

# Bodysurfing: My Father's Board

## *Inheriting a wave's invisible world*

BY MARSHALL JON FISHER

Life, from being made up of little separate incidents which one lived one by one, became curled and whole like a wave which bore one up with it and threw one down with it, there, with a dash on the beach.

--Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*

This winter I had a dream that I've had many times before. I was alone, shoulder-deep in the dark night sea. The water was cool but comfortable, with a powerful surf. Suddenly a tremendous wave broke right over me, and I flung myself into its arch. Now I was riding with the wave, rolling onto my back, my hands gingerly skimming the foam. I rode for what felt like hours, parallel to the shore, traveling miles along the beach. I woke with the euphoria that comes from riding waves until your cranial cavities are filled with seawater and your skin is tingling from the pounding surf. It was morning, with a foot of fresh snow outside my window.



The author's father, Cape Cod, 1997

I don't remember exactly when I learned to bodysurf. I do remember a time when I couldn't surf, however, when I stood in the shallow water watching my father and brother wait for waves until finally my father torpedoed towards me, head down and arms locked like a diver's in front of him, upper body riding on the surface of the water just ahead of the breaking wave, lower body hidden in the foam. I imitated their wave-waiting stance, and as Dad glided by me I jumped onto his back like a cornerback stopping a breakaway runner and hung on, feeling the heat of his body, the numbing cold of the seawater around us, and the warmed droplets between our skins, until his sabotaged ride ended and we rolled over and rubbed the salt water out of our eyes.

"You punk," he cried. "I was going all the way." But I knew he didn't mind.

Later I joined my father and brother in the deeper water, waiting in the frigid New England ocean for the right swell to appear on the horizon and make its slow, ineluctable approach. The water was so cold that the first few rides caused a stinging pain in our feet and calves and an icy headache, but soon the pain lifted and left behind a pleasant, hypnotic numbness. There it is! one of us shouted, and, sure enough, a

blackness was lifting out of the sea, a mountain growing out of a flat landscape in the distance. Half a minute later it was upon us, collapsing in on itself and breaking into foam a few feet above us (which was no accident: we had already pinpointed the spot where the best waves were breaking). As it approached I turned my body sideways, bent my knees, and waited for the right moment. Then, just as the crest of the wave turned white and altered its vector from forward to down, its increased weight giving way to gravity, just before the whole thing came crashing down on me, I hurled my body forward into the hollow formed by the wave's momentary curlicue, my arms flung forward, fingers in a stiffened hydrodynamic cone, head tucked down between my biceps, my body a rigid board. For a split second it was like diving off a cliff into a freefall.

And then the wave hit. A hundred fists of watery force beat on my shoulders and back just as my stomach touched the surface of the trough, driving me forward like a jet engine, the water in front of me hammering my arms and bowed head as I sliced through it. My hands formed a vee that rode dry above the water, inches ahead of the foam. I kept my body frozen and rode out the wave until its final spasms of force deposited me in the shallow water, where I fell to my knees and jerked my head up to suck in air, wipe my eyes dry, and look back to see if I'd won—if I'd traveled farther than my father and brother. Hours later, seawater poured from my nasal passages when I bent to pick up a book or turned over in bed.

Those twenty or thirty seconds of riding the wave—that solitary interlude in the center of a raging torrent of whitewater—were worth more than the entire rest of the day. From shore such a ride appears disappointingly tame, no better than a good swim. From out in the water, where you've just missed a wave, your companion's ride seems not to exist at all. The person waiting next to you disappears with the passing wave, as though dissolved into the foam, until the turbulence subsides near shore and he precipitates like a salt crystal in the shoal.

Inside the wave, though, is an invisible world. The water is furiously pounding your body, but you don't feel the numbing cold, and you hear nothing; your mind drains of everything except the pure experience of the ride. All the awkwardness, irritation, and responsibility of being human dissolve, and you become a part of the wave, of this inexorable thunderous rolling motion of water towards land. It is truly a narcotic sensation; all through the school year in Miami (where there is no surf) I would wait for three weeks of summer on Cape Cod, when I could revisit the experience. The thrill hasn't diminished at all with adulthood. Never have I felt as close to the natural world as when I'm inside a wave. As exciting and addictive as surfing on a board must be, it surely can't produce quite this feeling of harmonious integration, for a boardsurfer rides on the outside of the sea/air limbus, on a vehicle. A boardsurfer conquers nature; a bodysurfer joins it.

