The Surfing Game

By Roger Keays, 4 September 2016



It can be easy to become complacent in the surf. Especially when there is not much swell. The waves roll by, and you sit on your board, soaking up the sun. It's relaxing. But for me, sitting out the back enjoying the serenity defeats the purpose of surfing. I need exercise, so I've come up with a few simple games to play in the surf to keep me catching waves and get the blood flowing.

Each game involves awarding yourself points (or penalising yourself) for specific actions. I keep track of it in my head, which isn't as hard as you might think. After the session I write my points down in my journal. That's quite nice, because it helps you remember your surf sessions.

Game #1: "I Can Ride Anything"

The aim of this game is to increase your wave count. Or more specifically, to catch waves that you normally wouldn't. Here is the scoring system:

- *First wave (**+1**)*. Catching waves is a habitas is not catching them. As soon as you paddle out you want to start catching waves. Once you've got your first wave, give yourself a mental point and keep surfing. This one doesn't have to go in your surf journal.
- *Late take-off(**+1**)*. These are my favourites. Late take-offs involve some degree of risk. Usually this is the sort of take-off where you're paddling out to a set, sit and spin on the spot and push onto the wave just as the white water starts to crumbleor even after the white water starts to crumble. You know what a late take-off is because you'll think to yourself "I'm too late for this one". Well, you're not!
- *Early take-off(**+1**)*. An early take-off is when you manage to get on the wave, even though you couldn't get into the pocket to take-off. This usually means you paddled your arse off, and had to put all the weight on the front of your board to get over the ledge. You don't want to be doing this every wave, but if it means you got a wave you otherwise wouldn't have, then +1!
- *Steep take-off(**+1**)*. By "steep", I really mean a wave that scares you. At least a little. Maybe because it is big, or because it sucks up a lot, so you have to angle your take-off.

- *Nasty wave(**+1**)*. If you get on a wave that doesn't want to be ridden, you get a point. These waves are like bull-riding. They're rough and bumpy. They're difficult to get onto, and when you're one them they just try to throw you off. Yee-hah, Cowboy!
- *Wipeout(**+1**)*. If you don't wipeout, it's because you're not pushing your boundaries. You get a point for wiping-out. In that way, the only way to lose is to chicken out.
- *Letting a good wave pass(**-1**)*. One of the thing that annoys me about being human is how I copy the decisions of other people, even when I don't want to. You've probably experienced the *herd effect*yourself. It can happen in the surf when a guy on your inside stops paddling for a wave, and this causes you to stop paddling. Then you find yourself thinking *actually, that wave was okay, why did I stop?*.
- *Arguing about waves(**-5**)*. There are plenty of waves for everyone. If you miss a wave, go to the back of the line, or give the next few waves up. You know who has been waiting for a wave, and who can catch them. Everyone does. The only real reason why surfers fight about waves is because *some people just like to fight*. If there are guys like this out there, your best bet is to agree with them, focus on the cool people, and keep surfing. Getting sucked into an argument to satisfy some random guy's need to argue is a fool's game.

Game #2: Surf Like a Pro

So now you're getting lots of waves, you can start riding with more intent. This game gives you points for different achievements on the wave. There is no individual scoring for different manoeuvres (e.g. snaps, cutbacks, floaters, re-entries), because it is up to the surfer to decide for himself, or herself, what moves are within their ability. However, there are a lot of penalties, because in surfing, there are a lot of ways to take yourself out of the game.

- *Pro wave (**+1**)*. The criteria here is simply that you surfed the wave to the best of your ability. You know it when it happens.
- *Long ride(**+1**)*. 50 metres qualifies as a long ride, but you still have to ride to the end of the wave to get this point. I think surfers pull off perfectly good waves to avoid a long paddle out the back. That doesn't make sense to me. You want to spend as much time on the wave as possible.
- *Close-out barrel(**+2**)*. You get two points for pulling into a barrel. Most barrels will close out, because that's how barrels form, but getting a close-out barrel is still heaps of fun, and it teaches you to tuck in and ride high on the wave.
- *Land a new manoeuvre(**+3**)*. There will always be a manoeuvre which lies just outside your skill level. Rather than trying to pull them off, I think it is better to let them happen naturally. To do this, imagine the manoeuvre and the conditions for it in your mind. When the wave presents those conditions, you will actually start to execute the manoeuvre out of 'habit', even if that habit has only been formed in your mind. +3 points for converting something you've practised in your head into real life.

