

three points of comparison arise to provide a measure of surfing's development: the people who surfed, the size of boards, and the riding position.

The first point, the surfers themselves, is important because it suggests the sport's social position. Who were they—the people who took part in a pastime that embraced hundreds of Pacific islands? Were they adults or children, men or women, kings or commoners? In western Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, surf sports were mainly a children's pastime, usually limited to boys. By contrast, on most main islands of eastern Polynesia, surfing was a sport for both sexes and all ages. For example, in Tahiti, the *Bounty's* Morrison said, "at this diversion all sexes are excellent...the children also take their sport in the smaller surfs."¹ The same was true of New Zealand and among the Marquesans, northeast of Tahiti.

Among the smaller islands, young men formerly surfed on lonely Easter, and both sexes rode waves on tiny Rapa, south of Tahiti. In Hawaii everyone enjoyed it, men and women, young and old; chiefs in particular took special pride in excelling in the surf.

The other points of comparison—board size and riding position—are closely related, since a board's shape and length determine how one rides it. Two basic board types are used in the surf. A body-board or belly-board is usually from two to four feet long and used as an auxiliary aid in sliding across a wave. The surfer is actually swimming and holding the board in front of him as a planing surface. This is commonly a children's pastime, not an adult sport. True surfing requires a full-sized board, usually eight feet or longer, that can support the rider entirely, allowing him to ride prone, kneeling or standing. Early accounts mention long boards specifically in only two island groups—New Zealand and Hawaii. Some New Zealand boards were six feet long, but because they were only nine inches wide they probably didn't support an erect rider and were ridden prone. Morrison says boards of "any length" were used in Tahiti. Four-foot boards were known in the Marquesas. In early accounts of surfing in Melanesia, Micronesia and western

Polynesia, all boards which were mentioned are only a few feet long.

The Hawaiians, however, possessed boards sometimes eighteen feet long, two feet wide, five inches thick, and which might weigh a hundred and fifty pounds. Such boards are still preserved in Honolulu. They were buoyant enough to support the rider and allow all the riding positions: prone, sitting, kneeling and standing. It is well-known that Hawaiians were capable of all these maneuvers in the surf around their islands. This variety of skills, on long boards, together with the widespread participation of all classes was unequalled in any other Pacific island group.

Tahitian surfers came the closest. Although board lengths aren't definitely established, we know that Tahitians sometimes rode in a kneeling position. And according to Morrison, some eighteenth century experts could stand on their boards, at least momentarily. That both men and women and particularly the chiefs of Tahiti enjoyed the sport, suggests its high development there. It is doubtful, however, that Tahiti's chiefs could have won a surfing contest at Waikiki. One of the few men who observed the sport in both groups during the nineteenth century, William Ellis, made this observation of the Tahitian surfers: "Their surf-boards are inferior to those of the Sandwich Islanders (Hawaiians), and I do not think swimming in the sea as an amusement, whatever it might have been formerly, is now practiced so much by the natives of the South, as by those of the North."²

It is tempting to consider that the Hawaiian and Tahitian developments were not just parallel, but were actually connected. Many legends describe voyages between Tahiti and Hawaii some eight centuries ago. One legend in particular tells of a Tahitian chief who travelled to the island of Kauai in order to live and die near a famous surfing place. (see page 21). Recent archeological discoveries, moreover, support the theory of an era of contact between the two groups. The Hawaiian development in surfing, then, may actually have begun in Tahiti, and was carried north by visiting chiefs. The reverse, however, is just as likely. Thus we

can only speculate on the nature and direction of such influences.

While exact relationships between island groups remain in doubt, the following sequence in the origin of Hawaiian surfing seems sure: first, a rudimentary form of surfing, mainly a children's pastime practiced with small body-boards, appears on many Pacific Islands. Then, on the main islands of Eastern Polynesia we see a development towards an adult sport practiced with bigger boards. And, finally in Hawaii, Pacific surfing reached its peak. There the feat of standing erect on a speeding surfboard found its noblest expression.



6 Hawaii is the world's surfing center because it has surf to suit a variety of tastes—from the easy combers at Waikiki, to twenty-foot bone-crushers like this one at Waimea Bay, Oahu. *Photo by Ron Church*