

RUBBER DUCK

by WOODY WOODWORTH



A spotlight on rafting. Mike Rogers. Photo: Woody.

As I sit here in the dimly lighted bedroom of my Balboa Island dwelling place, I've been struggling with thoughts and reflections of my life, and most intently with that portion which I'm trying to share with you. My basic purpose for this article is to say something about "rafting," or as others may know it, "mat surfing."

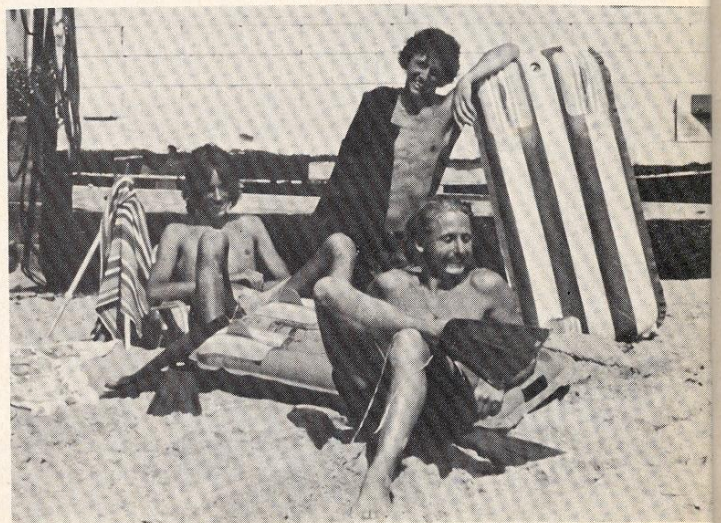
I could immediately jump right in and tell you about what can be done on rafts, how they have been evolving lately, and the responses I've been noticing concerning raft riding, but I feel you should know a little of the why behind the scene.

My story begins early in the summer of '66. I had just completed 8th grade, and was looking forward to be-

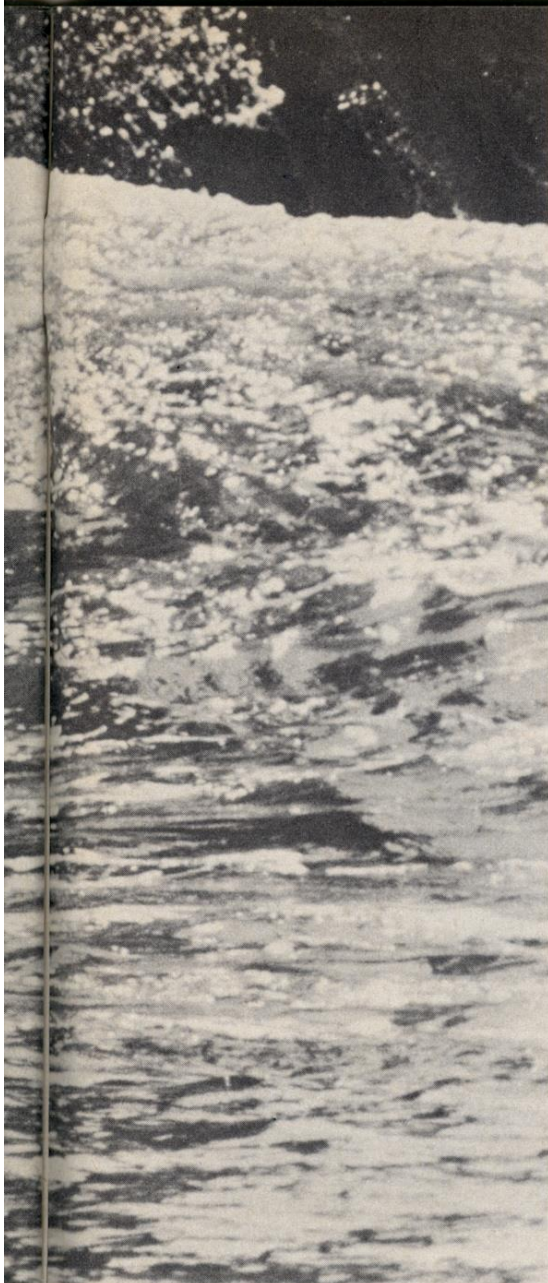


Good time for a soft edge—to hold. Photo: Lon Caruthers.

