

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

# SURFING

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NEW EDITION

THE *Bluffer's*<sup>®</sup> GUIDE TO

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# SURFING

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First published 2008  
This edition published 2013  
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Publisher: Thomas Drewry  
Publishing Director: Brooke McDonald

Series Editor: David Allsop  
Design and Illustration: Jim Shannon

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A CIP Catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

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ISBN: 978-1-909365-28-5 (print)  
978-1-909365-29-2 (ePub)  
978-1-909365-30-8 (Kindle)

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grasp a smattering of the terminology,  
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## SURF'S UP

**A**s you read these words, grubby and bearded feral surfers are stumbling along foreign shores searching for the perfect wave. Every surfer yearns to find his or her own secret point break on a remote island somewhere – along with a beautiful island girl dressed in nothing but a G-string of coconut pith and whose father owns a nearby brewery, or a bronzed Adonis who surfs like a god, is utterly faithful, and has an ailing billionaire guardian who dotes on him and has no close family. Very few surfers live their dreams.

There are those (predominantly men) who travel around with boards strapped to their car roofs, parading to the unsuspecting public (mainly the cute ones in bikinis) that they are surfers. They understand nothing of the history, the legacy or which way a surfboard is supposed to go in the water (the pointy bit goes at the front). These people are often referred to as ‘highway surfers’. The difference between a highway surfer and a bluffer is a fine line, but by the end of this guide you will know exactly where that line is drawn.

Surfing is a difficult sport that takes years of hard work to acquire the minimum level of competency. Bluffers do not have years to spare, yet will find themselves entwined with those whose focus is on whether or not luminous wetsuits are still the thing (they're not) or whether hardcore surfers should always have a shaggy dog with them at the beach (undecided, so plenty of mileage there). This is because surfing has just as much to do with the culture that surrounds it as it does with actually riding a wave. This suits the bluffer to perfection. Understand the culture, get to grips with what is cool and what is not, grasp a smattering of the terminology, learn how to bluff your way out of ever having to go for a surf, and you're made.

This short but definitive guide sets out to conduct you through the main danger zones encountered in surfing discussions, and to equip you with a vocabulary and an evasive technique that will minimise the risk of being rumbled as a bluffer. It will give you a few easy-to-learn hints and techniques designed to allow you to be accepted as a surfer of rare ability and experience. But it will do more. It will provide the tools to impress legions of marvelling listeners with your knowledge and insight – without anyone discovering that before reading it you didn't know the difference between 'dropping in' and 'going over the falls' (neither of which you are advised to try).

# MAKING A SPLASH

## A BIT OF HISTORY

Surfing, first recorded sometime around the end of the eighteenth century, has its roots in Hawaii. Some say that it started earlier in Peru, but there is no irrefutable proof. So you're advised to stick to Hawaii, where it was the sport of kings. Well, men, women, chiefs and youths all surfed together, but Hawaiian royalty frequently reserved the best beaches for themselves. Basically, when the surf was up, everyone dropped whatever they were doing and went surfing. Much like today then, except in Hawaii it was done in the nude – on boards made from koa wood (for the general populace) and from the aptly named wiliwili tree (for chiefs).

Unfortunately (or rather, fortunately for some), nude surfing often led to things like nude frolicking in the waves and casual sex. In the early 1800s Protestant missionaries frowned upon such unspeakable behaviour and put a stop to it on the grounds that it was far too much fun. Surfing went down the tubes, so to speak, for 100 years, until American writer Jack London arrived in Hawaii in 1907.

Despite trying to 'surf-ride' for hours on end at Waikiki beach, London could not grasp the fundamentals of the sport and chose to write about it instead, making him the first surfing bluffer. Here's a sample of what he had to say about the waves:

*The mere struggle with them, facing them and paddling seaward over them and through them, was sport enough in itself. You had to have your wits about you, for it was a battle in which mighty blows were struck, on one side, and in which cunning was used on the other side – a struggle between insensate force and intelligence.*

It was Hawaiian surfer Duke Kahanamoku, already an Olympic swimmer, who took to the waves around the same time and made it a sport. He proved himself to be incredibly skilled at it, despite the fact that he wore an extraordinary, genital-squeezing, hybrid Speedo/T-shirt one-piece swimsuit, which must have severely hampered his style. Duke became known as the father of modern surfing, and took it and his costume from Hawaii to show to the world.

