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## Paul Gross / A Special Feeling

Jan 17, '10 5:28 AM

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Paul Gross is one of surfing's Renaissance men. Best known for his 4<sup>th</sup> Gear Flyer surf mats, Gross is also a surfboard designer and shaper, former editor of Surfer Magazine, and is quoted often in surfing publications. Paul was gracious enough to let us speak with him.

### **Where did you grow up and what was it that drew you to the ocean?**

My father worked for General Motors, so we moved around. I grew up in a number of places, but all of them in the PNW and California. But we never lived near the ocean—which, in retrospect, was a blessing in disguise. It made surfing and the ocean seem all the more special. Even today, I don't take anything related to the ocean for granted, and I'm thankful for that. It really pisses me off when people act like they are jaded with the ocean.

My father grew up in Oahu between the wars. His father was the ranking Master Sergeant at Schofield Barracks for many years, and they lived in Wahiawa. My father was an avid competitive swimmer, and grew up in the water along the North Shore. He was keenly aware of surfing, although the surfing on Oahu back then was primarily done on the South Shore. My father had some contact with Duke Kahanamoku through his swimming

activities, so The Duke and his exploits as a swimmer and surfer were legend in our house!

I grew up hearing all about surfing and the ocean. Finally, in the mid-50's, when I was around 4, I demanded that my parents take me to the beach so I could see surfing. We were living in Fresno at the time, and we drove over to Cowell's in Santa Cruz. There weren't any surfers in the water the day we were there, but there were little waves breaking in the cove, and I was hooked. It was just so beautiful. To this day, a point with a little cove and the sun setting behind the land seems like heaven to me, surf or no surf.

It took a long time for any of this to really reach any kind of fruition, but from a very early age, I considered myself a surfer. Which, if you lived in Fresno in the 50's, is kind of weird!

**What came first for you—the surfboard or the mat?**

Oh, the mat for sure. First rentals, then dime store cheapies, then real Hodgmans. I didn't get a board until I was maybe 10. And even then, I liked mat surfing and bellyboards better. Part of it, I think, was because I am not a natural athlete. Standing up put a premium on your appearance, whether you liked it or not. And I was kind of self-conscious about being so awkward. On a mat or belly board, I was free!



**What was the feeling you had when you first stood on a surfboard? How did it differ from the feeling you got while riding a mat?**

I thought that riding a surfboard was almost comically heroic. And it seemed slower because you were so high up off the water. In retrospect, I realized that I actually tried to replicate the feeling of riding a mat when I surfed a board. I tried to trim across the wave, even if it was just a white-water wave. And I didn't like stepping back and relying on the fin at all. It seemed like cheating. When fins on longboards got skinnier and more flexible in the mid 60's, it seemed like a lot more fun. Relying on the rail for control still is a priority for me even on surfboard.

**Who did you look up to and admire when you were a young man?**

The Duke, for sure, because of all the stories I heard when I was little. And baseball players like Willie Mays. But then, when I was in Little League as an 8 year old, I kept popping out in games and the coach asked me to try a different bat. It was a Nellie Fox model with a really thick handle. And all of a sudden I could hit... or at least not pop up every at bat! So now I had a new hero—Nellie Fox—and for the right reasons. I could take what he had developed for himself and apply it directly to my life. No way I could do that with Willie Mays or The Duke! That was one of the best learning experiences I ever had.

**How does one go from film school student to editor of Surfer to maker of mats and shaper of surfboards?**

Wow, that's a long, convoluted journey! I got into filmmaking because of my love of going to surf movies. Then, when I was in college as a film major, I wrote a feature article for Surfer on a whim. They published it and asked if I wanted to fill their vacancy as photo editor. I was pretty frustrated with school. Filmmaking is such a collaborative effort. I spent most of my time dealing with other people rather than the creative aspects of making a film. Plus, I was tired of being broke all the time. So I took the job and, after a year or so, ended up working as the editor. It was a brief tenure! I wasn't cut out to deal with finance and politics, even at the puny level that surfing was at during that period. But I will say that I was the first editor at Surfer who grew up reading the magazine and taking it to heart. And I was the last editor during the bi-monthly era. I left when they went monthly.



