

Learning to Surf

Chapter 4

The Complete Surfing Guide for Coaches - Bruce "Snake" Gabrielson

Before You Go

Before you start, follow these "Golden Rules" to the letter:

- Never try to learn your first time when the waves are so challenging that the surfers in the water can't catch many good waves.
- Never get between the shore and your board while standing on the bottom.
- Never turn your board sideways to an oncoming wave.
- Always put your hands over your head when you fall off.

Learning how to stand up on a board is not an easy thing to do. In addition, simply learning to paddle out through rough breaking waves, sit on a board outside, and then paddle into a wave takes considerable balance, strength, endurance, wave knowledge, and patience. Since these techniques take time and practice to learn, and the beginner should not be expected to have success the first time out.

Usually by the second or third time out, beginners will start to acquire some balance and be able to catch and even stand up in a shorebreak wave. From this point on, the more you surf, the better you get. This section is intended to outline a basic learning approach for beginners who are somewhat athletic, but have never surfed before. Average students should be surfing on a low to intermediate level after two weeks of regular practice spending two to three hours per day. Less practice time will extend the learning time somewhat, while irregular practice will extend the learning time a great deal.

Before going to the beach, a few practice sessions on a skateboard can greatly increase your learning speed. Turning a skateboard with long, smooth maneuvers on a slightly inclined hill is very similar to turning a surfboard for the first time. The longer and flatter the skateboard, the closer to a surfboard it feels. Find a gently sloping paved hill and practice making turns by using your body as a weight rather than just twisting your body and jerking your feet. Practice at banking on a steeper hill section is also good. Smooth turns are necessary for stylish surfing.

Board Selection and First Time Out

Find an old surfboard that is big for your size and floats you well. A good starting size for a 120 lb surfer is 6'10", 7'2" for a 140 lb surfer, and 7'6"+ for a 170 and above surfer. The board should be rented or borrowed from a friend if possible. New boards should not be purchased when learning to surf.

Beginners cause a lot of wear and tear on boards, plus the bigger board may become cumbersome as the surfer gains more ability. In addition, new boards lose considerable resale value after they are dinged or shattered a few times. Once the beginner is able to catch a few waves on a regular basis, finding an acceptable design and size will become much easier.

Take the board to an uncrowded beach break to start with. Uncrowded conditions may be difficult to find, so go to the beach early or plan to stay late, when the wind dies down just before dark. Nothing is more upsetting to an experienced surfer than having a beginner paddling around in the surf line on a crowded day. It is also dangerous for the beginner because they may lose their board and have it hit someone else; or a less experienced surfer might not control their board and hit the beginner. Small breaks and shore breaks are usually a haven for beginners, so you will have a lot of company. In all cases, make sure you use your leash.

Paddle your board out to where good rolling soup can carry you towards the shore. You will probably need learn how to move you board around and paddle about in bumpy conditions, so just lay flat with your legs slightly apart straddling the board. When you paddle, place one hand in the water and stroke at a time. When you paddle for a wave, start paddling well before the wave gets to you in order to build up momentum. Also, never paddle in front of another surfer.

To turn gradually while paddling, just lean slightly to the side you want to turn towards. When you get to a small rolling wave, aim the board directly towards it, hold each rail near the nose of the board tightly and do a push up. The soup will wash between you and your board and not bounce you around as bad. Make sure you hold the board near the nose as holding on the sides may result in the board smashing against your face.

At first, walk your board as far out into the surf as you can. When you think that you are far enough out that the soup will push you towards shore, turn the board towards the beach, and let the oncoming wave carry you. If you're sitting on the board, turning it to catch the wave may be difficult at first. Just sit upright towards the tail section and use your hands and feet to paddle in the direction you want to turn. Allow plenty of time to get completely turned before the wave hits. Don't let the wave catch your board sideways, sitting on the board or standing in the water, especially when the board is between you and the wave. The picture shows me riding the soup into shore during a contest.



