

Paipo - Belly boarding in Australiasia

The mixed fortunes of bellyboards since the 1950s.



Tom Wegener - King Island. Photo Sean Davey.



Vidler bellyboard WA 2006. Photo Henry Marfleet.

Higher performance bellyboards

The emergence of bellyboards as higher performance surfcraft was due to several reasons. Without the assistance of surf fins (flippers), this was a time when surfing prone would have largely been restricted to riding white water or catching waves from a shallow point, unless the board could be paddled or the surfer was particularly skilled. The development and manufacture of swim fins enabled surfers to more readily catch and ride critical waves. Swim fins were invented in 1935 by Louis de Corlieu (Marx 1990) and were being used in Hawaii in the 1930s (Clark 2009). Churchill began selling his swim fins in 1940 (Marx 1990). Dick Turnbull from Bondi produced swim fins in Australia around 1949 (Regan 2010). While swim fins enabled propulsion to catch waves and to get out beyond breaking waves development in materials enabled the production of surfcraft that could be ridden in better waves. In Australia, balsa became generally available for surfboard manufacture in 1958 (Young 1983). Arthur Millner provided manufacturers, such as Bill Clymer with a source of lightweight but relatively strong material to manufacture surfboards and bellyboards (Larkin 2009b). The introduction of foam and fibreglass also allowed more functional bellyboards to be produced.

There were also a number of US influences. Regan (2010) recalls that the 1956 US/Hawaiian lifeguard team on their visit to Australia brought two balsa paipo boards with them and that soon after local surfers copied these boards. The photo below by Regan depicts a board much shorter than the other 'malibu' style boards. Clark (2010b) advises that he spoke with Tim Guard, the president of the Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation who was one of the Hawaii team members. Guard (2011) recalled that he brought a semi-hollow balsa bellyboard made by Joe Quigg which he rode at Manly and Freshwater. This board was left with his host family in Australia.

Early surfing films, such as Bud Browne's 1957 'The Big Surf' which was shown in Australia (Unknown 1972) depicted surfers riding bellyboards in larger Hawaiian waves,

while Bruce Brown's 1961 film 'Surfing Hollow Days' featured an unknown Australian bellyboarder riding Waimea Bay. Not only did this suggest how bellyboards could be ridden, but also provided design inspiration (Tingle 2009, Larkin 2009c). A Paipo Nui flyer mentioned a number of other 1960's films that contained paipo surfing ('Locked in', 'The Call of the Surf' and 'For Surfer's only'). In addition to the images shown on the big screen, surfers in the 1960s began making trips to Hawaii and Hawaiian boards were being introduced to Australia. Around the mid 1950's Wally Froiseth had developed fibreglassed balsa, twin-fin paipo boards ([Footnote 1](#)) while the early 1960s saw the development of the delta-wing guitar-pick shape Paipo Nui boards. Jamie Farfor (2009) was one surfer who began making these more hydrodynamically sophisticated boards in Australia after seeing them being ridden in Hawaii. The use of foam and fibreglass also enabled a myriad of different designs to be made.

Another factor associated with the use of bellyboards has been the banning of finned surfboards from certain areas. In Sydney this occurred around 1970-1973 (Cater 2009c). 'Tracks' magazine reported receiving lots of letters regarding problems at Bondi in this regard (Stewart 1973) and notably similar bans also occurred at Newport in the United States (Moynier 2010). Coolite boards were among the prone craft ridden to escape these bans. A 1971 letter in Tracks by Joseph Cool (ite) in response to an article on surf mats extolled the virtues of coolite boards. Cool quoted from the October Tracks article stating both types of surfcraft 'make the rider aware of "the movement of water underneath him, giving the impression that no barrier exists between himself and the water"(Cool 1971) ([Footnote 3](#)). This sensation of being close to the wave, is one that many bellyboarders have experienced and commented on (see Crandall 1970, Carson 2010) and while also experienced by bodysurfers, bellyboarding offered new opportunities for speed and manoeuvrability. For example, Laycock (2009) described bellyboards being based on the surfplane ([Footnote 4](#)) with the motivation being to find something more manoeuvrable. Peden (2010) described riding a bellyboard because as a bodysurfer he was less able to compete with surfers, as designs progressed and boardriding became more popular.

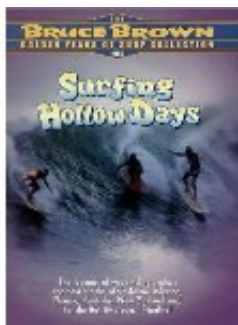


1956 US/Hawaiian lifeguard boards
Cronulla SLSC

Photo by Barry Regan, courtesy Garry Birdsall.