I've been shaping since 1966, on a garage level, and since the early 70's on a professional level. Shaping has always seemed like a fascinating puzzle that can't be solved, so no matter what else I've been doing, I've always managed to get some shaping in.

The mats are a completely different story. We always rode whatever mats were available and that was a source of fun because you didn't have to think about the design—you just went out and bought one and went surfing. But when the Converse-built Hodgmans dried up in the late 70's, it eventually became necessary to make our own.

**Your relationship with George Greenough is a long one. What have you learned from each other throughout the years?**

I have no idea what, if anything, George has learned from me! But what I've learned from him could fill an encyclopedia. The bottom line is that he has never been afraid to draw from other areas of engineering and apply it to surfing. This sounds simple and obvious, but the post-Simmons history of surfing has been very insulated. Part of the reason that George has been so influential is that his boards are the result of "clean-sheet" design. He draws from the best of whatever he can find, regardless of the source.

**The skateboard world knows you as the co-writer of *The Search for Animal Chin*. How did you become involved with that project?**

I'd known the principals at Powell/Peralta for years. And I had a strong background in filmmaking. (Besides my schooling, I had done a lot of editing work for Hal Jepsen.) They had made two or three Bones Brigade videos at that point and one of their distributors from the Midwest suggested that they do something with a story beyond the action. They kind of mulled that over for a few months. Then we started talking about it just as friends.



Craig Stecyk had done a P/P ad with a character named Animal Chin, and he thought that the Chin character might serve as the father figure that skateboarding never had. That kind of struck a chord with everyone. So Stacy and I started working on the story. As it progressed, it started to seem like a good idea. I took the story we had written and laid it out in script form. The final film was structured almost identically to the shooting script, but of course the dialogue and gags all came about during filming. What's interesting is that there were over 100 hours of tape shot, which was edited down to just over an hour. It could have had well over 20 plot resolutions based on what was shot!



**Of all the places you have traveled to, what place in particular stands out and why?**

I think that the three or four years I drove from our home in South Ventura County up to Ventura and Santa Barbara in the late 60's/early 70's really sticks in my mind as the best time of my surfing life in terms of travel. I know that sounds pretty tame, but it involved "leaving home". None of the big surf trips I've taken in my life—Hawaii, Australia, Central America, the Caribbean—have been more meaningful. Maybe it was the time in my life, but that was a great era to be surfing in that area. Crowds were minimal. There were no longboards and there were no leashes. For me, if there was a golden era of surfing in California, that was it.

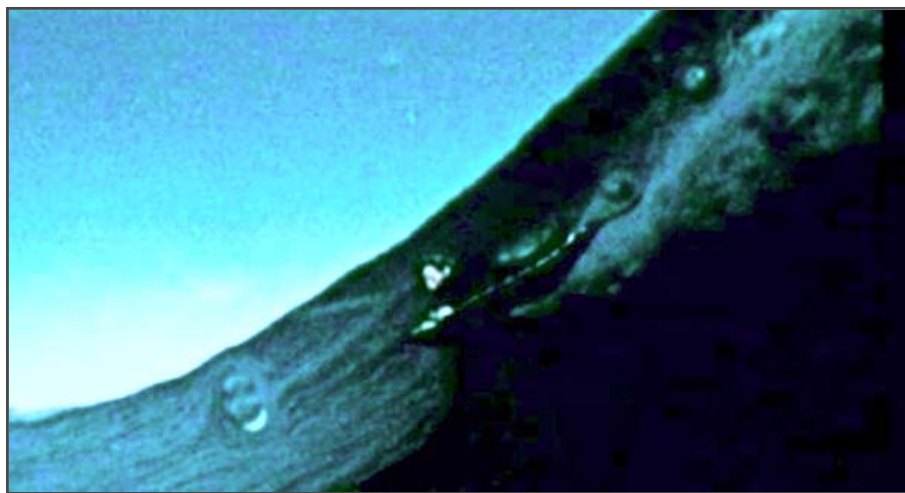
**Who/what inspires you?**

Beside my wife Gloria, who was and is indescribably supportive, I really like the younger surfers who are open-minded enough to try stuff outside the media-validated thruster paradigm. And I still get a buzz off Greenough's enthusiasm for surfing. The guy's pushing 70 and he's like a stoked gremmie all the time!

