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surf's up, surf's down

Tom Keer discovers the joy of rising
and falling with the waves

Sitting on a longboard just past the beach break gives every surfer some time to think. The gentle rise and fall of the swell is relaxing. For most of my life I looked at the ocean and saw the front of an approaching wave. I'd see some folks swimming or surfing, and kids skim boarding, while others fished or sun bathed. I still see the back of a wave and all the people scattered along the beach. I see people sitting at the base of the dunes, the middle of the beach, and at the waters edge. I can look for miles and miles.

Good things come to those who wait and you learn that on the longboard. A rational thinker would suggest a surfer pick each of the biggest waves for maximum output. But a surfer picks and chooses whichever wave he feels like riding. Some waves are challenging and aggressive, others are intricate, and still others are gentle.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LUKE SIMPSON



I've run into surfers for the past few decades, but I didn't really know any. I'd be the guy fishing the beach while they sat off the bars in the areas I wish I could reach. They'd always pass along some places where they saw fish and I'd pass along new bars that I'd see after a storm. My desire to take to the waves on a board started when my ten-year-old stepson, Isaac, wanted to learn to surf, and it seemed like now was the time. It was my wife Angela's idea for us to make it a father and son boarding opportunity. Had I not entered fatherhood I wouldn't have taken a lesson, but Isaac wanted to learn to surf. Wanting to surprise us, Angela bought us lessons from Matt Rivers at the

Pump House Surf Shop in Orleans.

Matt learned to surf from his dad who was one of the original Cape Cod surfers back in the 1960s. Our skilled instructor started surfing as a kid, and as with anyone who combines talent with practice, he makes it look easy enough for anyone to do.

Our lessons are held at Nauset Beach where the offshore parallel bars are long and close to shore and make easy spots for beginners. Soaking in the sunshine and tugging on our wetsuits, we grab our longboards and walk down to where the waves are symmetrical and uniform.

Matt has Isaac and I lay down on our boards on the beach to get our body positioning right. Surfing



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is about balance, and the difference between catching a wave and taking a plunge is finding that balance. The balance keeps the nose riding just above the water's edge. If you're too far forward on the board then you dig in, topple forward and wipe out. If you're paddling, it's a lot harder to catch the wave you want. Good balance on the board means you can get easy cuts and longer, smoother rides. We slowly learn how to position our bodies to paddle out past the beach break, how to paddle to catch a wave, and how to get up on our knees. After some practice, we learn how to pop up with our feet on the board as Isaac and I laugh and smile at our wobbling legs.



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Probably the biggest surprise for me is the paddling out past the beach break. Matt shows us how to get up and over oncoming waves and how to go through the tops of them. He waxes the surface for better traction, and the stickiness helps us keep from sliding around on our boards. Lying on my belly above the water, keeping my head up and doing the crawl stroke with just my arms is about as counterintuitive as anything I've ever done, but once we get used to it and got going it is easy.

For the smaller waves we skim over the top of the water, for the moderate sized ones we lean up and coast over them, and for the big ones we dive under and swim on through to the other side. In

the deeper water on the outside of the parallel bar we meet up with a grinning Matt.

Matt gets into position in the water, just beyond the breaking wave. He holds the board in place and waits for the waves to curl up behind us. He tells us when and how hard to paddle. The first few times we strain our muscles and paddle hard to get ahead of the wave and surf it all the way to shore. We shift our weight around for practice, change direction and dump off the board before shore. In a simplistic and beautiful rhythm, we paddle back out and repeat the ride again.

After a few successful runs, we move on to the next step of getting to our knees while riding in.

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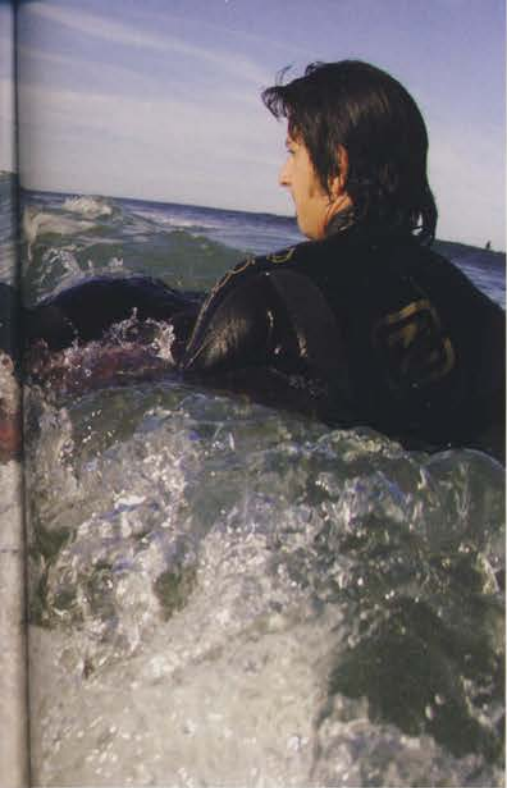


Positioning the board to get in front of the wave requires some timing, and there is a quick movement of grabbing the edge of the board and popping into position.

This step takes a little more time for me than for Isaac. I seem to be either too far forward on the board and dig the nose into the wave or I am too far back on the board and it squirts out from underneath me. During a few other times my timing is off or I neglect to paddle as fast as I should have. I lose speed and then the nose of the board rides high and I miss the wave. When I finally get the approach right I can settle into catching some more. With every additional wave I catch, I relax even more and

enjoy the rush of the water, the blues of the sky, and the accomplished feeling of learning something new. And when you relax more, everything flows better. If I wipe out, who cares? When you're at one of the best beaches on Cape Cod and it's a warm, sunny day, who can complain?

Back up on the hot sand, we tug our wetsuits off our shoulders and join a group of local surfers. One of the guys on the beach has a beautiful board made by local surfer Shawn Vecchione. Vecchione splits his time between Cape Cod and Hawaii riding waves and shaping boards. He's been shaping boards since 1999, and customizes each board to the surfer's tastes and preferences.



Surfing is a process, and a simple and natural one at that. Surfers are patient, and they accept that there isn't much that they can do in the way of improving surf.

Learning to surf with Isaac is one of the best parts of my summer, and it'll be part of our springs and falls for many years to come. 🌿

Matt Rivers at the Pump House Surf Shop

9 Cranberry Highway, Orleans
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