As a child, I assumed that my father, my brother, and I were the only proper bodysurfers in the world. After all, I never saw a stranger do it well. At beaches everywhere one finds aspirants either jumping into the "soup"—the foam produced by waves that have already broken—or swimming in vain after waves that have passed them. They might as well try to catch the wind. Once you've missed a wave, you can burst into a flurry of Australian crawl, kick your legs, twist your body around to try to gain leverage with the wave, but it'll still pass you by as though you

were a lump of seaweed. You'll rise and fall and watch the furious shoulder of the wave muscle its way towards the shore without you.

On the other hand, if you get to the spot where the wave is going to break, and then let your body assume the shape that the wave naturally will transport, you can easily experience the joy of bodysurfing. It's simply a matter of getting the hang of it, like swimming for the first time.

As I grew older, I wondered (and I still wonder) how my father learned his style of bodysurfing. Not from his father—I remember Grandpop watching us from the shore, tickled at how far we'd ride the waves, as though he'd never seen anyone do it before. Not from watching anyone else do it—he can't remember anyone bodysurfing like that in Atlantic City when he was a boy; none of his friends in college bodysurfed. He just picked it up, he says, listening to an instinctive voice that said, Keep your body stiff, become a board, let the wave do the work.

As it turns out, bodysurfing is an organized, well practiced sport. In California, Hawaii, and Australia (and probably elsewhere) there are those who practice a more sophisticated form of bodysurfing and compete in tournaments, including a world championship. With fins on their feet to get a moving start on large deep-water waves, they keep their head out of the water as they ride down the slope of the wave. One arm remains at their side, palm faced down or turned to one side to act as a rudder. By turning the body to one side or the other, they can ride ahead of the break like a boardsurfer, continuously "falling" off the crest just before it breaks.

I must admit, it does sound thrilling: sliding down the slope of a wave too large and deep to ever catch in bare feet. But this elevated excitement carries a concomitant danger, like when one leaves the ski slopes to take on ungroomed cliffs. Temporary paralysis is an ever-present hazard for this breed of bodysurfer, and emergency-room doctors working near good surfing beaches report a preponderance of spinal injuries and broken noses among bodysurfers. With one arm hanging down by your side, it's easy to smack your head against the ocean floor when a wave gets the best of you. My family's more primitive style, however, with both arms locked in front, pressed against the ears, protects against that very injury—if a wave throws me down against the bottom, only my hands hit ground as I somersault safely to a standing or sitting position. And the submerged head and closed eyes create the illusion of great speed and tumult: I get the feeling of danger and excitement in relatively small surf. In over twenty years of family bodysurfing, the only injury I can recall is when my brother-in-law sprained his ankle high-stepping in the shallow water, celebrating a rare victory.

I suppose the West-Coasters would dismiss me and my "New England style," as they'd call it, with my face in the water and eyes closed, as neophytic. But there's something to be said for bowing your head into the water, closing your eyes, and surrendering to the fury of the wave. Something that makes me dream of bodysurfing at night and long for it on winter afternoons.

Ocean waves are deceptively potent bundles of energy. Their power begins as the driving force of a storm a thousand miles offshore (or some other disturbance, such as an earthquake). It is transferred to the ocean as wild winds whip the sea into

seemingly random crests smashing violently into one another. The net result of this chaos is a series of regular undulations that strike out in every direction. As these deep-sea waves approach shore, perhaps a couple of days later, the quickly shallowing water causes the waves to slow down and compress, which raises the crests. When the depth of the water shrinks to 1.3 times the height of the wave (measured from trough to peak), the wave becomes unstable and collapses, or "breaks," releasing its energy and creating surf.

When a wave breaks, it becomes steep enough so that an object's buoyancy—a force always operating in a vector perpendicular to the water surface—is tilted enough to overcome the object's weight and propel it forward: hence surfing. The first to take advantage of this phenomenon were sea creatures such as porpoises and seals, who can be seen today surfing waves above and below the ocean surface. Human surfing was first recorded in Tahiti in 1777 by Captain James Cook, an Englishman who was perplexed at seeing a native inhabitant "paddling in a small canoe, so quickly, and looking about with such eagerness on each side," until a wave broke and he "sat motionless and was carried along at the same swift rate as the wave, till it landed him in the beach." Two years later, in the Hawaiian islands, days before he was killed in a fight with natives, Cook was the first white man to see a surfer on a flat board.

Of course, the Hawaiians had probably been surfing for centuries without pale-skinned spectators; and bodysurfing, one would presume, is even older than boardsurfing. A hundred years ago, a Hawaiian recorded this account of the ancient sport:

Kaha Nalu is the term used for [when one] would strike out with his hands and feet to obtain headway as the approaching comber with its breaking crest would catch him . . . and bear him onward with swift momentum, the body being submerged in the foam; the head and shoulders only being seen. Kaha experts could ride in the lala, or top of the surface, as if riding with a board.

