

'Wave skiing and the Art of Composition.'

An Allegorical Manual.

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'Like echoes of the heartbeat of the absolute being, waves give expression to the divine will. They give form to the universe.'

'Unless, for instance, man's relationship with the sea and the waves was given to him - breathed into his essential consciousness by some force, some power, some other mind. Think about it: How likely is it that any conceivable evolution would have taken man down a critical path that would lead him eventually (and in our time) into the hollow pocket of a thirty foot wave....to ride in the belly of the beast....to slide through the maelstrom of a collapsing cathedral of water with the composure of a matador, with the exhilaration of a wild-haired youth, with the aplomb of a science-fiction comic book hero come to life, incarnate in his most bizarre predicament of all?'

'Waves are the imprint, the signature, not only of life, but of existence itself.'

'Perhaps it is as the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke has said, that we are 'the bees of the invisible', here to harvest with our senses the realities of the physical world around us. Why? To function as the eyes and ears (and all the senses) of a being or beings that cannot directly experience this world or this reality without us. Maybe receiving and transmitting the essential knowledge of this world - more divine than we can suspect - is the central reason for our existence.'

Note 1: Wave skiing is a hybrid of kayaking and board surfing. The skier is strapped on top of a short, bouyant planing craft, and combines the rolling and paddle skills of the kayaker with the manoeuvres of the board surfer.

Preamble:

It is possible to take up this activity with relatively little initial expense, and hardly any long term costs. It is best to begin with a second hand ski, and paddle. I would suggest obtaining advice as to the appropriate size and type of ski from a reputable dealer. A wet suit of appropriate thickness (depending upon whether you wish to ski all year round), rash shirt, helmet and shoes, are probably best purchased new, but again are not necessary during the early period of instruction. It is also necessary of course to possess transport of some kind in order to get you and your gear to the water!

In order to gain the necessary basic skills (paddle, and rolling technique in particular) it is often a good idea to practice in a controlled water area, like a swimming pool, or enclosed pond. It can also be useful to take instruction from a qualified person, who is experienced in passing on these techniques. Because of its extreme bouyancy, it is often difficult for the beginner to remain upright on the ski. This is why it is a good idea to begin on a large size board, which, although slower on the wave, provides maximum stability. Later, when one has more experience, one can graduate to faster, less stable craft.

The secret to stability on the ski lies in maintaining flexible hips. The upper body should remain as close to vertical as possible, while the hips act as a sort of universal joint, isolating the sideways movements of the ski from the upper body so that it does not lean out from the vertical, and cause overbalancing. When sensing that they are about to overbalance, the novice will usually stiffen with anxiety. This allows the sideways motion of the ski to be extrapolated up the body, and it becomes impossible to stay upright. It is therefore important to stay loose and flexible in the pelvic area. The more outrageous the conditions, the more flexible one must be. Eventually of course, this flexibility becomes second nature, and no longer needs to be consciously applied.

Learning the basic paddle strokes is also important. One quickly discovers that water is an extremely dense medium, and manipulated correctly provides as firm a support as solid ground.

Once the basic skills have been mastered in isolation (usually in a relatively short space of time) one must enter the sea, and apply them in authentic conditions.

From here on, nothing will substitute for being in the waves, each situation informing and enlightening the subsequent ones so that a growing body of experience is accumulated.

Before entering the water:

Spend time observing the conditions. If you are new to the location this may involve waiting for a complete tidal cycle in order to ascertain hazards which may be concealed when the tide is full. Even if you have visited the location on many previous occasions always spend at least ten minutes observing, as the conditions on any one day will never be exactly duplicated on any other. Failure to take time at this point may restrict your ability to fully exploit the conditions when in the water.

Each beach has its own unique topography, both above and below the water surface. This, combined with climatic and tidal conditions will affect the behaviour of the sea.

You must be adroit in identifying these. Be aware that the less experience you have in reading the signs, the less is your chance of success. It can be useful to take advice from local surfers in this matter, as they have had far more experience than you of this particular location.

Be aware of your level of skill and fitness. This can vary depending upon your current degree of experience.

Bear this in mind when considering whether or not to enter the water. To be honest with yourself regarding your abilities requires a certain degree of detachment. This is a quality for which you should continually strive.

Remember that in this kind of situation there exists a sliding scale of risk versus desire. The more you desire the experience, the greater the risk you are prepared to take. Erring on the conservative side may deprive you of contact with the ultimate wave. Erring on the liberal side may deprive you of your life. This particularly applies if you intend surfing alone.

Generally it is regarded as safer if one surfs in the company of at least one other person, so that if something unforeseen happens (broken gear, or bones, cramp etc) there is someone there to assist.

