

ONLY A BODY TO SURF WITH - BUT IT SUFFICES

THE PAST again illuminates a present and lively form of surfing. About seventy years ago, "a native of the Kona district" of the island of Hawaii recorded his surfing recollections. They were translated into English, and appeared as the first coherent description of body-surfing, in the *Hawaiian Annual* of 1896 (page 112):

SURF SWIMMING WITHOUT BOARDS

Kaha nalu is the term used for surf swimming without the use of the board and was done with the body only. The swimmer, as with a board, would go out for position and, watching his opportunity, would strike out with hands and feet to obtain headway as the approaching comber with its breaking crest would catch him, and with his rapid swimming powers bear him onward with swift momentum, the body being submerged in the foam; the head and shoulders only being seen. *Kaha* experts could ride on the *lala*, or top of the surface, as if riding with a board.

Body-surfing is certainly "an art perhaps older than board-surfing," as Tom Blake said. However, it is examined here, not because of its age, but because of its vitality and its value to surf enthusiasts.

Body-surfing has not remained static in style. Swim fins now provide

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body surfers with a new, powerful aid. The conquests of new beaches and surf zones by board-surfing have led to innovations also in body-surfing styles. Even today, when to most, “surfing” means only the stand-up stance on a full board, body-surfing is still developing and revealing new possibilities.

Because of “the body being submerged in the foam,” body-surfing is

Surfing a steep wave at famed Makaha Beach, Hawaii. At left, a body surfer slides sharply to his right, burying his right shoulder in the wave face. His left arm serves as an “outrigger” and stabilizer. At the bottom of the wave, Hawaiian surf star “Buffalo” Keaulani does a cut-back on his board, thus making room for the body surfer. He turns left with a right-foot-forward stance, his arms almost at sides, in a masterfully relaxed moment.

Photograph by Dr. Don James



SURFING

less spectacular than board-surfing, when watched from the shore. Body-surfing, however, is *not* a halting imitation of board-surfing in which the body is forced to “make like” a board. It is, rather, a separate surfing skill, and should be developed as such. It happens also to be a skill splendidly suited to building better all-around surfers. It has been called, quite justifiably, “the best possible type of training” for board-surfing (Desmond Muirhead, in *Surfing in Hawaii*, 1962).

This section follows the discussion of belly boards and other “fractional” boards for a good reason. Surfing with the aid of a very small belly board or arm board resembles body-surfing in many of its problems and possibilities. In fact, one may begin by thinking of body-surfing as if the area of a very small arm board had been shrunk still further—to the size of the rider’s arms and hands.

Start from standing positions: Body-surfing can begin from positions shallow enough to stand in, provided waves are breaking there. A typical situation would find waves about 3 feet high breaking in water that stands about 4 feet deep between waves.

The surfer waits somewhat beyond the line of breaking, his body facing shore, his head turned so that he can watch arriving swells. When a suitable swell nears, he leans forward, pushes against the bottom, and swims crawl, taking several sharp, strong strokes as if seeking to escape the advancing wave. (It is the same take-off pattern by now familiar from riding mats, belly boards, and so on.)

If his timing is right, the surfer finds himself sliding on and riding the wave. Body posture should be natural—not horizontal, but slanting downward enough to conform to the slope of the forward face of the wave.

Arms are extended in front, palms facing downward. This is best accomplished (if the surfer is a left-side breather in swimming) by halting the right arm when it is forward on, or just below, the water’s surface, then completing the left arm stroke and halting it, too, in a similar position. The right-side-breathing swimmer does the same with directions reversed.

At this point the surfer’s hands may be as much as 2 or 3 feet apart, palms downward on, or just in, the water. The old hands-locked-together position, once taught widely to beginners, is somewhat outdated, although it does offer the head good protection against unexpected bumps.

Head and shoulders are kept low, the legs high. Anything that sinks the feet and raises the front part of the surfing body tends to take the