Taking a Soup Ride Inside

Don't try to stand up initially. Instead, as the wave carries you towards shore, try to become familiar with how the board responds to leaning forwards, backwards, and to each side. You

also need to learn how far forward you can position yourself in order to prevent the board's nose from catching into the wave. Nosing into the wave, called purling, will usually result in your quick exit from the board. Finding the correct balance point to prevent purling is absolutely essential when you take off on an outside wave.

After you have learned to catch waves easily while lying down, you are ready to try standing. When you catch the wave and your momentum builds, hold both rails and push yourself into a standing position. You should stand with one foot about 2 feet in front of the other, near the middle of the board. Put whichever foot is the most comfortable in the forward position. A "goofy" foot has the right foot forward while a "regular" foot has the left foot forward.

Lean lightly forward while keeping your knees slightly bent. The board will shoot out from under you if you lean too far backwards. To turn, lean into the rail and kick your board slightly in the direction you want to go. Holding the same side hand as your leading foot out in front of you slightly will aid in balance and control. Stay in the lower part of the wave's shoulder, frontside (facing the wave), and don't try to turn back at first (cutback). When you feel comfortable frontside, lean back on your rear foot and slowly throw your weight towards the bottom of the wave face. This will initiate a cutback.

First Outside Waves

Once riding the soup has been mastered, you are ready to try a breaking wave. Here again a small uncrowded beach break will be best. Paddle to just outside of where the waves start to break. This is called the surfline or lineup. If the wave breaks in front of you, you can get through the soup in several ways. For waves that aren't large, perform the push-up move used in the shorebreak, or a so called "duck dive" to get you through. As the wave reaches you, lean well forward and push the nose down. Keep your head against the board as well.

This procedure works best on shorter boards, but will likely still move you towards shore. Another approach when the waves are larger is to roll over when the wave hits, wrapping your arms tightly around the board. I believe this is called a "turtle". It works effectively with most size boards. Another way of getting through is to simply turn the board towards shore and remain sitting while the wave hits.

This last method works with longboards in smaller surf. Basically, stand up with a parallel stance slightly forward as the wave hits. The wave will roll over the board and through your legs. In all situations, aim for the oncoming wave before the curl while paddling out if possible.

In the early days before leashes, it was a common practice to bail off the board just before the lip broke if you couldn't make a larger wave. The board was heavy enough that you could push the board hard and its momentum would carry it over the wave's crest. The surfer would then swim under the wave and to his board before the next wave hit. This maneuver is not practical with leashes and light modern boards.

The next issue to understand is that of wave courtesy. In general, the surfer farthest back in the breaking part of the wave has ownership. Don't take off on the shoulder in front of someone. Paddling out in front and across a standing or paddling surfer is also poor manners. However, two or more individuals paddling for the same wave is acceptable with the first up usually the one who gets the wave. This can sometimes cause a problem when a longboarder paddles from outside and everyone else is waiting inside for the wave to get steep.

You're now ready to catch an outside wave. When a wave approaches, paddle to the side of the peak you wish to ride. At first, try frontside rides only. Turn your back towards the wave while looking over your shoulder and start paddling. This time angle the board slightly away from the peak and not directly towards shore. Time yourself so the wave doesn't get too steep or break before it reaches you.



Normal Frontside Ride

Paddle hard and lean forward as the wave reaches you. When you feel your momentum start to accelerate as the board catches the wave, stand up and lean into the wave's shoulder slightly. This action will start your initial turn. If the turn is executed too soon, this wave will be missed completely. Practice will help you determine the correct moment to initially stand and turn.

After standing and your initial turn, try to keep low on the wave's shoulder at first. Turn back (cutback) by leaning on your rear foot and turning the board slightly towards the breaking wave or aim towards shore if the wave breaks or is so slow that you keep outrunning it. Don't try any major maneuvers or try to catch a larger wave until you can make a few turns without falling off on smaller waves.



Traditional Cutback

Surfing on larger waves follows basically the same procedure when dropping in, except that hollowness and size will determine how soon to turn. More speed is gained by waiting until the wave reaches its crest

before turning. Very large hollow waves, like at the Pipeline in Hawaii, require the surfer to drop well down the face of the wave without losing any speed in order to prevent going "over the falls" for a bad wipeout. Over the falls occurs when both the board and surfer are carried over the wave when it breaks.



