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The El Rollo Rocks Oahu

Think bodysurfing is just playing in the waves? Well, check out the Pipeline Classic, where the action in the curl is off the boards

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By Bill Syken

SIAdventure

Bodysurfing may be the only sport that can trace its history to the time before life's migration from sea to dry land. After all, dolphins do it, and it seems fair to presume they didn't pick up their moves from bodysurfing videos. Yet ever since people have gotten themselves up on two feet -- and especially since those feet have been on surfboards

-- bodysurfing has been on a downhill ride. Most people think of bodysurfing as a dive into a wave from a standing position, something a hard-core bodysurfer would call "playing in the waves." Big-wave bodysurfing is far more sophisticated and dangerous, practiced by a diminishing cadre of fin-wearing devotees who hurl themselves across the faces and through the barrels of tremendous waves that crash over reefs or into shallow water. "When I tell people I bodysurf, they always say, 'Hey, so do I,'" says veteran competitor J.T. Nickelson, shaking his head. "It's like meeting a NASCAR racer and saying, 'Hey, I drive too.'"

For bodysurfing -- a sport that carries on without commercialization, or recognition, or any reward beyond the pleasure of its doing -- there is no pro circuit, but each winter since 1971 the best wave riders have congregated on Oahu's North Shore for the Pipeline Bodysurfing Classic, the sport's most prestigious event, such as it is. Mark Cunningham, a 48-year-old lifeguard lieutenant and four-time Classic champ, calls the event, at which winners receive only plaques, gift certificates and T-shirts, "a gathering of an endangered species." Certainly there is no promotional hype. "Getting sponsors for this event," says organizer Alan Lennard, "is like trying to find a prom date for your ugly sister."

The Classic was actually in jeopardy of being canceled this year, as an increasing number of surfing and bodyboarding competitions vied for Pipeline time. Because of permit delays, Lennard was only able to announce contest dates a month in advance. Despite the uncertainty, contestants this year came from as far away as Australia, Brazil and France. A few years ago Hank Harris set the standard for travel: The California native and contest regular flew 11,000 miles from Nigeria, where his work as a ship's engineer had taken him. Surfing stars have been known to show up as well: In 2002 six-time world surfing champion Kelly Slater graced the field and made it to the semifinals. Slater heaped praise on bodysurfing in his 2003 autobiography, describing the feeling as "much more intimate than riding a surfboard."



ENLARGE

Flying ahead of the curl, Stewart barreled through the finals to win his 10th Pipeline Bodysurfing Classic.

Erik Aeder

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peacefully. If waves were 18-wheelers and bodysurfers bicycles. In the days before the Classic, bodysurfers had to hang out far down the Pipeline, catching leftovers that surfers had bailed out on. Two bodysurfing videos, Primal Surf and Pure Blue (about the 2000 and 2001 Classics, respectively), feature skits with a gorilla (actually Nickelson in an ape suit) throwing rocks at surfers who, thanks to creative editing, appear to be wiping out under the barrage.

Such fantasies are cold comfort for practitioners of the original water sport, who attribute the thinning of their ranks to two 1970s inventions: the surfer's leash and the bodyboard. The leash meant surfers didn't have to learn to ride in after their lost boards; bodyboards, the much bigger culprit, gave nonsurfing water rats a simple and fun way to play in the waves.

It's ironic, then, that the man who dominates the Classic, Mike Stewart, 40, is more widely known as a bodyboarder. Stewart was the first to bodyboard the big reef breaks on the North Shore and on Maui; he is also a cinematographer, and he filmed the majority of the water action scenes for the surf film *Blue Crush* from his bodyboard. Stewart had won nine of the last 13 Classics coming into this year largely because he can execute bodyboarding moves without a bodyboard. His trademark move is the El Rollo, in which he rolls with the tube of the wave as it breaks. That would be impressive enough, but then he disappears and reappears farther down the wave, ahead of the break. It's as if he has jets in his fins.

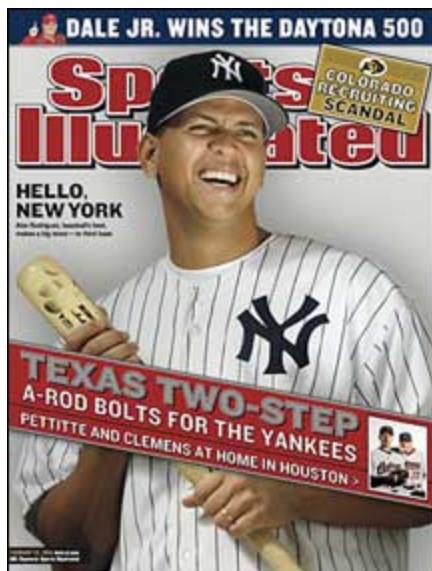
Stewart's chief rival is Cunningham, who worked the Pipeline lifeguard tower for nearly 20 years. Cunningham's riding style features none of the spins that other riders employ. He sails gracefully and powerfully across the wave, absorbing as much propulsion as the water can give. "Tricks are for kids," says Cunningham with a smile. He last won the Classic in 2000 but had finished second or third behind Stewart seven times coming into this year's competition.

This year Stewart and Cunningham started in opposite brackets in a field of 34 that included one pro surfer, Keith Malloy. Malloy stalled out in the semis, while Stewart and Cunningham made their inevitable march to the six-man final, which also included two of the field's younger competitors: 27-year-old Hawaii native James Duca and Rogerio Scheffler, 30, a former member of Brazil's national water polo team. Scheffler is the rare bodysurfer with a sponsor, albeit a frugal one; his backer, Brazilian surf gear maker South to South, purchased a discount plane ticket that took Scheffler from São Paulo to Oahu by way of Toronto.

Stewart opened the final heat with an impressive El Rollo, and despite a soaring highlight-reel ride by Cunningham, the bodyboarder collected his 10th title. Cunningham, sitting on a table in the beach park where the results were announced, said of finishing second to Stewart yet again, "It's like that movie *Groundhog Day*." When informed that it was *Groundhog Day* -- the contest took place on Feb. 2 - he let his head drop in his hands. This is not, however, a contest at which the runners-up mope. Later that night Cunningham and Stewart went with a large group of friends to North Shore haunt Haleiwa Joe's, where they dipped straws into an oversized rum cocktail called an Outside Double Up.

Even lower finishers enjoyed the day. Steve Kapela, a muscular 5'9", 247-pound Hawaiian known as Vanilla Gorilla, talked about how much fun it was for bodysurfers to have the Pipe to themselves for once. "The contest," he said, "is really just an excuse to get everybody else out of the water." For one day no surfboards or bodyboards clogged the Pipeline tube, and the wave became the exclusive province of a bunch of mammals splashing in the water. Just as it used to be.

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