### **THINGS TO TAKE ON BOARD**

It is imperative to be able to join in on discussions that include topics like swell direction, tides, wave sizes, how to 'snake' and get away with it, and the virtues of a frontside air reverse as opposed to full rail carving (*see Glossary*). You don't need to know much more than their names, but before you commit any of them to memory, you need

some understanding of the surfboards themselves – how they are supposed to work and what motivates the people who create them. Knowing something about the people who actually make the boards (known as ‘shapers’) is a leapfrog in the bluffer’s bank of recyclable information because they are generally very reclusive people. This is usually because they are either socially inept, paranoid or making themselves scarce because someone really is looking for them – i.e., the police or a jealous husband.

## **BOARDS**

Essentially, a surfboard is made by taking a chunk of foam (known as a ‘blank’), shaping it (either by machine or by hand), covering it with fibreglass and then sealing it with resin – unless it is made from wood and coated with oil, for those who really want to get back to basics.

These days, there are many different methods of constructing surfboards with new, experimental materials. Some of them work; some of them result in boards that would be best accompanied by a steam iron, or boards with dimples the size of golf balls, or boards so heavy they can only be picked up by a forklift. These are usually sold to beginners for exorbitant amounts of money.

Surfboards first came out without any fins or skegs (the surfboard ‘keels’), but a legendary surfer called Tom Blake put a stop to that and a whole new fad started. It was very obvious that the boards performed better with a fin, but would one fin be better than two, or two fins better than three? Australian Mark Richards won four

world titles on a twin-fin surfboard. Another Australian, Simon Anderson, put three fins on his, called it a Thruster, won contests with it, forgot to copyright his design and, consequently, is not as rich as he should be.

Many, like Nathan Fletcher and Anthony Tashnick, to name but two of the more famous pro-surfers, prefer a four or 'quad-fin' set-up, while the popular underground 'Bonzer' surfboard incorporates five. For the bluffer, the most common configuration is three fins. To get into technical talk about the superiority of the quad-fin or the 'down-the-line speed' of the twin-fin would be courting disaster. All you need to know is that the three-fin set-up is faster and has more drive than the others. You might perhaps speculate about a future for a 'sextufin' (six) set-up, or suggest that we're all headed for surfing in the nude again and really going back to basics – so the size and number of fins will become completely irrelevant.

## **SHAPERS**

The Chinese, with their cheap 'pop-out' boards (ones that come off a factory production line), may be hell-bent on taking over global board production, but traditional board shapers are still the most important people in the surfing world. Why? Because they surf, and thus they tend to know what type of board suits what type of surfer.

Surfing, at its core, consists of a surfer, a surfboard and a wave. These are the three intrinsic elements, and everything else, from board shorts and bikinis to wetsuits and wax, are just accessories.

The surfboard shaper can make you a better surfer or a worse surfer. Your level of skill depends to a large extent on your level of mutual understanding with your shaper. He/she should therefore be deified, worshipped and applauded. Sadly, this seldom happens, and it is usually the shaper's fault. Shapers have many faults and you need to know the reasons why:

1. Shapers often let you down:

**Surfer** I'm going overseas in two weeks' time. Can you make me two new boards by then?

**Shaper** Sure, no problem.

**Surfer** So you're not too busy. Because if you're too busy, I'll have to go somewhere else. I really need these boards.

**Shaper** Like I said, no problem. Trust me.

2. Shapers make wild assumptions when in the process of shaping:

**Surfer** But I asked for a swallow tail. This is a square tail.

**Shaper** I've seen you surf and thought that you'd be better with a square tail.

**Surfer** But this isn't the board that I ordered and paid for in advance.

**Shaper** Just try it. It'll go like a bomb. Trust me.

3. Shapers are highly temperamental:

**Shaper** I heard you were surfing on some other shaper's board yesterday.

**Surfer** Erm, I was just having a go on it, trying out a different design.

**Shaper** Well, so much for loyalty then. In fact, so much for friendship as well.

**Surfer** But I ordered some boards two months ago and you never made them!

**Shaper** I would rather not ride any boards at all than turn my back on loyalty.

**Surfer** But I'm going away tomorrow and you haven't made my boards!

**Shaper** Whatever, 'buddy'. You've obviously made your choice.

4. Shapers tend to forget that most boards these days are actually made by machines, and that all they do is twiddle a few knobs at the controls. But it has to be conceded that it's how, what and when they twiddle that can make the difference:

**Shaper** I slaved night and day with my bad back to make that board, and now you tell me you don't want it?

**Surfer** That board was machine-made in less than 20

minutes. What are you talking about?