Smooth and Easy Backside

Taking off backside isn't much different than frontside except that now your weight is centered low towards the inner edge on the middle of the board. A slightly wider stance will help. Don't point the board nose high on the wave as you will have a hard time staying on the wave face if you do.

The basics of paddling into a wave, standing up, turning, and staying with the wave must be mastered before giving any attention to the more radical maneuvers possible on a surfboard. The majority of these maneuvers require the use of centripetal force to hold both surfer and board in the correct place on the wave. Learning such positioning and use of momentum takes several years of work.

Developing Style

As your technique develops, and you think your style needs a change, first be sure of which way you need to go. Look at some films of yourself on an average day and determine if you are too jerky, overly uncontrolled or radical, or simply not flashy enough. A lot of quick turns from the tail, stiff legs, too wide a stance, or swinging your arms a lot are all indications of unnatural balance and jerkiness. One turn and then a lot of cruising in a safe spot on the face is a sign of sluggishness. Never losing your board is a sign of overly conservative surfing, while losing your board nearly every wave in a difficult spot is a sign of over aggressiveness.

The fastest way to improve style is to have a special board designed for a specific purpose, and not necessarily one you will be able to sell easily once you are done with it. This is why many professionals wait until they have access to special boards before they improve dramatically. When turns need to be smoothed out and slowed down, get a large slow board, slightly wide and thick, with rounded or egg rails. A rounded diamond or rounded square tail is preferred with a good size larger fin. If more power needs to be developed, the same board could be used but with a pin tail.

The final way to improve style is with lots of practice in various conditions. Surf big Hawaiian waves in the winter, point breaks, quick reef breaks, beach breaks, and close beach breaks or shore breaks. Each break type will contribute its own characteristics to your overall style.

Contest Surfing

The subject of contests naturally arises whenever a group of accomplished surfers get together. The contest surfer is a different type of person than those who surf just for relaxation or enjoyment. It is rare to find a surfer who can compete with the best but will never enter a contest. Many surfers who say they don't enter contests because they can't relate and don't like the hassle usually aren't competitive type people or simply don't like losing.

In this section we will explore ways to improve chances to win consistently in contests. The non-competitive surfer will find the explanations on how to perform certain maneuvers useful in his everyday practices. School coaches can use it to offer suggestions to their team members. Modern day super stars might want to read it just for fun.

Strategy and Wave Judgment

While several maneuvers, which can be readily executed, will add points to the final score, wave judgment and a certain amount of contest strategy are essential in winning consistently.

When first arriving at the beach, sit down and study the way waves are breaking for several sets. Try to find the exact spot where the majority of waves seem to form. If heats will be short and waves are inconsistent, this spot will be vital in providing sufficient scoring opportunities to win.

Next, try to find where the best front side waves are breaking. It may be impossible to find this spot at a point break, but beach breaks usually have both left and right breaking sections. In the case of a point break you must ride backside, find the best takeoff location that will allow you the longest ride.

If you are close to the finals, are going one on one, or are in a heat with some very good competition, try to locate the position where the largest set waves are forming. One or two good set waves will often provide the critical difference in winning a heat.

The final spot to look for is a channel where it is easier to paddle out. In larger surf, knowing this location is absolutely essential in order to prevent being caught inside and wasting much of the heat paddling. If a wave is ridden too far in a strong side current, it is often necessary to go clear into shore and run up the beach to this channel before paddling out again.

Show Up on Time

Showing up when your heat is called, entering the water immediately when directed, and not standing up except when allowed are rules all top surfers follow. Showing up on time prevents being rushed, and ensures all directions are heard. Most surfers study the surf and the current heat or wax their boards after checking in. Conditions can change quickly, or can be different than they look from shore, so watching how surfers in the previous heat are doing can help in your wave judgment.