However, in fact, when one enters the water, one is in effect alone. Events happen so quickly, and in what can be such a hostile environment, that even if there are other people quite close by, it is unlikely that they will be able to assist in time.

Always carry out preventative maintenance on your equipment. At this time make a detailed check of your gear for signs of wear and tear. Never proceed if you have any doubt as to its integrity.

Always undertake a warm-up routine before entering the water. This will involve stretching and breathing exercises designed to prepare you for the extremes of physical exertion and mental concentration which are involved in this experience.

Once you have entered the water:

Proceeding to the prime wave catching position in heavy conditions requires physical strength, mental determination, technical skill, patience, guile, and luck. Apply your earlier observations carefully. If there is a rip current, use the resulting diminution in wave height to help you advance through the breakers. Areas of broken water or migrating point breaks, often form channels allowing easier progress seaward.

It is important to time your arrival at the position where the waves are actually breaking at a moment between 'sets', when they are at their smallest. You must develop an understanding of how to avoid the situation of being confronted by a wall of broken water too high for you to negotiate. If this happens it is usually best to turn shoreward and run with the wave.

As each wave front approaches, calm decisions, acted upon at the correct moment, will produce a trade-off between physical exertion and progress seaward.

There will often be areas between the shore break and the sea break, where relative calm exists. Here one can rest and re-group before re-entering the more difficult zones on either side.

Remember that withdrawing from the situation is always a viable option. It may be better to do this, rather than risk breaking your equipment, or yourself.

Resist the temptation on your journey seawards to catch an incoming swell 'on the fly'. This will more often than not lead to your losing ground, and wasting energy on a whim.

Do not be so vain, nor ignorant as to neglect the harbouring of your physical and mental resources during this initial progress seawards.

It is after all only the first preparatory stage in a larger scheme. Losing sight of the overall plan may give some short term pleasure, but it will deplete your ultimate store of energy and concentration so that you are then incapable of tackling the perfect four meter swell which at this moment may be approaching from over the horizon.

When in position beyond the sea break take a period of time to regain your composure, check your gear, and observe afresh, from your new, closer position, the nature and behaviour of the swells.

The act of catching the wave:

Initially it is often best to allow your ski to drift. In this way it will move slowly towards the zone in which the incoming swells are entering their final stage. However, winds or currents always need to be taken into account during this procedure.

The objective is to catch the swell precisely at the spot where it is about to topple, and then to turn sharply in order to ride the wall of unbroken water in front of the break.

Usually, initial momentum is gained by dropping at a steep angle down the wave face, and then cutting sharply to left or right, depending upon the direction of the break.

In the ideal scenario this allows you to ski along the wave face as it travels towards the shore staying on the unbroken face, out of reach of the broken water behind.

You should then be able to trim your ski so that it takes maximum advantage of the changing angle and height of the wave. It is also possible to perform a variety of manoeuvres on the wave, cutting back towards the break, jumping clear of the wave top and then returning (like a salmon swimming up stream), swivelling through a complete circle, etc etc.

Most of these techniques involve a combination of relative speed (dictated by the angle of travel on the wave), wave height and steepness, position on the wave face from bottom to top, and the angle of the bottom of the ski relative to the wave (controlled by the hips and buttocks of the skier).

Paddle skills usually function as a back-up device, although some of the more extreme manoeuvres require positive action with the paddle. With certain larger waves, the breaking wave flings itself out in a curve, forming a hollow barrel. Sometimes, the surfer can enter this zone and ride in the belly of the wave. This is called entering the 'green room'.

The fact of being caught by the wave:

There will often occur incidents when for a variety of reasons, (miscalculations or mistakes, or just plain bad luck) you lose control of the ski while on the face of the wave, and are claimed by the white water.

Unlike board riders, who are not firmly strapped to their craft, and are therefore in danger of being clouted by their own board while in the raging water, the wave skier is belted onto the ski.

This provides a great deal of safety, as while you are on the ski, it cannot hit you. So it is essential that you stay calm, hold your breath, retain your grip on the paddle, (a lethal item if let loose in the white water) and wait for the natural bouyancy of the ski to bring it to the surface behind the broken water, where you can then roll upright.

Depending upon the circumstances you can experience quite extreme force in some incidents. As mentioned previously, water is a dense medium, and when you are hit by a great deal of it, you may be winded, or suffer worse injury (dislocated shoulders are considered an occupational hazard by some extreme skiers). However, it is only in a genuine emergency that you should contemplate ejecting from the ski, as once you are removed from it, you are at the mercy of any later breaking waves in the set. Regaining your seat under such conditions is not only awkward, it uses up a great deal of strength, and makes you vulnerable to further destabilisation.