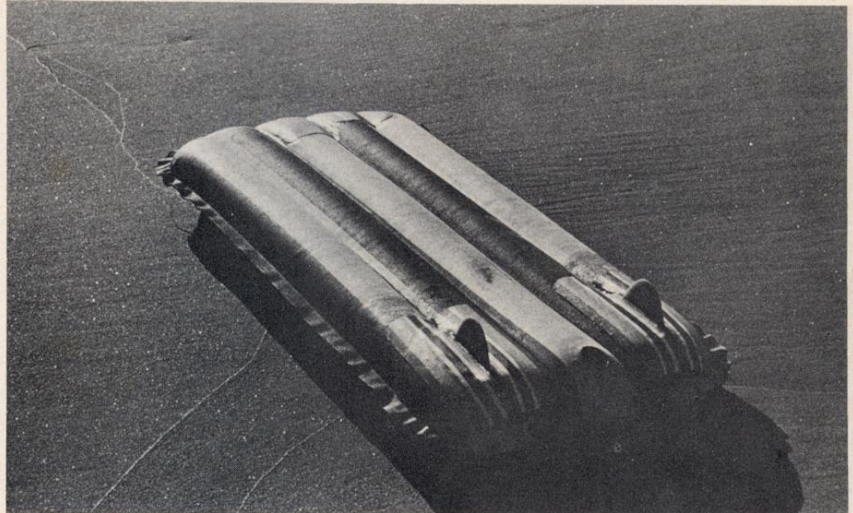
coming a surfer, for I had just moved into Newport Beach from a town 20 miles inland. It had been one heck of a painful transition from a wing-tipped shoe-wearing inlander to a most cool and casual coast kid. A lot of my new friends didn't board surf. However, as most kids of our age did, and still do who live near the ocean, hang out during the summer at their favorite local beach. Ours happened to be the southern end of Corona Del Mar State Beach, which is to this day referred to as Banzai (named most likely after the Pipeline). Now let me tell you about the wave scene here. During the summer months when the south swells are working in from Baja California, Banzai receives the lines perfectly shapeless. It's nothing but a thick, top-to-bottom, hard-breaking wall, which can get as big as eight or nine feet. It is here I learned how to ride a raft. On crowded, hot summer days you could see us taking the drops on our knees, tandem, standing or doing wipeouts and wars on the waves. However, this was



The kind of rasty, kicked-back crew that looks a bit like me an' you. Remember?



"...kind of a soft, playful toy." Photo: Woody.



A "rubber duck"...double canvas with stabilizers. Photo: Woody.

not the case on bigger days, for just down the beach a ways was the Corona Del Mar jetty. Now when it was big, all eyes were upon it, for the large south swells would come crashing over the rocks, and you'd see boards and rafters working their way shoreward for 150 yards, the distance of the jetty. It was a big thing to be an end rider (end of the jetty, naturally) in those days. If you were a board surfer, you had to be good or you wouldn't have a board for long. I think this is why the rafts entered into the picture. Back then you could buy a seaworthy raft for \$14, which was a far cry from \$140 they used to get for the old pig boards. As I understand it, the jetty had been exclusively board surfing until the raft caught on in the mid 60's. As the boards got shorter, the raft began to take command. Because the takeoff on a big wave is so critical out there, most guys on small boards can't get into the waves before they blasted out of their trunks by the explosion on the jetty. On the other hand, the rafts

being more buoyant and stable can be paddled right to the tip and make the point takeoff until the initial blast rockets them out onto the shoulder.

