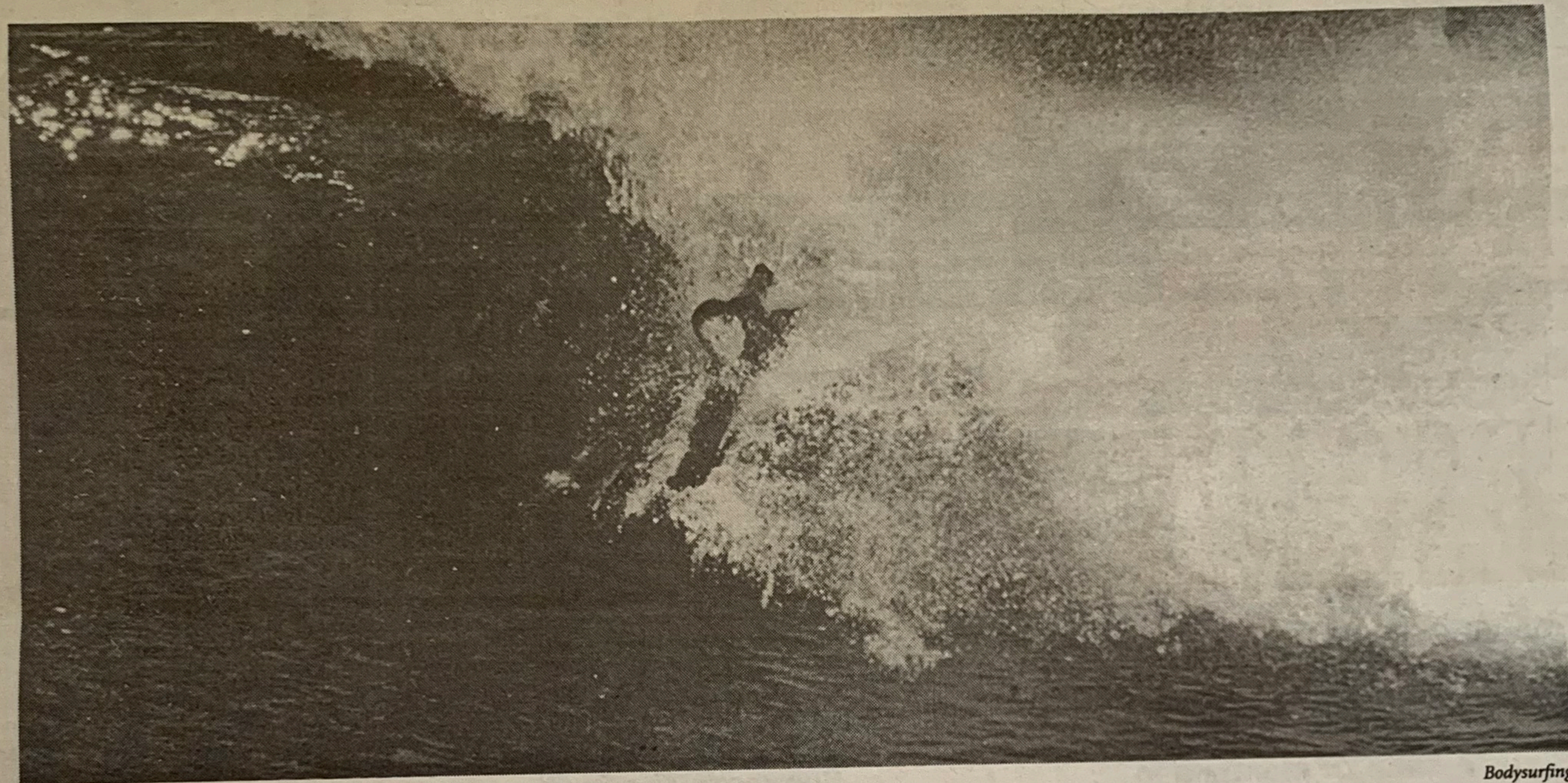


Calendar

You and Your Fins

Bodysurfing Isn't a Lifestyle



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There is no Brian Wilson for the bodysurfers of the world. They inspire neither songs, haircuts, nor fashions. Bodysurfing is not a lifestyle. It's only a sport — and a difficult one, according to Cindy Fossen, who will compete in the World Bodysurfing Championships in Oceanside this weekend.