**Shaper** Yes, but I made the machine by hand under extreme duress.

**Surfer** But it was flown in from a factory in Australia!

**Shaper** Are you calling me a liar? I made you the surfer that you are today, and this is how you thank me?

Should you have the opportunity to deal with a shaper, you will need to believe that they are, in general, perfectly acceptable people. Somehow they manage to translate your surfing skills to the right board underfoot, and for that you have to be eternally grateful. Their strangeness and unreliability can probably be blamed on the fumes they breathe while working alongside:

## **GLASSERS, SANDERS AND SPRAYERS**

The glasser's job is to seal the shaped foam 'blank' with fibreglass, keeping it light and strong. They also have to interpret the client's instructions on the order form to determine what sort of glassing has been requested. Rarely do they read the order form correctly. (It's something to do with the fumes.)

When the glasser has finished his job and the resin has set, the sander takes over and sets out to make the lump of heavy, rough resin into an aesthetically appealing piece of equipment. The biggest problem a sander faces is 'sanding through' (breaking through the resin to the foam core blank) which means the board will need to be repaired

even before the client gets a chance to ride on it. This is not good. However, if a sander sands through, he can also use the fume excuse.

Then the spray artist comes into the equation. These days most surfers just want white boards, but occasionally an '80s throwback decides that he wants a two-tone look with black-and-white checks, or a '70s hippy decides that he wants a groovy, bare-breasted, life-sized mermaid on the bottom of his board that will 'allow him to communicate with the sea spirits, man,' and give off good karma while he surfs.



You should take careful note that people also refer to rails when discussing cocaine, so best not to ask for a rail in the wrong company.

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If the mermaid isn't exactly what the client requested, the artist usually throws his hands in the air, shouts that no one understands him and his art, and resigns on the spot. These resignations are rarely spoken about because the artist merely returns to work the next day when the client isn't around and no one mentions a word about the resignation tantrum. But if they do, it's usually blamed on the fumes.

## **BOARD REFINEMENTS**

### **TAIL SHAPES**

This refers to the end of the surfboard (the opposite end to the pointy bit) and there are three basic designs:

**The square tail** A tail that is squared off and provides bite for ‘dynamic direction’ changes. Very popular among those who surf mainly tiddler waves.

**The round tail** A tail that is rounded off, usually favoured by surfers who prefer bigger waves and less dynamic direction changes. Not to be confused with Jennifer Lopez’s tail.

**The swallow tail** A tail with a shape that resembles a swallow. Imagine a squared-off tail with an inverted ‘V’ cut into it. Works for both big and small waves.

Most surfers can’t really tell the difference between their tails while riding, but you will be obliged to know what the tail shapes are meant to do.

### **RAILS**

These are the edges of the surfboards and the bits that bite into the water when turning. They can be either hard-edged or soft. The softer edges are more forgiving and enable surfers not to fall off so much while turning. Older surfers, longboarders, bluffers and surfers with little or no skill like softer edges best. The hard rails are preferred by small-wave rippers and competitive surfers who want to get the most

out of their waves and turns. You should take careful note that people also refer to rails when discussing cocaine, so best not to ask for a rail in the wrong company.

## **ROCKER**

This is the amount of curve the board has – the mild banana shape that prevents the board from digging in or nose-diving when paddling for a wave.

The basic premise is that the more rocker or curve a board has, the less chance of nose-diving. However, more rocker also means the board will travel more slowly across the water. So, short of a master's degree in hydrodynamics, the shaper's (or shaping machine's) skill lies in giving the board enough rocker to prevent nose-diving, while leaving it flat enough to hold a modicum of momentum. Simple, really.

## **BOTTOM SHAPES**

The bottom shape of your board also affects the way it rides, and the variation in bottom shapes is not just limitless but in constant development. Concaves under the board, which provide lift and thus speed, may therefore give way to channel bottoms, bottoms with 'vee' (unsurprisingly, V-shaped bottoms), flat bottoms or textured bottoms.

Bluffers may wish to avoid conversations involving bottom shapes since most lead on to sexual innuendo and crude connotations. This is below the status of surfers who are universally recognised as sexually sated people.

## **FINS**

There are two main fin set-ups: glassed-on fins and removable fins. The glassed-on kind are advisable because, being integral, there is hardly any drag, which means increased speed. The removable fins are advisable because when you are travelling, they eliminate the wasted space that boards with fins take up when placed together in a cover. It's also easier to replace removable fins with bigger fins or fins with more flex to see if the board moves better. A board that feels terrible the first time you ride it can come alive when you try new fins on it.

Removable fins are also surprisingly versatile on the beach. They can be used:

- as bases in baseball or goal posts in football
- to open beers
- to get your vehicle out of the sand
- to wave at passing fanciable members of the opposite sex
- as plates for sandwiches
- as rudimentary knives for buttering bread on camping trips
- to terrify swimmers by pretending to be a shark
- should the need arise, for digging holes in the sand to bury your dog's turds.