Paipo Nui-'delta wing' order form.
Bob Smith collection.



Bruce Brown's 'Surfing Hollow Days'.



Bennett fibreglass bellyboard. Photo Mike Smith

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The demise of bellyboarding

Bloomfield suggested that the bellyboard "never had strong appeal, mainly because of the

superiority of the full-sized, hollow board; also because the small board has an unpleasant habit of diving abruptly and striking the user a blow in the abdomen with the rear-end" (p.59). Midget Farrelly later took a different view, "I think that peipos are likely to become very popular" (Farrelly & McGregor 1965). Their simplicity and "easy and cheap" construction being two factors that were considered likely to contribute to their popularity. The likely reasons why bellyboards never attained mainstream status are more complex than Bloomfield above suggests. The demise of bellyboards has been attributed to the introduction of boogie boards, however, the picture is again more complex, as interviews with surfboard manufacturers and surfers attest. A number of factors probably contributed to the decline in use of bellyboards. Just as bellyboards were seen by bodysurfers as an improved method of riding waves, the surfing of George Greenough inspired people to try kneeboards. Dick Laycock (Laycock 2009) who worked for the McDonaghs and then Bennett for 30 years acknowledged the influence of George Greenough around 1965-1966 though stated kneeboards were no more popular than bellyboards. Laycock described bellyboards as a specialist item that no one made on a commercial basis and that shapers would "begrudgingly make one". However, in January 1972 'Tracks' saw it necessary to provide readers with the names of manufacturers from whom "bellyboards" could be purchased (along with board prices), stating that "Belly boarding has undoubtedly received terrific impetus from George Greenough".



Design page, Tracks v.15 January 1972. Page 29. Morey Boogie advertisement. Tracks v.61(Nov. 1975). Page 31.

Also, as surfing broke away from lifesaving and surfboards become lighter and thus more accessible, the boom in surfboards was about standing up. Laycock described bellyboards as being treated with a bit of scorn by most people: "they were on the periphery" ridden by people before they could stand up. Laycock stated that he had a friend Barry Sievers who was taunted with "why don't you learn to stand up". Bellyboards were reported to be treated like "lepers".

On the Gold Coast and around Torquay bellyboarding had faded by the early 1970s. A factor reported by several of the bellyboarders was the advent of the legrope (Carson 2010, Hayden 2010, Taylor 2010). The steep take-off and punishing rocks at locations like Kirra and Winkipop had limited the number of stand-up surfers at these locations, especially when conditions got bigger. Legropes reduced these risks and bellyboarders couldn't compete with standup surfers who could catch the waves earlier. Additionally, with the much longer 12' boards, bellyboarders and surfers did not conflict over the same take-off spot. As boards got shorter at places like Cronulla there were tensions when there was competition for the same critical take-off spot (Regan 2010).





Same wave from the water.
Photo Dennis Markson.

Aden Parsons planing on the body at Little Avalon. May 1964.
For a while Little Avalon was primarily a spot for bodysurfers
and bellyboard riders.

Photo Pennings, courtesy Dennis Markson.

Another factor was the increased popularity of mass produced coolite boards as a transitional form of surfing. In a series of interviews with Tasmanian surfers, Davey (2005) reported that many began surfing on coolite boards. There is no mention of bellyboards. Around 1970 Dick Ash (2009) produced the bellybogger, a roto moulded hollow plastic board. Ash estimated that he made about 500 of these boards. Sales were good until they were banned from use in the flagged beach area patrolled by lifesavers. The Morey Boogie was introduced and Ash gave up producing the bellybogger until 1994. Another competitor for riding prone was surf mats. Numerous full pages advertisements appeared in 'Tracks' magazine from 1974-1975. Free 'n Easy advertisements in issues 48 and 49 featured Rabbit Bartholomew and Peter Townsend, while Gerry Lopez was featured with an O'Neill mat. Other brands of surf mats, usually marketed on a full page included Merrin's, Hodgeman, RipCurl and Palma. Advertisements for surf mats after April 1975 became less frequent. The October 1975 issue featured the O'Neill 'Super Mat' followed the next month by an advertisement for the "1 1/2 pound foam miracle" the Morey Boogie. Dale Solomonson, who later made Neumatic surf mats provided an endorsement for the boogie board: "For amazing freedom and speed". Elsewhere in this advertisement, no doubt with competitors in mind, the reader finds the line: "For the real feeling of surfing fast, finless and flexible".