General:

Every situation presents with its own set of peculiar characteristics. You must be aware enough of your own capabilities to be able to best decide how to exploit your strengths and minimise your weaknesses. An error of judgement regarding your ability to deal with any particular situation could result in injury or worse.

It is interesting how quickly a situation which you seem to have totally in control can turn into a life or death struggle.

Never forget that the possibility of the arrival of a rogue wave twice as large as the average, is always present. Even in the most balmy of conditions, the sea can claim you. Therefore be constantly alert.

Always monitor the extent of your physical and mental endurance. It is unwise to extend your stay in the water beyond your resources.

Often a larger than normal wave can be seen approaching from the horizon. This usually has a common effect on everyone in the water viz: to paddle towards the wave, because one feels that because it is

larger, it will break further out. This can sometimes be true, but not always. The urge to move towards a larger than usual wave is contagious. After the first surfer moves, usually everyone follows suit. It is best however, to rationalise the situation carefully before taking action similar to other surfers. Make your decision based upon your own calculations, and trust your conclusions. Observe everything that is happening on the water, but always put these observations to your own test before acting.

Large waves are like bull elephants. You will only ride them successfully if you establish a relationship with them. Any attempt to be the 'master' will eventually cause you damage. The best riders are the ones who understand this.

It is unhelpful to conclude that a particular surfing spot has no good surf simply from a single visit. Many environments will seem unpromising on most occasions, but there is a strong likelihood that if you regularly revisit them, you will eventually arrive at a time when waves of unique quality are present. A fundamentally optimistic outlook is most likely to keep you permanently connected to the activity. Perseverance is an important quality to develop if you are to withstand the many disappointments which always accompany this type of situation.

On some windless days, and particular tidal windows, the swells arrive in even sets on a glassy sea. They may be huge, but with an unfolding point break which you just cannot fall off. These days are rare, but when they occur, you cannot resist extending your stay in the sea until lack of light, cold, or cramp force you to come in. You recognise these occasions as unusual gifts, proffered in recognition of all of the hundreds of other occasions which were marred by frustrations of all kinds. Because mostly, the seas will vary from downright tawdry, to awkwardly bumptious, to viciously unpredictable, from back breaking dumpers to fat, lazy, unformed bumps on the surface providing no face for the board to grip. The more experienced you become, the more you realise how rare are the 'perfect' moments, and how usual the less than perfect. Knowing when to engage and when to demure. When to fight and when to quit. Having the enthusiasm and determination always to try, and the knowledge that you will never catch a wave unless you are in the medium in which they occur. These are the lessons one learns and applies from this kind of experience.

Note 2: One of the most essential techniques for the wave skier is the ability to roll upright from an upturned position, the so called 'eskimo roll'.

The initial response of the novice when they first experience being trapped upside down underwater, is to attempt to lunge for the surface with the top part of their body, in an effort to get their head above the water. This in fact acts in opposition to the bouyancy of the ski, and under most conditions is impossible to achieve. When the first couple of lunges fail, the novice will panic and try even more deperately to lunge towards the surface. This in turn uses a great deal of energy, and will eventually cause the novice to either eject from the board, or drown.

In fact, the trick to rolling is to lunge, but in the opposite direction to the surface. Lunging the top half of the body downward, forces the bouyant ski upwards, out of the water in a trajectory which turns very quickly into a roll in the opposite direction to the lunge.

It is then simply a matter of bending the body as far back as possible to reduce its effect as a keel, and the ski, along with the skier, rotates easily to an upright position.

Hence in order to achieve a desired result, it is often necessary to proceed in what seems to be the opposite direction.

This entails overcoming an innate 'knee-jerk' response and applying a rationale gained through logical analysis.

To succeed in this requires not just the learning of the necessary physical actions, but also the overcoming of the fear which initiates the incorrect response. It could also be said that the applying of the correct technique removes the fear.

There is a complementary place for both intuitive responses and applied analytical observations in this experience.

Note 3: The first waveskis were relatively cumbersome heavy 'planks', hardly capable of any lateral movement across the face of the wave.

Thanks to modern materials and technology the latest models are manufactured from fibreglass, plastic or in some cases carbon fibre, and through trial and error have assumed the ultimate shape for efficient planing across the wave face.

However, although the design and materials have evolved, the experience of being at that place where the latent energy of a wave train is forced into kinetic mayhem remains as full as ever of the potential for deep learning.

At its best, wave skiing is a combination of intense aesthetic awareness, and physical action.

Such an experience has the power to administer a massive dose of well being.

'Waves: pulses of energy, echoes of power, children of the struggle between ocean and atmosphere, endless song of circulation.'

(Italicised text by Drew Kampion from 'The Book of Waves', Pub. Arpel Books, 1989.)

