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Wood is Good!

- Posted by [Charl van Rensburg](#) on February 18, 2009 at 6:00am
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I have been bodyboarding for almost 20 years now, and I must admit, about 12 – 18 months ago, I just got so jaded with the sport... I'd

find more reasons not to go Bodyboarding than to actually paddle out, you know that “been there done that” feeling. This prompted me to start looking around at what is currently going on in the Surfing World / Industry, and in so doing have found some inspiration, and with it have started exploring some alternative wave-riding craft... this inspiration has not come from line-ups packed with kids who have sun-bleached hair, industry Sponsorships and a lot of attitude. My lifeline for Bodyboarding came from the periphery, the edge, the place where Heretics, Hippies and Intelligentsia reside (or have been banished to). Here is a pic of my Son Neo (holding an Original Surboard) & I taken recently after a surf.



There is an interesting phenomena (which I call the “Centripetal Force of Popularity” - CFoP), which basically predicts that activities, practices, fashion, music etc. that were once scorned and banished to sideshow status is, over time, drawn into mainstream society to the point of becoming fashionable, popular and lucrative. Here are some examples: Tattooing was once regarded as vile but is now uber-cool, as are piercings. Punk-hairstyles can now be seen on 10 year olds in shopping malls, Heavy Metal Music is used in Bank Adverts, Rap Music, Skateboarding, Surfing, The Osbornes... I can carry on.

The point is that if you want to know what could potentially be the next big thing, you need to look at the fringe, and that is where I have come across some of the beginnings of what I believe could be the birth-canal for a new, more ‘holistic’ approach to the sport of Bodyboarding, a second life, so to speak.

So, I want to give you a heads-up, on the next BIG thing :-)

The first element then to deconstruct as it were when critically looking at the state of Bodyboarding, is the board itself. At present it is widely believed that Bodyboards must be made of Foam. The fact is, long before the invention of the Morey Boogie Board in the 70’s, guys were “Bellyboarding” on all kinds of boards made of all kinds of materials. Probably the most common of these was Plywood and

other woods such as Koa or Paulownia. These boards had radically different designs to the Bodyboards we now see, but were instrumental in its evolution. Boards made of surfboard-foam and sealed in resin were also common as was boards made of composite materials. Yes these boards were hard, sometimes uncomfortable, had hardly any buoyancy, but they were fast (very fast), very maneuverable, very durable plus very easy and cheap to make. Here is a photo of a board I recently made for myself.



One of the most inspiring short-films I have seen recently is “The Life of Ply” by Ocean Motion Pictures, (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmSi5_tXe3w). I just love the stoke of the person in the clip, it resonates with wave-riders all over the world. Dot, featured in the clip, lives in the UK and I recently met someone who knows her, named Sally Parkin. Sally owns a company called 'The Original Surfboard Company' (<http://www.originalsurfboards.co.uk>), a UK based business manufacturing traditional plywood boards. In the pic above, my Son Neo is holding an Original Surboard. Wow, they are amazing to ride. Not made for tricks, just down the line speed and pure joy. I now ride waves all the way to the beach. Below are some examples of Original Surboards.




Another alternative to the Bodyboard is the Surf Mat. This is an inflatable board usually made of rubber. On the face of it these boards are similar to Bodyboards due to their buoyancy and safe, comfortable construction. The key differences though are that Surf Mats do not have rails and that the rider is able to control the amount of buoyancy by how much air it is filled with and then further by exercising control over the Surf Mat while on a wave through compressing or releasing the Mat, thus increasing or releasing buoyancy. The idea is that you are "Riding on Air". Watch this YouTube Clip of Surf Design Legend George Greenough and Paul Gross riding waves on Surf Mats (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljNxUhRQWWM>) This is way back in the 70's, there are no flashy moves or tricks, just good wave-riding. I am especially amazed at the speed they generate and how well they are able to get through sections on the waves.