- *Open barrel(**+5**)*. If you've had plenty of close-out barrels, it is only a matter of time before you start making it through them. This boils down to wave selection, speed, and a bit of luck. It'll feel like the most obvious thing when it happens.
- *Dinging your board(**-10**)*. Board dings create stresses in the fibreglass where water can get in, and they also slow you down. Dings are caused by collisions with your knee, your elbow, your head, the wave, or sometimes a tuk-tuk. Remember, your board is foam underneath that fibreglass.
- *Reef cut(**-25**)*. If you're surfing on a reef, you will want to get good at floating pretty fast. Even small reef cuts are a problem, because they fester in the water and get infected. In the tropics, the humidity stops them drying out and forming a proper scab. Eventually you'll have to stop surfing until they *heal, which can mean up to two weeks downtime.*
- *Fin cut(**-50**)*. These happen when you land badly on a board that has been flipped over. My fin cuts always seem to be worse than my reef cuts because of the force of the landing. A fin cut in your foot can easily go down to the bone. They also tend to be wider than reef cuts. Make sure your fins are blunt, and keep your feet on top of the board at all times.
- *Breaking a fin(**-50**)*. Ride, paddle, or duck-dive in shallow water and there is a good chance you'll rip out your fin box. This is worse than just snapping a fin, because it takes a lot of repair work.
- *Breaking your board(**-100**)*. Breaking your board is pretty bad luck. Usually, a heavy lip crashes flat on your board and, combined with the buoyancy pushing your board up, the total force snaps it clean in two. Like with preventing fin cuts, the best way to prevent this is to always keep your feet on the board.

Game #3: Switch vs Natural

Small surf is actually harder to ride than big surf because the waves don't have much momentum. It's also a good opportunity to play one of my favourite games: *switch vs natural*. This game is very simple:

- *Switch take-off (**+1**).*
- *Natural take-off (**-1**).*

All you have to do is get on the wave, the actual ride doesn't matter. You can still combine other points, so a steep (***+1***) switch (***+1***) close-out barrel (***+2***) would be four points =)

Surfing switch increases the range of movements that feel comfortable to you. It opens up more possibilities. After a while, it won't be a question of switch vs natural. As you sight the wave, you'll be thinking "frontside or backside?". It's really fun.

If you're planning to play *switch vs natural*, strap your leash to your unnatural side. This will remind you to do everything switch. You should be duck-diving with your unnatural knee also.As your switch surfing improves, increase the penalty for natural take-offs to ***-2*** or ***-3***.

Game #4: Unleashed

Your leash can drown you if it gets caught on the reef. It doesn't have to be deep water either. A strong current, white-water, or undertow will keep you under. When this happens, don't try to pull your leash free. That won't happen, and you'll waste precious breath. You need to tuck yourself into a ball so you can reach the velcro of your leash and release it from your ankle. You'd be surprised how hard this is, because there is so much more force acting on you when you're anchored to the reef.

I'm not sure if it is safer to surf with or without a leash, but putting that aside, going leashless is an excellent way to sharpen your surfing. You have to keep your feet on the board at all times, or you'll lose it. This means making smooth take-offs, clean exits, and not catching close-outs. Basically, it triples the cost of errors.

The rules for *Unleashed* are simple:

- *Every wave you ride cleanly (**+1**)*.
- *Every time you lose your board (**-10**)*. Adjust to your ability.

Don't play this game if the surf is really crowded, or if you're worried about your board being washed into rocks or reef. Also, don't play this with a longboard. They're too heavy to hang onto, and you'll just risk injuring someone else.

Game #5: Surf Explorer

We haven't quite finished yet. If you've incorporated all these ideas into your surfing, there is still one more to turn you into a fully developed surfer: surfing lots of different waves, and lots of different boards.

I'll admit that I have clear preferences when it comes to the waves I'm looking for, but that only came about from surfing a lot of different breaks. And even when I can't find the wave I want, I know how to ride the waves I have thanks to having rented hundreds of different boards while I travel.

Here is the scoring system.

- *Try a new setup (**+5**)*. If you're used to surfing a shortboard, try a longboard. If you're used to surfing a longboard, try a funboard. If you used to surfing a funboard, try a fish. Boards make a huge difference, and each configuration breeds unique habits. Longboarding will teach you to turn smoothly, shortboarding will teach you to ride the pocket, a fish will teach you to get traction on the wave, and so on and so on.
- *Surf a new beach break(**+15**)*. Having a few extra beach breaks to surf never hurt anyone. Surfing a few different beach breaks will help you get experience without taking on too much risk.
- *Surf a new point break(**+25**)*. Point breaks will give you a much better shoulder to surf than beach breaks. This will give you better shaped waves and longer rides. Compared to beach breaks, they usually involve more paddling, often near rocks. Tracking your position in the water is one thing that is also more difficult on point breaks.

- *Surf a new reef break(**+50**)*. Reef breaks take the most familiarity to surf safely. This is because there are weird currents around reef breaks, and you need to know where the reef starts. Once you learn the patterns they tend to be fairly consistent, and the new problem becomes complacency.

Well, that turned into quite a long blog, didn't it? I hope you picked up some ideas to incorporate into your surfing, or whatever extreme sport takes your fancy. Till next time,

Peace.

About Roger Keays



Roger Keays is an artist, an engineer, and a student of life. He has no fixed addressand has leftfootprints on 40-something different countries around the world. Roger is addicted to surfing. His other interests are music, psychology, languages, the proper use of semicolons, and finding good food.

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