I will always look back on the years I was either getting boards from Greg Liddle or working for him as a glasser as a kind of graduate school. His methodology of tuning in the board he had, rather than go off on tangents, was hard to follow when I was younger but I really appreciate it now.

**What is the greatest thing you have learned in your life?**

That there's always a lot more to learn...and it's fun!

**Do you have any regrets or wish you had done something differently?**

That's a good question. All the things I did in my 20's seemed very rational at the time. But for the next 20 years, I really beat myself up thinking I should have done this or that differently. But now that I'm in my late 50's, I see that the choices I made were indeed the right choices for me.

**What are you most proud of?**

The 4th Gear Flyer mats. I never dreamed that I would ever be able to convey that special feeling mats give you in such a direct manner.

**What meaning does mat riding (and/or surfing) hold for you and how has it changed your life?**

It defines my life in so many ways—I can't put it into words.

**What brings you the most happiness in the world?**

Getting a big belly laugh out of Gloria—usually while commenting on a bad television show.

**Who are some of the people you feel are shaping the path for surfing today?**

The people who are conveying their surfing experiences on a daily basis over the internet. They have successfully broken down the stranglehold the surf magazines have had over surfing for nearly 50 years and the results are fantastic. We need to end the influence of contest surfing once and for all.

**Which mat is your favorite?**

I still like the 4GF Standard the best, but the Fatty model is a close second!

**What is your favorite mat spot?**

Rincon, although that's pretty much off the list due to the crowds even on small, windy days. But if I could ride four foot plus Malibu on a mat with no one out, that would be the ultimate experience ... in my opinion. Mats love long, textured waves and Malibu has those! Mats offer the most range, wave-wise, so I don't get too hung up on specific spots anymore. I like any wave that's got some bend in it and not too crowded. I'll take junk over crowds any day of the week!

**What are you currently listening to on your iPod?**

Shiny Beast by Captain Beefheart. Dated, I grant you...but somehow still fresh!

**What are you most grateful for?**

My wife and still being able to function physically.

4th Gear Flyer Mats are available [here](#).

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## Comments

5 Comments so far. [Leave a comment](#) below.

1. *Kyle Lightner*,  
[January 17, 2010 at 9:29 am](#)

Those shots of PG hulling are all time. Great read and super inspirational.

[Reply](#)

2. *Piskian*,  
[January 17, 2010 at 11:09 am](#)

Right on! Paul deserves so much credit for supplying so many of use with so much stoke and helping to being the fun and freshness back into waveriding. We need MORE MATTERS AND MATTING!

[Reply](#)

3. *Uncle Grumpy*,  
[January 17, 2010 at 4:22 pm](#)

Mats are AWESOME and so is PG.  
Imagine Malibu with everybody on MATS!

[Reply](#)

4. *Russell Blackwood*,  
[January 20, 2010 at 4:21 am](#)

I was lent a 4GF at SJ in Baja on 5ft. 400 yd. long waves. An incredible feeling. Paul's name was spoken with great respect by the owner.

[Reply](#)

5. *soulglider*,  
[January 26, 2010 at 7:58 am](#)

I'm a bellyboarder, kneerider and now own a Classic 4th gear! whats best? definitely the mat and the bellyboard. "the farther you get from the wave the slower it feels." Thanks Paul for putting that into words that explains it totally right.

soulglider,  
Big Tim

[Reply](#)

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