



**REDUCING  
THE  
MEDIUM**





(Left above) Rick Newcombe and the Wedge combine in a joint effort. Photo: Steve Trear. (Below) Chuck Gardner contemplates salvation while the middleman gives him the nod. Photo: Mike Moir. (Above) Crucified but smiling, Spyder Wills planes along on one hand. Photo: Brewer.

A lot of surfers have been mouthing one of the truly camp-cliche statements of all time lately. "Being one with the wave" is probably the most popular noncranial response to what the experience of surfing is since "challenging the big surf." The only problem is that it is possible to challenge the big surf, but it just isn't possible to become one with the wave. We all know that the proponents of such a pantheistic viewpoint mean the phrase to be taken metaphorically. Yet there is a group of individuals who are trying to take it beyond the metaphor to the reality. While it's the surfers who talk about "being one with the wave," it is the bellyboarders, knee riders, paipo boarders and body surfers that are doing something about it.

"You're so close to the water," says Newport Wedge paipoboarder Rick Newcombe, "you're right in it, and everything is up to you. All the mistakes that can, and will happen, will be your mistakes. You can't depend on your equipment the way a surfer can." Newcombe adds that "the board, like fins, must become a part of you."

Reducing this medium of contact has put many minimal-equipment riders into positions that any surfer would love to get into, and that most board surfers (riding something over seven feet and standing) cannot hope to get

into. The remarkable knee-riding of George Greenough is an example. George compares surfing on his spoon-vehicle to high-speed driving, and tunes his equipment accordingly. Yet George admits to the importance of the rider's being equally tuned and capable of handling his equipment under extremely accelerated stress conditions.

Generally, though, there is an individual abandon about the reduced-medium surfer that is seldom found among surfers. Often they are closer not only to the wave, but to the real meanings behind surfing. "I surf just for the fun of it," Greenough says: "I don't even care what I ride. A mat is fine. As far as comparing surfboards and knee boards, I don't compare things along that line."

"It seemed like there was too much work carrying a board around," Spyder Wills shrugs; "I want something that's portable." Spyder classifies himself as a paipoboarder and body surfer. A bellyboard, he says, is any prone-ridden water vehicle with a round bottom; a paipo being any prone-ridden vehicle with a flat bottom.

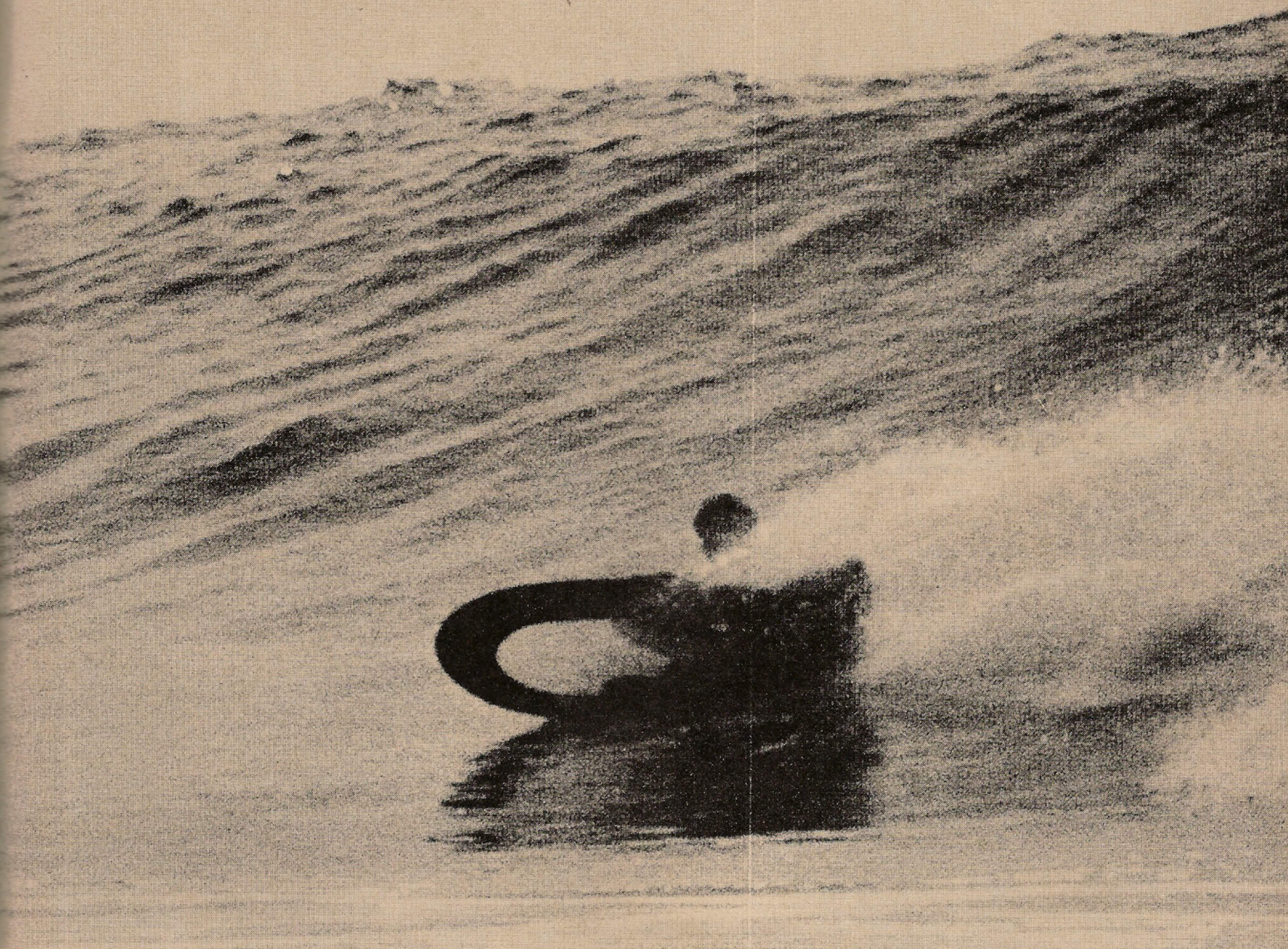
Spyder casually accepts the demands and rewards of both his approaches: "When I'm body surfing, I'm totally independent. I can ride anything, take off on impossible close-outs and roll over and watch the wave come over. I