Check out this YouTube clip of George Greenough (respected wave-rider and surfboard designer/shaper) discussing the intricacies of Mat-Surfing <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igN3FqwC29E>

Speaking of Surfboards... there is one man who has become synonymous with wooden boards and also a drive to more sustainable practices in board manufacture. Tom Wegener is an American now living in Australia. He has made a serious impact on the surfing world and has one of the coolest websites around

(<http://www.tomwegenersurfboards.com/>). Together with a small band of Surf Vigilantes, Tom has been heading up a revival in understanding surfboard manufacture and wave riding. In a project undertaken in 2007, entitled "Surfica Musica" Tom and 9 other like-minded Surfers (Tom Carrol, Derek Hynd and others) experimented with alternative ancient surfboard designs. See (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urtbRmPuLpk>)

Of special significance is that Tom Wegener teamed up with the one and only Mike Stewart to produce a limited edition wooden bodyboard, which is also called a Paipo. The boards were released in 2008 and all were numbered and signed by Mike Stewart. Check out www.mikestewart.com




THE ALAIA IN ACTION

FOR 2008 WE ARE INTRODUCING A NUMBER OF REVOLUTIONARY DESIGNS, INCLUDING THE ALAIA MODEL, AN AUTHENTIC REPLICA OF THE FIRST SURF CRAFT. WORKING WITH MASTER CRAFTSMAN TOM WEGENER, THIS BOARD IS A COMPLETE BLAST TO RIDE, ESPECIALLY ON THE SMALLER DAYS THAT YOU MIGHT OTHERWISE DRIVE AWAY FROM YOUR LOCAL SPOT. THIS IS ALSO THE FIRST FULLY SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL BODYBOARD THAT ACTUALLY HAS A CARBON POSITIVE FOOTPRINT DURING IT'S GROWTH CYCLE. WHEN YOUR HAND CRAFTED WONDER IS NOT HANGING ON YOUR WALL IT SHOULD BE IN THE WATER WERE IT BELONGS.

-MIKE STEWART

IT TAKES ME HOURS TO HAND MAKE EACH BOARD. THE NUANOE TO DETAIL IS PRETTY OVERWHELMING WITH THE WOOD. THE FL EX HAS TO BE JUST RIGHT. EACH BOARD IS HAND MADE BY ME OR MY BROTHER JON WEGENER. THE WOOD IS FROM A PLANTATION NEAR KEMPSEY AND THE OWNER OF THE TREES PLANTED THEM 12 YEARS AGO WITH THE HOPE THEY WOULD MAKE SURFBOARDS. THE SANDUST FROM THE BOARDS GOES INTO MY COMPOST ALONG WITH THE LAMIN CLIPPINGS AND NEWS PAPERS AND ENDS UP AS GREAT SOIL IN MY GARDEN BEDS. THERE IS NO WASTE. THE BOARDS WILL LAST A VERY LONG TIME AND NEVER LOSE THEIR FLEX. THANK YOU VERY MUCH.

-TOM WEGENER



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Even if riding Paipo boards is not the Panacea for Bodyboarding's woe's, I love the fact that I can make my own board (very cheaply), make a bunch of boards each with a different design, know it is environmentally much friendlier than bodyboards and ultimately it represents a challenge to me because they are not easy to ride, but if you're willing to work at it you may also find, as I have, that **Wood is Good!**

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Comment by [Josh Galt](#) 1 day ago

Charl that is an awesome post - wow! The science is fascinating too, sometimes less really is more, sometimes the original really is best...which is a shocker in these days of manufacture-anything in China. Thanks for informing us on what's out there, possible, and the best.

Perhaps we'll see somebody rocking an Original Surfboard on the river for a surf comp during the 2009 FLRC's?



Comment by [Seth McNew](#) 23 hours ago

Nice post man! You managed to articulate quite well a LOT of things I've been thinking for a couple of years now.



Comment by [Alex Koutzoukis](#) 20 hours ago

Those boards are awesome! Looks like they would be SO much faster on the wave. Maybe not enough volume for the river though, but would be so fun on a standing wave :p Nice blog!



Comment by [Charl van Rensburg](#) 8 hours ago
Thanks for the comments and encouragement guys!



Comment by [ianriverboarder](#) 5 hours ago
Great post!! Being a carpenter myself i really appreciate it . (thinking of making myself one now to)

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