The old Hodgeman brand rafts performed quite well in those days. You could see their red, white and blue stripes streaking across the long tubular shorebreak all day long. However, it wasn't unusual to see the remains of several rafts strewn along the seawall and the beach that had popped on the barnacle-encrusted jetty. I remember how everytime you lost your raft, that would be the end of your surfing for the day, unless you were granted a little grace from above. It is from this factor that the raft was destined to change.

It had now been five years, and I was well into riding waves, I loved it with everything I had. In the years past, I rafted and board surfed every spot from Ocean-side to Huntington. At times I'd really be into board surfing, and then I'd get on my dusty old raft and love it so much I'd go rafting until I'd get into boards again.



"...only lacking degrees of exactness and speed." Photo: Woody.

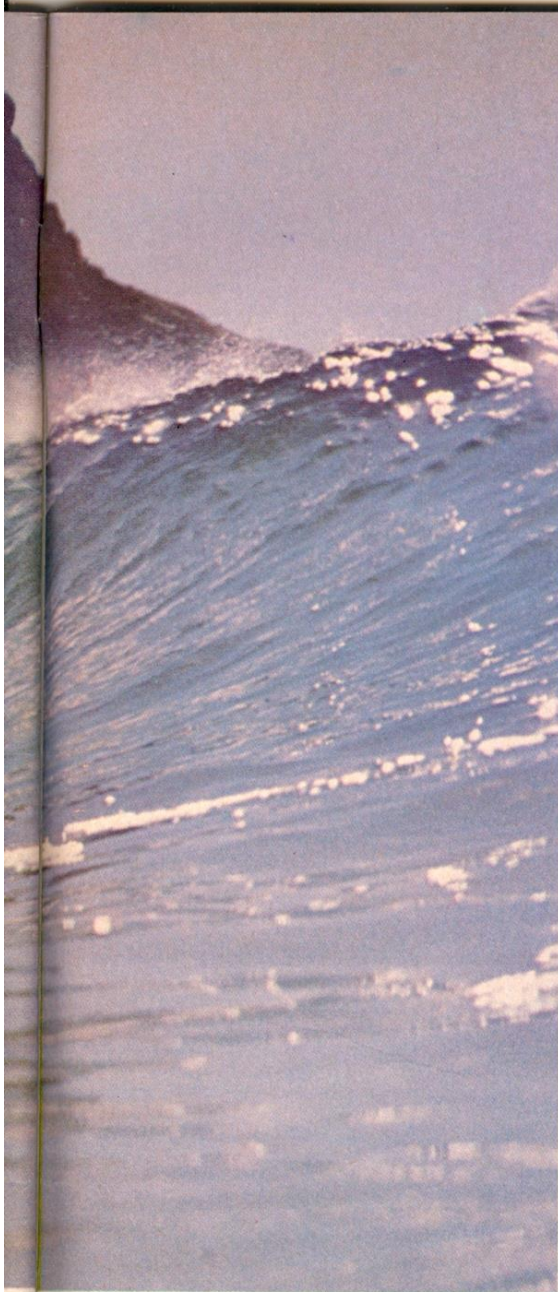
Through the years, I experienced both phases, and there were things I liked and disliked about both of them. By the time I graduated from high school in 1970, I had pretty much begun to favor rafting. I think this occurred mainly because of the crowd hassle that was really beginning to get irritating. I enjoyed so much those days of riding with a few rafting buddies at little rock-infested reefs. It was so much better than the, "Hey, Buddie, comin' down scene" at the better spots. And when the black ball went up, that was rafters heaven.