Kaha Nalu must be one of the oldest surviving sports. When I catch a wave off Cape Cod, I am having the same experience that Pacific Islanders had hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years ago. To me, the age of Jet Skis, waterskis, and windsurfers has provided no better oceanic pleasure.

An average four-foot wave carries thirty-three tons of force per foot of crest width. So it's no wonder that apparently puny waves, if well formed, will deliver you shoreward with gratifying power. "Enders," my brother and I called them as kids, because they were the ones we ended our day with, taking one last ride towards shore. We created our own taxonomy of waves as we jumped from one foot to the other, shivering, taunting the ocean, "Come on—give us your worst!" There were "doubles"—two waves so close to each other that you could catch the first one and then feel the second take over halfway through the ride. "Choppers" were unruly waves that might provide a quick thrill but would fail to give a long, satisfying ride (we were oblivious to the fact that Californian surfers called these waves "junk," "mushburgers," or "close-outs," and Australians knew them as "dumpers"). But surely the biggest thrill came from the waves that forced our private lexicon to embrace the phrase any beachgoer would use: the "big ones."

We used to get them all the time on the Cape at Nauset Beach, but the storm of 1978 deformed the ocean floor there and ruined the surf. The bottom there now drops off rapidly, producing waves that don't break until they're practically on the shore. Luckily, the next beach up the coastline, Coast Guard Beach, retained its surf-producing qualities. Its bar deepens gradually, on a good day providing long, rolling breakers.

The big waves require a modified technique. Normally I wait in chest-deep water in order to have leverage for springing forward. But when the sea is tossing up large-scale waves a little farther out, I sometimes swim out to catch them. I tread water out near the boardsurfers, careful to duck underwater should any of them catch one in my direction. Eventually the right wave will come—one developing too late for the boardsurfers, still building as it reaches me. Then, lacking the rubber fins the West-Coasters use, I simply prostrate myself on the surface of the water and give myself up to nature.

The wave gathers me up casually like an abandoned surfboard, lifts me high into its fold, then throws me down with a crash—it's a feeling of falling down the slope of a mountain, like when you first push off a snowy peak with your skis, or like shooting down the flume at an amusement park. During the first break, and sometimes again when the wave unleashes a second blow, my body is actually airborne for a moment—a moment of absolute fear, when I feel that the force will be too much for my body, that it will snap me like a piece of thin driftwood. But then I crash down and am riding on the surface again, fishtailing like a car on snow, then leveling out and finding again the source of the power and riding out the rest of the wave until finally coming to a peaceful finish on my knees and elbows in six inches of water.

Nine years ago, my brother and I wanted to take a trip. He had just graduated from a nine-year M.D./Ph.D. program and didn't know what he wanted to do with his life. I had no doctoral degrees at all and still didn't know what I wanted to do. We both longed to get away and forget about the future for a while. There was no question what we were looking for: a bodysurfing spot.

A few days later we were in Puerto Vallarta; the beaches were dirty, with no surf, and the town was inundated with Corona-swilling college students in Hard Rock Cafe T-shirts. We took a typically helter-skelter Mexican bus ride up to Punta de Mita, purportedly a premier surfing spot, but when the bus pulled away we found ourselves alone by an abandoned restaurant and a rocky, unsurfable beach. We hitched a ride south on the back of a truck, and when we came around a bend, we suddenly yelled to the driver and got off. There, down a short trail, was the perfect beach: exquisitely shaped waves as regular as a metronome, and not a soul in sight.

For three days we hitched back and forth from the nearest hotel, four miles away, and spent all day taking in the waves. The water was cool enough to be refreshing but not cold enough to hurt, and the waves were powerful and unceasing—there were none of Cape Cod's long, numbing waits. Occasionally some Mexican children who appeared seemingly out of nowhere would watch us; they would wait for us to take a wave in and then run with us for the last bit, laughing and shouting, "¡Mira! ¡Aquí llega!"

I stood in the chest-deep water, treading over the swells, waiting for a perfect one—I could afford to be selective here. Then there it was, rising in the distance and gathering strength, the biggest in three days. "All right, then," I said under my breath as the enormous wave rose to a peak over my head, and I dove with it. Tons of force, siphoned from a mighty storm in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, hoarded and transported a thousand miles, exploded in a cacophonous frothy new incarnation. The power was frightening. I could hardly hold my breath as it drove me down and forward, and I rode it through several new bursts of energy, lifting my head at one point to grab a fresh breath of air. Then the fury began to abate, and I kept my body taut, sucking in my stomach and arching my back to avoid hitting the ground, milking the last drops of force until finally the wave died and left me there, abandoned and happy at the edge of an ocean.

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