Entering the Water

Most places start the heat when the surfers paddle out, while some allow the surfers to paddle out before the previous heat has ended. Regardless of how the heat is controlled, don't stand up or get in anybody's way until your heat starts. When you enter the water, paddle out to the most consistent break immediately. Then, when the heat starts, catch at least three solid waves at this location. Solid means that you can get a good long ride out of the wave. Heats are usually judged on the best 5 or 6 waves, so catching three quick waves will insure a full score in the heat.

Once your scoring base has been established, move to where the larger or more "juicy" waves are forming. You might need to wait, but remember that to win (except at the professional level) you probably only need one or two of the real big ones. Try to go front side on a big wave if you can, as it will allow you the best position to try your most radical maneuvers first. Also, watch your time so you can move back to the consistent location if the heat grows too short to wait any longer for a large set.

Traditional Turns

A good turn off the bottom and up to bank off the lip is a classic for contest surfing, especially if performed backside. If frontside, try to kick your board vertically against the lip and let the wave push your board back down. If backside, try to cut back over the breaking part of the wave when you reach the lip. The higher scored turns are those that show no loss of power, and appear to attack the waves directly in a nearly fluid form.

When surfing slow but steep waves, several banks off the lip will increase speed and ensure a solid scored ride. In large fast surf, long clean turns off the bottom and smooth lines in the most critical part of the wave near the lip look good. Also, the more often the surfer can get back inside the tube, the higher the score.

Another technique in big surf is a backside carving turn from high under the lip. Your body should be almost perpendicular to the wave during the turn, so speed and momentum are necessary. The contest surfer should perfect smoothness in big surf, as this is a must for high scores.

High Scoring Maneuvers

Certain flashy maneuvers are scored very highly by contest judges. Many are difficult and can only be performed by top notch competitors, while others are fairly simple if you know how. A person cannot learn these movements without practice, but can be mastered with minimum effort by following the procedures described.



Basic Roller-Coaster

The most common and basic maneuver is the roller-coaster re- entry, with the over the lip movement much easier than the through the lip movement. This maneuver can be performed in virtually any surf conditions and on most normal size waves. It is usually accomplished as the wave starts to close out or when a section breaks in front of the surfer.

Important points to perfect are timing and speed off the turn. When the breaking section forms, increase your speed by dropping lower into the wave and then using your power to turn up into (or over) the breaking section. Aim for a point very near the curling and breaking lip so your board will cut through and over the section. This will appear to a judge as the most difficult move. If you lose speed off the turn the maneuver will be difficult to accomplish.

Water will blast off your board and carry you on top of the curl. The more vertical a turn into the wave will generate the highest score. If you plan to go across the breaking section and back into the wave, make your turn sooner and don't approach the curl as vertically. Just as the board breaks through the curl, make a hard turn towards the bottom and lean back slightly.

If performing a backside roller-coaster, try to turn your board in an arc so it ends up directly under you and facing the shore. Frontside roller-coasters are best accomplished by waiting until your board is mostly on top of the wave and then dropping back into the wave similar to a late takeoff. If shooting across a section, keep high on the wave and try to re-enter the shoulder just above the curl line.

The methods outlined work best in 3 to 6 foot surf. In small surf, several turns in succession may be necessary to generate enough speed. Roller-coasters are difficult in large surf, and best left to experts. However, the procedures are basically the same. Be careful when trying the maneuver that you don't aim too far below the lip as the board may be pushed directly back on top of you by the wave.



Large roller-Coaster (Huntington Beach Pier)

360 Degree Turns

Among the more radical maneuvers that can be performed on a wave is the 360 degree turn. There are two ways to accomplish this trick; one is fairly simple while the other is a little more difficult, even for professionals.



Start of a 360 – Releasing the Fin

For the less difficult maneuver, a short, down rail board with a small fin is commonly used. Take off on a fairly slow wave and stand towards the nose. Position your board horizontally at about the middle of the wave face, then kick the nose slightly towards the wave and lean

forward to release the fins. Next, stand as straight as you can and allow the tail to drop down to the bottom of the face.



