

“The Sound of Everyone Surfing”

I like other surfers. I just don't like them when they're surfing.

If that sounds like a veterinarian saying that he or she likes dogs, but not when they bark or that I enjoy the company of our in-laws, so long as they are asleep, well, so be it.

Before you label me a self-severing curmudgeon, indulge my explanation of this diametric statement that most surfers should understand while the non-surfer scratches his head, the stereotype reinforced.

Place yourself in this scene: You go to a party wearing an aloha shirt and slaps. Your nose is sun burnt and peeling. You silently ooze that pervasive stoke of having scored good surf that morning.

Fate being what it is, you end up pouring beers and swapping stories with guys just like yourself. All is right with the world.

But when that same carload pulls up to your empty lineup the next morning, your stomach turns. Damn, can't they find their own spot?

As a student of the sociology of sport, I find it particularly interesting that we, as surfers, are one of only a handful of other sportsmen who really don't like to see other members of our chosen activity. Oh, we may flatter ourselves with the label of 'tribe' or 'subculture', but that appears as self-inflated profiling and means nothing unless the anecdotal evidence is there to back it up.

And you could dumb-down the theory, call it “supply and demand”, no different than having to wait for a tennis court on a crowded Sunday morning. But it is more than that. So much more.

Surfers are innately individualistic, born to stand, not above, but apart from the seething morass of humanity. We don't do things en masse. That would be an affront to the very nature of our being. And especially, we don't ride waves together. Not now anyways.

There was a time though, not that long ago, when riding waves with other surfers was considered not only acceptable, but culturally “correct”, safer, and for all means and purposes, more fun. The ancient Hawaiians shared waves, the early California pioneers shared waves, and even the big wave test pilot riders of the late 50's took off on the same behemoth face merely for the sake of sharing their fear.

As far as anyone can tell, it was likely the advent of the lighter weight balsa boards and their resultant ability to “climb and drop” as they rode, that originally instigated the concept of ‘one man-one wave.’

Now though, when we speak to other surfers of the day's conditions, we ask first of the crowd factor, not the size, shape, surface conditions or

how one's board performed. To "score" is to get it alone, even if *it* is one foot slop. How odd. How strange. How very sad.

Last winter I found myself surfing a cold, sharky, mysto spot up on the Central Coast, *alone*, and secretly coveted another body in the line-up...just in case. My admittedly weak thoughts took me back to my own home break the summer before; a fat, mushy wave that favors the gray haired pony tailed set, replete with their new 9'6" cradled in their Thule rack-adorned SUVs.

I had been watching one set wave after another go to the dot.com millionaires as I sat patiently on my dog-eared 6'8". Finally, I told some V.P. of Marketing that I was going on the next wave and would he mind if I stayed out on the shoulder and allowed him his statuesque perch while I burned up a few rail to rail calories.

He turned to me and grunted a reply that highly suggested I ride a "long board" if I wanted to surf here.

While I didn't get mad, I couldn't let it go; my demented reaction prompted, no doubt, by the fact that I lived up the street, worked on the beaches and spent 7 or 8 sessions a week riding that yawner of a wave.

So, with cynicism as fuel, I proceeded to rotate, in sequence, my gradually lengthening craft conveniently stored in the lifeguard tower on the beach, each time asking my perplexed new friend if "this was big enough"? An airbrushed 9'0" Minard, a 10 ft rescue board, a 13ft. surf ski and finally a 19 ft Eaton racing paddle craft; I wondered just what he meant by needing a long board.

Finally, I asked him if he would come in to the beach and help me row the two-man dory back out. That way, I explained, we could ride waves together and not be in each other's way.

He called me psycho and left the water. But I wondered who was more mentally unstable at that moment. I mean, I didn't want to stuff the guy on take off and call him a kook. My kids were on the beach, same as his. I just wanted him to share the 'love', if only in gesture. Not chastise me for my shortened board, as if he was referring to something anatomical.

Face it. In highly populated coastal locales, the waters are crowded. Blame it on man's search for a connection to nature. Blame it on the image propagated by the clothing manufacturers and the media. Blame it on the burgeoning 'wahine craze'. Blame it on the long boards, leashes and unobtanium-lined wetsuits. Hell, blame it on yourself for not becoming a lacrosse player. It doesn't matter. People like to surf.

And they like to think of themselves as the iconic wanderer, Juan Cabrillo or R.H. Dana with the optional leather and CD changer.

Urban surfing will only survive if we recognize the futility of posturing, of expecting and requiring that every wave we get to ride will be un-encumbered by another surfer. Maybe the answer to this metro- madness is a type of controlled Marxism, but with the emphasis on the pleasure of sharing, of giving and receiving not because the unwritten rules say so, but because you want to; kind of like the Dalai Lama passing out wax at Malibu or Rodney King guiding newcomers down the trail at Lunada Bay.

This idealism may not fit with the rebellious nature of surfers everywhere and I doubt I'm going to suggest Johnny Boy go on Prozac, but trust me, you don't want the binary opposite: a type of forced control and order in the line-up, like some crowded bakery where numbers are handed out. "Set wave serving number 49! Number 49 your order is ready to ride!"

Or worse yet, picture a gallery of fresh law school graduates, scanning the line up for potential contingency cases causing "mental duress". Most of us would quite surfing and take up lacrosse.

I'm not advocating drop-ins or a loss of respect for those who have paid their dues at a spot over the years. But if we choose to inhabit metropolitan regions and spend significant periods of time surfing crowded waves, maybe we should try a different tack than the current "meanest growl + biggest stick = most waves" scenario.

Then again there is always the real deal, the search for empty waves in every pocket of the globe. I know that I could live in a tree house in the Seychelles. But like all things, it seems, there is an attempt to achieve a sense of balance, convince the wife and kids that malaria night sweats are really not that bad. Not nearly as bad as trying a "go-behind" with some dude you never met, the both of you falling, coming up laughing, remembering that the ancient Hawaiians thought it rude to take off on a wave without another member of the tribe to share the experience.

It's like an old friend of mine says, "Never take off on the first wave of the set. Wait for the last wave so that all those paddling back out can watch you, and share and hoot."

And probably cut you off on the next set.

Just so long as they ask first.