

Surfing's New Wave: ...The Long And Short Of It

BY ERIC CARLSON

Autumn brings two things to the waters off the South Brunswick Islands: better fishing and bigger surf.

If you spend any time on our beaches, you probably like to watch the surfers at play in the waves (even if you have no desire to join them). Veteran surf watchers may have noticed that there seem to be two different approaches to wave riding these days.

Most surfers, especially the younger ones, ride racy little boards called "thrusters," which are just a bit taller than they are, with sharp, pointed noses up front and three small fins in back.

These riders aggressively attack every wave, slashing quick turns, throwing sheets of spray into the air and blasting through the curl as the wave folds over. Or at least they try to.

Then there are those other surfers—many older, some not—riding surfboards that seem gigantic by comparison. These boards are usually wider, with rounded, blunt noses and nearly parallel sides. Some have three fins at the tail, but many have only one.

Long board riders take a different approach to wave riding. They seem more relaxed, turning in long, smooth arcs and stepping to the nose for a leisurely cruise across the wave's face as it races to the shore.

This latter style might remind you of the way surfers used to ride, back in the days when the popular movie "The Endless Summer" introduced the sport of surfing to all those folks who live between the Atlantic and Pacific.

What you are seeing has come to be known as the "long board revolution," a return to a style of wave riding that was almost totally rejected in the early 1970s as surfers began experimenting with smaller and smaller surfboards.

For centuries, surfers rode boards at least 9 feet long and sometimes twice that size, primarily for two reasons: First, they needed big boards to ride big waves like the ones in Hawaii, where surfing as we know it originated. Secondly, early surfboards were carved from wood. And it took a lot of wood to make a vehicle capable of floating its rider.

All that changed with the coming



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON
SHARING A WAVE at Holden Beach, Jon Tennant (left) rides a nine-foot "long board," while his friend Cane Faircloth prefers a six-foot "thruster."

of polyurethane foam. This easily shaped substance provided a lot more flotation (and a lot less weight) than an equal amount of wood. While early foam surfboards continued to be made at the traditional length, it wasn't long before surfers and board builders began exploring the possibilities of shorter surfboards.

For the next 20 years, typical surfboard lengths fluctuated between five and seven feet. Shorter boards allowed surfers to turn much more quickly and to ride areas of a breaking wave that were previously impossible to explore.

The old nine-footer became a museum piece, and anyone who rode one was considered to be out-of-touch. Still today, the vast major-

ity of surfers ride thrusters with an average length of about six to six-and-a-half feet.

But then a strange began to happen. Older surfers—who had given up the sport when new versions of their favorite boards disappeared from shop racks—started paddling out on their old "logs" to catch a few waves. As more of these "old timers" showed up in the water, surfboard manufacturers took notice.

Board builders started applying what they had learned in the previous two decades—about lighter foams, hydrodynamic shapes and advanced fin technology—to the old nine-footer. Almost overnight, they launched a revolution.

Other than its size, the modern long board bears little resemblance to its 1960s ancestors. Weighing about 20 pounds less, these new hybrids are much easier to turn (and carry) than the old boards. And while they will never be as maneuverable as a 6 foot, 5 inch "thruster," they do have certain advantages over short boards.

Because a long board spreads a surfer's weight over a larger surface area, it floats higher, paddles better and makes it easier to catch waves. Long boards also move more quickly across the wave face, allowing the surfer to stay farther

ahead of the white water for longer rides in smaller surf.

On the other hand, even a modern nine-foot board can't turn as quickly as a short board in small surf. So you won't see a longboarder carving as many (or as tight) turns as a short-board surfer.

Which suits most longboarders just fine. They tend to be a bit more laid back about their surfing, shrugging off the "radical" moves of the short-board set in favor of that long, fast glide only nine feet can provide.

Though most younger (and more energetic) surfers tend to prefer short boards, more and more are adding long boards to their collections—especially for use in small surf. And while some rivalry exists, longboarders and shortboarders seem increasingly understanding of each other's preference.

Take Holden Beach locals Cane Faircloth and Jon Tennant, for example. These two 18-year-olds have been surfing together for years and can be spotted at the Holden Beach Fishing Pier almost any day the surf is up (and often when it's not).

They recently returned from a 10-day surfing trip to California, where they caught waves up to eight feet high at such famous
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