Top of the 360 – Now Push Down on the Rear Foot. Lean Back and Enjoy

Continue your board's momentum by twisting while allowing the fin to again catch in the wave. As the wave rises to just above your knees, execute a turn towards the bottom of the wave. Don't turn very hard or your rail will dig in the wave and cause a fall.

The hardest part of this maneuver is maintaining your balance for the last critical turn. Trying this trick during a contest will definitely gain a few points unless you fall early into the initial turn.

The second way of doing this maneuver is very difficult, requiring both a very good wave and no mistakes. The author has only accomplished this twice, and never during a contest. A regular board is used in over three foot surf.

If you are planning an inside 360 degree turn, approach the lip of a frontside wave using a very strong frontside nearly vertical high turn from the bottom and let your momentum carry you to the top of the curl. To maintain all your speed and power to turn, use your rail more than your fin.

At the top, make a second quick flat turn to get you over the lip and headed back down again. Your momentum must keep you forward on the board so the second turn can use the power remaining from the first turn to allow bringing the nose down in a complete circle and back down the face. You must keep concentrating on the turn and not your position, as you will not be right side up for the second turn.

Accomplishing a 360 during a contest assures a higher than average score from the judges. The maneuver is more often tried in modern day professional contests than in the past, primarily because of wave conditions, the push towards radical contest maneuvers, and because some very good board designs exist.

Functional Tricks and Fun Tricky Tricks

Unlike longboards, tricks on shortboards don't seem to generate many extra points in modern contests, and are mostly used in long board contests or simply to have fun on a wave. While the number of points gained will depend on the individual judge, the surfer who can show a little bit more, especially in poor waves, will often get the extra credit. Just be certain that a variation of tricks are performed so the judges don't get tired of seeing the same thing. A few of the most popular tricks will be described below.

Quick little moves in an inside break like short nose rides, head dips, riding backwards, switch stance, spinners, and even hand stands on long boards used to be very popular and are still fun to try. Nose rides are harder on short boards since the board will quickly drop if the surfer moves forward. By keeping your weight well back in a fast tube, and then stretching one foot to the nose, hanging five, or an old time "cheater" five, is simple to accomplish.



Traditional "Hanging Five"



"Cheater" Five (Huntington Beach Pier)

The classic hanging ten was popular during the long board era. Special boards were made with concave in the nose to provide lift. As the board started to rise, the surfer could walk to the board's nose and put all ten toes over the front. Noseriders were built by nearly all manufacturers of the day including the Webber, Bing, Hobie, Surfboards Hawaii, and Greek. This author saw a surfer get ten toes on a nose ride lasting over 20 seconds at the Ventura Nose Riding Contest during the 1960s. I believe the surfer was David Nuuhiwa.

While getting ten toes over is nearly impossible on today's shorter boards, achieving a full nose ride for a short distance is both possible and exciting. The easiest way to get to the nose is from a backside turn. Turn the board into a slightly upward lift from the bottom of a hollow wave. The turn should be strong enough to provide plenty of speed. As the board begins to rise, walk to the nose and lean slightly back. Use short small steps. When the board slows, move quickly back to your normal position. For best results, turn back towards the bottom of the wave once you reach your normal position. Try also to master switching stance if you really want to maintain great control on the nose.



Close to Full Nose on a Shortboard

Another difficult trick in the long board era was a paddling out takeoff. John Geyer of Newport Beach used it effectively about 1967 or 68 to win his heat against Nuuhiwa at the US Championships. The move consisted of paddling into a wave, then standing up near the nose and allowing the fin to catch in the wave's face while using board momentum to swing the board around correctly. The surfer then stepped back and rode the wave directly. In more modern longboard contests surfers often step to the nose while paddling into a wave on takeoff.

Functional Switch Stance

A flat inside section of a wave is much easier to work facing the steepest part of the wave than it is going backside. Therefore, switching stance is used more often to help work a flat wave until it re-forms than for other purposes.

The quickest way to develop balance with your opposite foot forward is by using a skateboard. Practice with an opposite stance until power can be incorporated into a turn with no balance loss. Next, take off on a backside wave and, immediately after the turn, continue twisting and bring your rear foot around to the front. This same maneuver works on a frontside wave by doing it on a cutback.

