

Standing Down

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By Michael Reynolds



Lying can be fun, even if you're normally an upright citizen ... I've called them lids, spongers, boogers, speed bumps, belly rubbers and a waste of three feet of foam. I've sprayed them with cutbacks, snaked 'em, glared at and flat out ignored 'em in the line-up. Their backward waddle into the ocean irked me; their lack of vertical progression confounded me.

"Get up!" I'd mutter to no one in particular, while watching them slide on their bellies across a perfectly good wave. "Get the fuck up!" Nails on a chalkboard, people chewing ice, drivers doing 50mph in the fast lane, bodyboarders – they were all the same to me.

And yes, I've always given credit to the select few who've pushed the limits of riding a wave, those like Mike Stewart who've torn apart maxing Pipe or Teahupoo. Their deep barrels, air drops and mind-bending maneuvers can't be denied. But those everyday spongers flailing in my line-up – I'll admit, it's usually gutless – are, at best, a nuisance.

Then, one day last year I found myself stranded on the beach, clutching my 6'8" Merrick as perfect 4ft tubes spun and spat just 10ft from my buried toes, each detonation blasting sand and shells onto the beach. Despite all her beauty, soft rails and subtle concaves, my board was useless until the tide receded and the sandbar started doing its thing – three long hours from that moment. The perfection mocked me, stirring the pot with each cracking lip and grumbling rumble. My only response expressed in an exasperated "Ugghhh ..."

"Yo, Mike!" suddenly broke my private frustration. I looked over to see a surf buddy of mine and his kid, bodyboarding just down the beach. "Get your ass out here. It's rippin'!" His hand rested on the deck of a dirty, vintage Mach 7-7.

"Nah," I said, waving my hand as though to shoo him away. "What else are you gonna do ... the yard?" he replied. When visions of overgrown shrubs and my wife's predictable insistence paraded across my mind, I realized he had a point.

With a quick, self-conscious scan of the beach, I wandered over to my buddy and his kid standing just beyond the impact zone. We chatted for a few minutes while his son slid into the hollow waves around us. Succumbing to the fun he looked like he was having, I motioned for the old board and immediately eyed a set wave moving towards me. Like a virgin groom, I clumsily jumped on the board and paddled for the peak. After a couple of strokes, I found the board stable and surprisingly buoyant considering my soft 185lbs. With no hesitation, the board felt the wave lurch forward and slid down its face, as though it knew what it was meant to do. My inside hand instinctively burst forward – fingers outstretched, palm down like a one-armed Superman flying through the air – as I watched the shoulder transform into a heaving lip that pitched onto the shallows 5ft ahead of me.

Shells sucked up the face scratched my legs, while the vibrations of the water draining off the sand tickled my chest through the bottom of the board. In moments, the lip slapped the outside of my head while the deep foamball enveloped my feet and calves like a warm, wet blanket. People, chairs and umbrellas on the beach blended into a garish blur as the board flew on, responding to every tiny adjustment I made to stay in the barrel. Displaced shells and sand filled my tiny space and the scent of seaweed blasted into my nostrils. I maintained my line until I hit dry sand and was subsequently drawn up the face and pitched onto the beach like an old rag.

“Holy Crap,” I thought as I sat at in the shallows covered in sand and shells. “What the hell was that?” That, I realized, was the most sensation I’d ever felt on my body while riding a wave, in my life. I didn’t know it happened like that ... didn’t know it could.

I bodyboarded for three hours that day, fighting my buddy and his son for the Mach 7-7 the entire time. And while I’ll always love my 6’8”, I’m not so averse to the odd lay-down now and then if the conditions call for it.

And the anti-sponger attitude? Well, that has ceased, unlike the memories of those rides on my belly and the hysterical absurdity of getting washed up the beach in 3ft of foamy shoredump.

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