

Paipo - Bellyboarding in Australasia

Riding prone on wood and fibreglass boards in Australia and New Zealand.

by Bob Green



Noosa 1960s - unidentified surfers heading out
Photo by Stuart Scott



Kit Carson at Winkipop, 1969. Photo courtesy Kit Carson.

Introduction

The 2004 edition of Matt Warshaw's *Encyclopedia of Surfing* describes bellyboarding as "all but forgotten" by the mid 1970s and the online version doesn't have an entry for bellyboards or paipo. Warshaw did, however, acknowledge that modern surfing techniques and surfboards were influenced by the bellyboard. Richard Kenvin's 2014 book, *Surfcraft*, well sums up the place of bellyboards in surfing history:

"The paipo maintained a link to ancient boards and riding styles while demonstrating, in the midst of the longboard era, that incredible things were possible on thin, flexible boards with little flotation ... the paipo was a testament to the power of pure planing hydrodynamics".

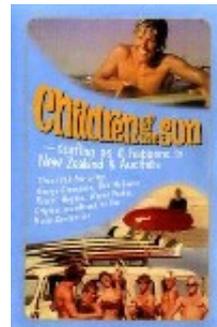
Rod Rodger's paipo forum, Tom Wegener's passion and promotion of the alaia and the World Bellyboard championships in the UK have rekindled an interest in these boards, which for some didn't need rekindling. Bellyboards are being "rediscovered" and either being ridden in new ways or their potential explored through new technologies and designs. Compared with the history of stand-up boards little has been written about paipo - bellyboards and who made or rode them. Even where there are photos, the surfers are typically not identified. This site tries to record some of the story of these boards, primarily in Australia, but also in New Zealand.

Challenges in documenting the history of paipo or bellyboards

Documenting this history is not straight forward. In the 1960s and 1970s the term bellyboard was also used to refer to a kneeboard. This can be seen in Andy McAlpine's 1968 film 'Children of the Sun'. In a 'Tracks' magazine interview George Greenough is asked his aims in riding "a scooped out bellyboard" (Quirk 1971) while in the Design page of the January 1972 issue 'Tracks' is described as receiving "lots of letters asking for details of bellyboards" and then referring to Greenough's spoon concept (Unknown 1972). Greg McDonagh (2009), Bill Wallace (2009), Dick Laycock (2009), Eddie Sawden (2009) and the kneeboarder Lenny Woods (2009) were contacted about their knowledge of bellyboards in Australia. Initially, all thought they were being asked about kneeboards and used the terms interchangeably.



Shane bellyboard resembling an early kneeboard.
Photo by Mike Brown.



Andy McAlpine's 'Children of the Sun'



Wally Froiseth - stand up paipo.
Photo courtesy Wally Froiseth.



Bill Wallace bellyboard resembling a short version of a

Identifying whether a board was a bellyboard is similarly complex. Early kneeboards were often below five foot in length resembling a bellyboard while some bellyboards were like shorter versions of stand-up boards. Long paddleboards can be ridden prone while small boards designed as bellyboards, may be ridden kneeling or stand-up. Examples of the latter include Wally Froiseth at Makaha circa 1957 ([Footnote 1](#)) and the 1963 footage of Val Ching riding the Wall, Waikiki.

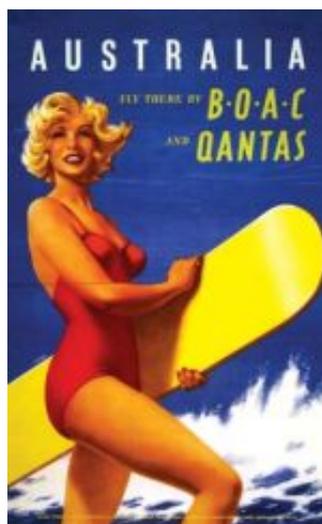
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To share your bellyboard or paipo story with Bob Green & Rod Rodgers

[Rod Rodgers' Paipo Survey Page](#)



BOAC poster, designed by Hayes c.1956

Interviews with people who have ridden paipo boards and bellyboards, or know something about them

[The paipo interviews project](#)



Cortina and paipo ready to travel .
Photo courtesy Gary Clyst

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Footnote

1. E-mail from John Clark (2010a). Clark's e-mail (dated August 22), contained a letter to him from Wally Froiseth from August 17, 2010: "I first put a single fin on one of my paipos, but when I tried it at Makaha, it was too shaky and not steady enough. My record shows that I tried two fins in 1955-56. I think I showed you one of my record books which confirms the timeline dates of 1955/56".

Clark added the following to the information in the letter from Wally: "Wally made his first Hawaiian Pai Po balsa/fiberglass board in December 1955 with no fins. This is the board that he loaned to Jimmy Alama that was stolen. He made a second board without fins, but it side-slipped too much, so he added two fins to it, which were too small and in the wrong position. This was early in 1956, and from then on he continued to experiment with materials, designs, and fins until he could ride the boards to his satisfaction. By 1957, he was riding his paipos prone and standing on big days at Waikiki, Makaha, and Sunset.

Clark (2010c): "I don't know if you can actually determine the date when a fin was first put on a paipo board, but we do know that Tom Blake introduced the fin for surfboards in 1935. Wally told him once that Blake made several fins out of metal in the 1930s and gave him one, but Wally said he never used it. He was afraid it would hurt someone. It seems like fins caught for surfboards on after WWII (1945), so my guess would be that's when fins would have also been tried on paipo boards."

Clark (2010d): "Traditional paipo boards until after World War II were generally short, narrow, and thin. Wally's boards were longer, about 4'; wider, about 21" in front narrowing to 18" in the tail, and thicker, about 1 1/2" wide. He also glassed the boards and added a handle in the front and twin fins on the bottom. Given all those features, his boards were different than the existing boards."