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Body, Mat and Belly Board Surfing

TALES OF BODYSURFING AND BELLY BOARD (*paiipo*) SURFING abound in the ancient legends of Oceania. The sport attracted young and old. Its lore features romance, contests and the names of famous chiefs and it is probably an older sport than board surfing. Some board surfers today think bodysurfing is a humiliating act they are forced to do to retrieve their boards after wipeouts. A smouldering war-of-liberation attitude exists in the hearts of many bodysurfers toward board surfers. To the board surfers, bodysurfers are obstacles. To the bodysurfers, boards are a menace, the bodysurfers getting cut out of good rides by faster sliding boards or bouncing around in the board's wakes.

If bodysurfers and board surfers are mixed together in a

take-off site, the bodysurfers may be heard urging the board riders to wait for the seventh wave in a set of six. Another ruse is to stir up a shark-like commotion in the water just as a set approaches. The board surfers, believed to be the unstable and excitable type, are supposed to flee on the first smaller wave leaving the better ones for the bodysurfers. If the shark commotion is real, the bodysurfers are at a disadvantage! Other ways that bodysurfers believe they can turn the emotional instability of board surfers to their own purposes include swimming up under boards and biting legs or laughing at wiped-out board surfers struggling in the bone yard without swim-fins.

Some surfers believe that bodysurfers have a more accurate estimate of the height of waves, one of the most popular subjects among surfers. When they get dumped over the falls, bodysurfers, starting higher on the crest, experience a longer period of zero gravity than board surfers. They say they estimate the height of waves by the number of seconds of free fall. Then too, looking up at the crest of a wave from the eye level of a bodysurfer, one gets a better appreciation of the size of a wave than when sitting up on a board, say the bodysurfers.

Rocky coast-lines keep property-conscious board surfers away in droves leaving some choice sites free for bodysurfers who learn to wend their way around familiar rocks and channels. Those with live coral growing in their foreheads are usually the best ones to consult on reefs and shoals.

HOW TO BEGIN

It should be obvious that knowing how to swim well is a prerequisite for any sport in the surf. Quite often, however, the young or inexperienced think that they can han-

dle waves in water that is not over their heads. A number of these unfortunate people drown every year. So here again, we'd like to remind one and all that learning how to swim well and acquiring endurance are the first rules for safe enjoyment of the ocean.

First attempts at body or belly board surfing should be made in a sandy beach area in waves not more than two or three feet high where the water is waist deep. Even such shallow water and small waves can present risks to the unwary. If you are inexperienced, we suggest you read about undertow, currents and the action of water around sand bars before you try out even these mild appearing surf sports.

Young first-timers do well to start out with a belly board or surf mat. A halved ironing board makes a satisfactory belly board—the wooden type, of course. Simply point out to mother the superior qualities of the adjustable metal ironing boards and hang around the back porch until she throws away the old wooden one. Cut it in half so that the front end is about two feet long, smooth the edges and you're all set for some fun. Belly boards made of plastic foam can be purchased for elite beginners in sporting goods stores, but any smooth board will do just as well and it's more fun to experiment with your own design.

CATCHING WAVES

In shallow water, you should push off for shore and kick strongly just as the wave gets to you, not before. Hold your belly board out in front at first and don't try to lift your head or shoulders high. If you push off too soon or too late, your initial thrust is wasted and the wave may leave you behind. After a few successful rides on broken waves with

your board held out in front, you can start catching the unbroken waves and learn to tuck your board under your chest for better riding control.

An amateur bodysurfer often starts for a wave too soon. He sees the wave way off, puts his head down and starts swimming. The wave may begin to break but he won't know it because he isn't watching the wave. Instead of a good ride he gets tumbled heels over head.

Another possibility is that the wave may not rise up as it should have done. He swims like mad while the unformed wave slips quietly by underneath. Then too, some board surfers may have caught the wave a little farther out (though the sensible trend in regulations is to separate board surfing sites from swimming and bodysurfing areas). Before he knows what is happening he feels a skeg branding him across the backside. It is best not to start after a wave too soon.

In deeper water, the best way to catch a wave, bodysurfing, is to wait until the very top crest of the wave (the steepest part) is not more than a foot from your elbow and nearly ready to break. At that moment you give one good strong thrust with your fins and a single powerful arm stroke and you're on your way. For an instant you have to lower your head and arch your shoulders to help get the forward part of your body moving down the forward slope of the wave. The Hawaiian position for the arms is at the side, palms up or down to increase the planing surface; Australians and some Californians prefer hands out ahead. We'll describe the variations later.

As you start gliding down the slope of the wave, it begins to break. If the wave is not higher than four or five feet, you can ride it straight-off, though even at that height the crest has a respectable thrust and weight. Riding straight-off means your speed toward shore will be exactly