To switch without turning, reverse your weight and look backwards when the board is nearly horizontal on a smooth part of the shoulder. Next take a step to get your normal stance facing towards the tail of the board. By pivoting on the balls of your feet and looking forward again, you can continue surfing with the opposite stance.

For contest surfing, try switching at the top of a roller- coaster. Usually when you get through the lip frontside and start your cutback, it is easiest to switch and make a nice power turn back into the wave.

Fin First Takeoff

This was a popular contest trick in the 1970s but is now used mostly for fun. It's a simple trick if the right equipment is used. The best board to use is short and has flat bottom with a rounded pin or round tail. A wide nose and a small fin with not much rake is also desirable. The "pig" board of the 70s was often used for this maneuver.

A slow mushy wave of any smaller size is preferred. Position yourself sitting towards the front of your board (fin reversed) close to the surfline and just to one side of an oncoming peak. As the wave reaches you, paddle down the face and slightly towards the peak. When your board catches the wave, stand up opposite stance and make a slight turn towards the peak. A slightly wider than normal stance is best.

In the same motion as your turn, aim the nose of the board down the face by following through with a normal turn. The tail of the board will move up into the wave and catch, and then start back down normally as forward momentum starts to build. Don't fall backward as the board will spin too high and the board tail will go over the falls. While this maneuver may get a point or so in a contest, it is mostly a fun thing to do when you are surfing shorebreak on a day with small surf.

Side Slipping

Releasing your rear fin and maintaining a completely controlled rail slide on the face of a steep wave is another not too difficult basic fun move. A judge might increase your score a point or so if you can perform it from a position just under the lip of a steep breaking wave. Releasing on a normal face probably won't gain much in a contest, unless you use it to set up a 360 turn.

The trick can be done on virtually any board. Longer three fin boards are a little harder to perform on. Short fins, 4 in. to 6 in., will release with very little pressure on the inside rail. However, take care not to lean into the wave as the board will slip out quickly and can result in your falling on top of it under the wave.

To start the maneuver, turn your board slightly up into the face of a frontside wave while leaning on the inside rail. The feet should be kept wider apart than usual with your rear foot (and little weight) directly over the tail fin. If the fins do not release immediately, kick your back foot out and your nose into the wave. The best method is to lean only from your waist up and keep your legs directly over the board. The reader should note that this trick is nearly impossible to control for any length of time backside and should not be attempted. One interesting backside variation is to cut back into the wave, slip a few moments while facing the wave, and then turn back out again. Turning the nose back down the wave with a cutback will cause the fin to catch again.

Board Bags for Traveling

This subject is open to a great deal of interpretation. The author always keeps his boards in individual board bags when not being used. While commercial bags are available, some surfers make their own using canvas or heavy nylon based cloth, plastic foam sheeting, and rope draw strings. About 1/4 inch thick plastic foam sheeting works best.

A board bag is simple to make. Lay the cloth you want to use over your board and cut four bag shaped pieces about one foot wider and 26 inches longer than your board. This will allow room for the fin. Make the bag longer if you might use it with a longer board someday. Also, cut two pieces of the plastic foam sheeting the same size as the other material. Surfers often choose to use a decorative outer material and a plain colored inner material. Whatever is used, the inner material must be strong enough to not tear when subjected to repeated rubbing by sharp edges.

Using about a 1/2 inch overlap, arrange the material and sheeting inside out and stitch around the bag on a heavy duty sewing machine or by hand using heavy twine or nylon thread. Don't stitch the opening of the bag or the last 5 inches near the opening. When finished, turn the bag inside out, lap the end over on itself, and stitch the closing overlap all the way around the end. Thread a flexible cotton rope through this overlap using a piece of cloths hanger as a guide and then tie knots in each end of the draw rope so they don't pull back through.

Some added touches that look neat include embroidering your name on the outer material and using hot yellow or red draw ropes. Silk screening a design is also used sometimes.