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Bodysurfing

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Abstract:

Neophyte bodysurfers should buy fins aside from body suits. They should also analyze whether the conditions are appropriate for bodysurfing and should cancel the activity if there are rocks. Moreover, the timing of the take-off should be right to avoid being overwhelmed by the wave.

Full Text:

The beach sucks, nothing but rocks and sharp shells, and the break isn't much better - the waist-high waves pop up for a second, then collapse like the French army during World War II. There's nothing to ride, no place to lounge, and my buddies have set up a campfire and a case of Pacifico up on the ridgeline. I can hear them laughing.

The sky is darkening and we've just completed a 200-mile drive from Los Angeles to the Baja coast at Punto San Tomas, including a 20-mile bump across a dirt road intent on separating my Honda from its muffler. I'm tired, tense, cold; it's a stupid time to jump in the water. But I can't stop staring into the sea. Maybe it's not so bad out there. How will I know if I don't try?

I put on my suit and grab my fins. I wade into the water, braced against the cold. I crouch and slip on my fins with numb fingers. A few strokes and I'm out to where the waves are breaking. They're still falling almost too quickly to ride, but they look better here than they did on shore. A wave rushes in and the chase begins. Two huge kicks and I'm on it, trying to cut across the face. Friction disappears. I disappear. The wave is everything now, the entire world is nothing but momentum and purposeful water.

I'm gliding on top, trying to cut a sharper angle so I can outrun the wave's collapse for a few more delicious seconds, but it shatters in a straight line and sends me skittering into the foam. Before the wave breaks, though, there's a freeze-frame moment, a weird instant of athletic clarity. It's a flash of blue and shore, the feeling of being encased in a cocoon of liquid speed, a compelling sense of being in the right place at the right time. It almost doesn't register because I'm bouncing into the rough, riding the whitewater, trying to stop before my belly plows into the rocks.

This isn't my favorite kind of bodysurfing. Small, sharp waves lack elegance; their quick rush and crash stunts the style that attracts me to the sport. Yes, style. Bodysurfing is the art of finding the right wave, then the right combination of angle and force to ride it the way it's meant to be ridden. A degree of arc, a kick, a second earlier or later on your takeoff mean everything. There are no intermediaries; it's just your skill, your skin and the ocean.

It's this immediacy that explains why the freeze-frame instants keep coming on this lousy day, in these lousy conditions. I chase them until I can barely swim. Then I stagger shivering onto the beach, picking my way up the ridge. I wrap myself in a huge towel and stand over the fire. Someone hands me a beer. Someone else starts talking mess.

"What's with the whooping?" he says. "Every wave you caught, you were bellowing like a sick whale."

I don't believe him at first. Out there, bodysurfing, I didn't realize I was making a sound.

Starting

1. Bodysurfing is a soul sport: The only equipment you absolutely need is a bathing suit. You'll have a better time, though, if you pick up a good pair of fins. I prefer longer swim-type fins over shorter bodyboarding styles.

2. Before you go out and hit a break, spend a few minutes assessing the conditions. You're looking for safety - beware rocks and rip tides - and also to see if the waves are breaking at an angle. If they are, you can work with it to lengthen your rides.

3. Figuring out when to start your take-off on a wave is all instinct. If the swell isn't cresting, you can kick until your knee-joints pop without catching it. Start too late, just before the wave breaks, and you'll get pinned under 10,000 gallons of saline solution.

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