The winter of '70-'71 rolled around, and my friend and I were heading up to Santa Cruz to spend the winter conquering the Steamer Lane heavies, "raft style." We had a gas up there. We'd go out on the big north swell days, drop in on the middle peak, stalling a bit, side-slipping, doing 360's waiting for the peak to wall up into the long point effect into Cowell's Beach. We'd also flip out on the low tide second reef left which has

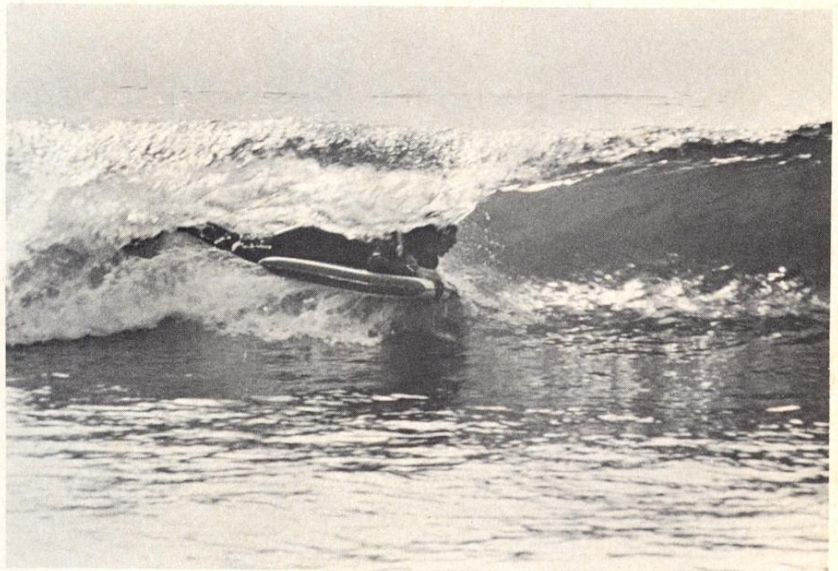
to be some of the most intense stuff I've been on as yet.

Up in Santa Cruz, working just four or five hours a day for six months, my friend Jim and myself had a lot of free time on our hands. If we weren't surfing or reading our Bibles, we were talking rafts and anticipating the summer '71" jetty riding season. Rafts would be different next season, though, for out of our Santa Cruz excursion came an idea for double-canvassed rafts, babies that would be too tough to tear and not hard enough to crack and break. Ah . . . the perfect jetty riding machine.

Back from Santa Cruz, the double-canvas raft was now a reality, but a problem had arisen. With the extra strength came more rigidity. Control became hard. Instead of the soft rounded rails kind of molding to the wave with a decent amount of control, we had a stiff round rail skittering out of control. My next thought was to put skegs on a raft, but I didn't really dig that



A "jetty" tuber. Photo: Caruthers.



Woody, body-conforming curl. Photo: Tom Contant.

idea because I had seen it before and figured, might as well get a knee board or surfboard if you're going to go that far. But I had no choice, so I decided to put on some small stabilizers so I wouldn't lose the freedom for sideslips and 360's. It worked beautifully for as long as I could keep them on. It was a real problem trying to put a stiff fin on canvas. I went through many failures which lasted for various lengths of time. Finally, John Park, a board maker in the Newport area who had been getting into rafts, came up with an idea that worked, and he and I have been improving on it ever since. After various experiments, I found that fin design doesn't have much bearing in conjunction with the thick round rails of a raft. Anymore than four inches deep just resists the freedom for fun, the effects. We talked about doing this little thing and that. But I pretty much feel, as I said earlier, you might as well get some kind of a board.

As she stands now, you've got a functional fun-type

thing that satisfies the desire to explore on waves. It can do most everything a board can do, only lacking degrees of exactness and speed. Due to the way it's constructed, it's kind of a soft and playful toy and is great in hollow beach breaks. When the black ball is flying, you're doing the same.

This last summer, I made about fifteen of these rafts for some of the local people, and they have loved them. You can see us ripping up the Orange County beaches on our brightly colored mats just about anytime when the swell's right. As far as their performance, well, I'll let the pictures say the other thousand words worth. In conclusion, I'd just like to thank the good Lord for life and this opportunity to share some of mine with you. 📷