one I did for a long time and said he liked it. He liked light boards. Of all the good surfers, he probably had more sense about what he rode than anyone else. As soon as guys got hot they demanded longer, thinner, this and that. Joey was much smarter on what to do and probably one of the best athletes. You ever see him ski? I skied with him a few days in Aspen. We went with him one morning. The girlfriend went up ahead of us on the lift and was waiting for us when we got off. She said she left her sunglasses on the gondola. We got down to Copper Bowl together. It's a nice, big, steep bowl. She was still worrying, so, finally, Joey said to meet him at the bottom and off he went, disappearing down Copper Bowl at speed in long, fast carves, so smooth, unbelievable! He was hot on skis and, now, snowboarding, and on any kind of snow he's carving deep turns.

So, I went over to Keyhole's that night. He was a fireman, and on the Friday nights he didn't work there was always a party at his house. Everybody just showed up, and I got a little drunk and was saying, "This is *it!* This is what all boards will be made out of." Really, it was the first thing I'd ever seen (that was plausible to replace balsa).



**1954: Hobie Surfboards opened on Pacific Coast Highway in Dana Point; the first custom-built surfboard manufacture/retail-related structure. As originally designed, a classic example of mid-century architectural style, now rebuilt to house Taco Surf.**

You can't believe what a shock it was after Styrofoam didn't work. That was the first I had seen of urethane foam. After that, I had a belly board mold that I tried to foam up. I went up to Reichhold and did it right in their lab. They didn't do it very good. Then I started to make a surfboard mold. Grubby was glassing for me then, but he'd been gone for a couple of weeks, and when he came back he immediately told me, "You've got the right idea here." He suggested: "I'd like to work on it too. You've still got your business to run. Why don't we get a shop off to the side and we'll work together on the foam?" I didn't pay him. He lived at our house and we went for about six months working at that first foam shop in Laguna, in a hole right across from the Festival of Arts, first driveway over the drainage ditch. Different guys worked there with me. No one was allowed in except a few friends and guys we could trust. We started working on pouring a half board at a time, on edge, rail down. I liked the idea because the first place foam goes to is always the densest and you like your rails to be a little denser.

People talk about foam "blowing up." Now, the (water-blown urethane) foam we were using, versus what came out later—the Freon foam—had more pressure but wasn't as user-friendly. You have to pour something that wants to foam beyond the cavity you're pouring into and then contain it. You can't just pour it in and have it fill perfectly. As it starts to go off, it goes through stages from a liquid to a jelly, and through all of that it keeps expanding. If you pour more in one place than another it will surge

to the lower density. If the skin goes off quicker, the inner mass can move and then you get a shear problem. You had to get it to foam up evenly to a certain level and then hold it there until it was stable enough to cure. Then you could pull it out of the mold.

To build the molds, we poured a thick slab of concrete with tapered troughs running lengthwise that we could fit long wooden boxes into that we could drop the mold plug down into. Then we poured plaster around the plug to form the actual mold. We ended up putting polyethylene in the mold so it would release the part, then we'd pour into that cavity. The epoxy (plaster mold material) doesn't want to harden gradually. In big amounts it wants to go off really, really fast. The bigger the pour, the hotter it goes, so we'd have five buckets, all lined up with the right amount of plaster in each. We'd pour the right amount of water into each bucket, and we're mixing all five buckets at the same time, then we'd have a bucket brigade passing plaster. We'd pour 700 pounds in five minutes! Can you imagine the mess if it went off on us?

We kind of knew what we wanted to do with the foam and how we could contain it by early 1958. By June we were getting acceptable pours and ready to go into business.

The goal was to make a board easier to shape. Also, getting good balsa was becoming a real battle because by then there was Gordie and Velzy and Greg Noll. I'd run into a guy who was making model airplanes and I got him to bring in better balsa for me than I was getting at General