like body surfing more than anything else, but it's so specialized that you really need a good wave to do it right. Body surfing can almost be a religious experience. With a paipo I'm closer to the wave than a regular surfer, and yet I have more speed than a body surfer. Besides, it's easy to get out of waves. I tie my board to my wrists with cord and have a handle to hang onto. It reduces the drag by keeping my arms out of the water and off the rails. I turn through the handles, using my wrists and hips. I tried it for a while without handles, but with them you can turn much faster."

Besides being portable, a reduced-medium vehicle offers other advantages:

"With bellyboarding," says Rick Newcombe, "it's easier to look like you halfway know what you're doing than with surfing, because there's no necessity of standing up and looking awkward. Its advantage to me, specifically, is that I like to surf the Wedge. It's just about impossible, of course, to surf the Wedge on a standard surfboard. But there have been more and more people coming here to body surf over the past few years, so that you either had to be one of them and take your turn, or do something else. When I first came out at the Wedge on a bellyboard, a lot of people were skepti-

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*George Greenough, Rincon, and the latest in see-through fashions. Photo: Baker.*

cal and at times downright hostile. Over the past couple of years, however, I've gained the admiration of the body surfers."

"For me," Rick adds, "at a place like the Wedge, bellyboarding has several advantages over body surfing: you have more speed, there are less bellyboarders (Ron Romanoski and myself are about the only two regulars), it takes turns better, people get out of the way, and therefore, I get more waves." Rick adds: "It's a dog-eat-dog world out there."

"I used to surf my kneeboard standing up," Art Brewer states, "but it wasn't the same as riding a surfboard and wasn't the same as knee riding. I figured I had to do one or the other, so I chose knee riding."

Why? "With knee riding, you're a lot closer to the wave and can get a lot more thrust and speed out of places where a surfboard would bog down or wouldn't even go. The bigger the waves

and the harder they break, the more you can barrel with a knee board."

A few surfers are becoming aware of the draw of the reduced-medium experience. Dru Harrison once weighed 155, but now can walk thin ice at 112. "I felt like an object sitting on top of the water," Dru says. "I wanted to feel like I was really a part of the ocean. You can't operate like a water creature if your body is a foreign object in the ocean." By reducing his weight, Dru has also been able to get his board down below seven feet, coming close to the length of the longer knee-riding machines.

Just as in the surfboard industry, the bellyboard-knee machine industry has its phases. According to Newport paipoboarder Bud Hulst: "A revolution began in the design of bellyboards last summer. For the first time, hard rails were seen. The V, the Tri-plane as in surfboards, has come and gone. The round tail is the present scene, and the

Baby Mini Gun for Oahu's North Shore is being tested. Unlike the surfboard revolution, bellyboards and knee boards became longer instead of shorter, from 38" to 54" and even longer. One longer fin is replacing two small ones. Removable fins are also in."

With the current squeeze on beaches in many parts of the world and the conflicting demands of surfers, boat owners, and land developers, reduced-medium surfing offers a practical, though perhaps temporary, alternative. There is much greater practicality in operating a belly or paipo board in poorly formed beach break surf than a surfboard. The demands of kneeling, proning, or floating are not merely so difficult to meet as the demands for a standing-room wave. Small coves, generally rocky areas, pool quality beach crunchers and closed-to-surfboards areas are all potential fun spots for the reduced-medium practitioner. Besides, they're portable.