The 45-year-old Fossen has never warmed to board-surfing. She prefers what she calls the purity of bodysurfing:

LOCAL EVENTS

"It's just you and your fins."

She grew up inland — in a suburb of L.A. — but became a strong, competitive swimmer in high school. When she was 17, she learned bodysurfing from her uncle. "He started in the 1950s, when he would go to Hawaii. One year, at the beach in Santa Monica with my cousins, I said to him, 'Gosh! What are you *doing*? I want to do that.' So he showed me how to read a wave, how to take off, how to wait for that wave to push you."

But it wasn't until she moved to Solana Beach in the 1980s that she "really got into it heavily." "My next-door neighbor became my best friend, and she and her husband bodysurfed. Up until then I hadn't used fins."

In Fossen's opinion, it is harder for a bodysurfer to catch a wave than for a board-surfer to do the same — "because the plane of the board can project you ahead of the wave more quickly" than your own swimming can. And you want to get ahead of it, so you can ride its shoulder or face. "But even if you take off late on a board, you can still get ahead before the wave closes out and crunches you. In bodysurfing, if you take off late, you'll go over the falls, as it's called. You'll just get pitched up and then down."

For bodysurfers, athletic ability isn't enough. Like gymnasts and figure skaters, they must also possess an aesthetic sense. Takeoffs, for example, are highly individualized and can be stylish or not. "Some people swim directly into the wave and do a fancy back flip. Some do a dolphin takeoff, where the peak of the wave comes and they go underwater, and get spit out onto the face of the wave. Some people take off on their backs."

You're also judged on the beauty of your exit. "Most people will do a somersault. Others extend an arm or both arms and plane on their hands. Occasionally, if you're lucky, the wave will reconnect to its inside, and take you all the way in to just a couple of inches of water."

In the measured 12 minutes between takeoff and exit, you have an opportunity to perform tricks. All waves caught are scored 1 to 10, and your top four scores are counted.

Fossen, who has competed in Oceanside for ten years, knows competitors who are coming from up the coast, Colorado, and Hawaii, as well as New Zealand and Brazil. Nearly 400 are expected to compete in several age divisions, from 12-to-17 through 65-and-over.

A majority of consistent winners are professionals and working people, not surfer girls or boys. Fossen names an obstetrician-gynecologist, a pathologist, a technician at Palomar Observatory, and a mechanic for Saturn Motors. Virginia Cartwright, a New Zealander who is favored to win the women's 40-and-over division, is earning a Ph.D. studying pigs and heart disease.

Fossen herself has a brokerage firm, which she owns with her husband, a board-surfer. They broker metallized polyester for emergency blankets and other products. "And when you have the stresses of your own business or whatever your stresses may be, you can go out and forget it all and be washed clean."

On the morning of the day we spoke, she had been preparing for the

championships in Del Mar and found that the grunions were running. "The waves were literally black with them. And I was going over the top of a wave, because it was becoming a wall, which is a wave that just comes and crashes; there's no place to go, either left or right. And underneath me came dolphins! I also saw a little seal, going for the grunions."

To those who may want to try bodysurfing, Fossen says it's essential to be an excellent swimmer. "Then get a pair of fins and be ready to take a few tumbles. You're going to suck water down until you know what you're doing. But it's so worth it. Think about how wonderful it looks when you see dolphins going through the waves, and you can do the very same thing. When you're in the tube, which is also called the green room, there's no other feeling like it in the world."

— Jeanne Schinto

24th Annual World Bodysurfing Championships
Friday, Saturday, and Sunday,
August 18, 19, and 20
Begins 6:30 a.m. each morning
Oceanside, adjacent to the pier
Free for spectators
Info: 760-435-4018 or
www.worldbodysurfing.com