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Book» The Art of Surfing: A Training Manual for the Developing and Competitive Surfer

Book» The Complete Guide to Surfing

Book» Surfing: A Beginner's Manual

Ancient Sport and Ali'i Surfers

Comfortably at home in the water, Hawaiians excelled in all ocean sports. Although they may not have invented surfing - Captain James Cook observed Tahitians canoe and body surfing in 1777, the year before he arrived in Hawai'i - and although it could have gotten its start anywhere in the Pacific, the Hawaiians earned the greatest renown as surfers. Hawaiian chants as far back as the 15th century honor surfing and mention contests, competing chiefs, surfing wagers and remarkable waves.

The technique of sliding on a wave - he`enalu - was popular with all ages and both sexes. Then, as now, surfers found it hard to resist dropping everything when the waves beckoned. Hawaiian historian Kepelino describes surfers of old:

"Expert surfers going upland to farm, if part way up perhaps they look back and see the rollers combing the beach, will leave their work ... then hurrying away home, they will pick up the board and go. All thought of work is at an end, only that of sport is left. The wife may go hungry, the children, the whole family, but the head of the house does not care. He is all for sport, that is his food."

Hawaiians' excitement peaked in `Ikuwa (November) when winter storms brought big surf to the Islands. If seas were calm, they enlisted a kahuna to pray and chant for surf. In addition to being fun for the athletes, surfing was a big sport for betting amongst the spectators. Hawaiians wagered their most important properties on contests, betting everything from pigs and poultry to canoes and their lives.

Surfing was especially popular among chiefs. They could reserve the best resources and locations for themselves by declaring a favorite beach kapu - off limits - or by ordering the best koa or wiliwili trees cut for making their boards. They also had greater leisure time to perfect their skills. Commoners, by contrast, surfed when they could, riding the waves on anything handy, even banana trunks.

Chief `Umi, a famous ali'i surfer, ruled Hawai'i island and Maui in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. A chant tells of his surfing in Hilo against the local champion Paiea. Each side placed large bets and tensions ran high. As they rode toward shore, Paiea saw he was losing so crowded `Umi, causing `Umi to scrape himself on a rock. Riding close to Paiea, `Umi then pushed his foot on Paiea's chest and rode in first. `Umi remembered the slight years later and had Paiea roasted in an imu.

Kamehameha and his favorite wife, Ka`ahumanu, both talented board surfers, also excelled at canoe surfing and lele wa`a, or canoe leaping. In lele wa`a, the surfer leapt from a canoe onto his board and rode the wave crest as the canoe slid down the back of the wave. Kauikeauoli (Kamehameha III) was also a great athlete and surfer who, along with his sister Nahienaena, often surfed the breaks at Keauhou near their birthplace on Hawai'i island.

Sites for further information

"Hawaiian Roots of Surfing History"
surfart.com/surf_history/roots.html

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