The decline in use of bellyboards isn't just about boogie boards and the story of bellyboarding is not just about the past but has relevance to the present because bellyboards continue to be made and ridden. In a recent discussion between Andrew Kidman and the US shaper, Dave Parmenter, Parmenter advised: " Be interested in everything. Try every surfboard you can get your hands on. If it's a modern Alaia, a Paipo board, a bodyboard. I rode every single surfboard I could get my hands on. I was always interested in it, and I've never been incurious about them" (Kidman 2010, page 50). So what is the story of bellyboarding?



Rocky Hall and Jeff Callaghan - Winki.
Photo courtesy Kit Carson



Kit Carson. Photo Kit Carson



Kit Carson and Jeff Callaghan -Torquay.
Photo courtesy Jeff Callaghan.



Bryan Hayden. Photo courtesy Bryan Hayden.

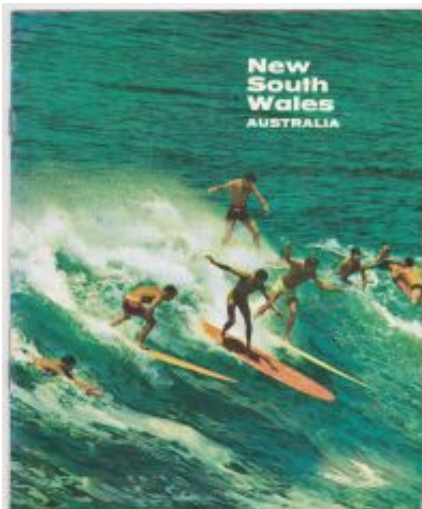
Footnote

1. E-mail from John Clark (2010a).

3. A more recent reference to Joe Cool-ite was a 2010 letter to Surfing World, describing the surfing of Tony Latham at Maroubra (Wazza 2010): "I vividly remember running down Beach St and seeing a pitching 10 footer exploding out there and Tony suddenly flying out of the tube on his Coolite" (p. 108).

4. The development of the surfplane has been described in an interview with John Ruffels who has researched the life of its inventor - Dr Ernest Smithers. See [John Ruffels interview](#)

Smithers Ernest E and Richardson, D. filed the patent on February 19, 1934 which can be viewed here. [Pneumatic surfboard or float. U.S.Patent No. 2,064,128. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Patent and Trademark Office \(December 15 1936\)](#) The patent includes specifications and design background.



NSW Tourist brochure.
Bellyboard at left and surfplane at right
Photo courtesy Gary Clist



Surfplane launching. Photo courtesy Gary Clist.

Peter Bowes in a post to Kurungabaa has provided insight into riding a surfplane: [Bowes, Peter \(2009\).](#)

"THE RIDE IN Unlike today's surfing etiquette, where only one man has the right of

possession of a wave, fifty years ago it didn't matter who was where, in fact the more who were able to crowd together on the very lip of a top to bottom breaking wave the better.

Especially if the wave had some size, because from this lofty crag the route to shore could be better planned. For instance; five boys are poised on the precipice of a six foot wall of water that is about to rear up and collapse onto the sandbank, and in the few seconds available they are individually able to string together a logical and related series of moves that would rival the game plan of a chess master. The inner sandbank was of course crowded with swimmers either too cautious to go beyond their depth, too inexperienced to tackle the dangerous breaking surf, or who were simply in a hasty retreat and trying to get out of the way. Whatever, young or old, now they were legitimate targets. The proper technique to get up sufficient killer approach speed was for the surfplane rider to deny fear and lean down over the lip and wait for the momentum of the wave to pitch the him down the vertical face into a long and fast glide that accelerated him well in front of the explosion of whitewater that always followed. This was where subjective target consolidation became critical, given the victim rich environment that presented itself. Ricochets were much prized, as was the rare double-knock – where more than one rider hit the same floundering wallower. Happily the choices were endless and at times a low growl could be heard amongst the roar of the sea as the young attackers homed in on their prey. Over there, a group of adolescent girls squealing with mock fright and trying to keep their hair dry, girls who had never bothered with fourteen year-old boys, until now. Behind them an overweight man desperately waddling away from the fast approaching mass of whitewater, a quality target indeed and one that was sometimes the objective of more than a few of us, as we converged towards him with a sharklike hunger, a killing pack. To the left a loving couple uncoupling their embrace far too late, then coupling again as the drama of the moment became evident – Two in the one hit. A roar from the crowd! And of course there was always the chance of running down a mate who was trying to get back out for another sortie, and grabbing his surfplane on the way through, a fair trophy. So here was the very early breeding pool of the first generation of modern surfers, not unlike the dozens of snowy haired kids who infest our beaches today; all playing out there in seas that make fools of the weather forecasters, bewilder the sports columnists and frighten their parents".

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