

# *Surf Team Coaching*

## *Chapter 2*

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

### **The Coaching Ideal**

Most public officials, school administrators, contest surfers, students, and novice surfers are in complete disagreement as to what constitutes a great surfing coach. Many people, including some coaches, think surfing teams are mainly organized and run by their members and the coach simply serves as a figurehead. This feeling is carried to the beach and is a constant source of discontent among qualified and dedicated coaches. It is the intent of this chapter to define the qualifications and duties of a surfing coach so the reader can better appreciate all aspects of a productive surfing program.

The most important quality of a good surfing coach is that of being a current or ex-surfer. It is probably best to actively surf while coaching. This does not mean someone who may have tried it at one time or that may have surfed a couple of years in their youth, but someone who can actively participate with his team occasionally. The coach does not need to be a great surfer, just someone who can "catch an occasional wave" and is in a position to understand the surfer's lifestyle. Serious team members tend to classify the non-surfer as "establishment" types and tolerate rather than appreciate the comments or suggestions they make.

The ideal coach is, of course, a person who has contest experience and can surf as well or better than most of the team. Although rare, this coach is highly respected and looked up to by team members. Coaching tips will be appreciated more from someone with experience and will usually be seriously considered by the team. A coach with competition background can also help determine the best spots to find a wave in the break, and also can sense the mood of the judges.

Since few coaches can fit into the top-notch surfing category, the next best bet is to find someone who is an accomplished contest judge. Judging is not learned easily or quickly. Surf judges can be equated with gymnastic judges in that the judge must have seen enough competitors over a period of time to intuitively recognize each movement the competitor executes, and then award points based upon a perfect execution. This value judgement is extremely important and difficult to master. Such evaluations often require many hours of practice with an established judge to perfect.

Every coach must have a thorough knowledge of both contest rules and judging. Just like any other sport, the coach must be able to determine how his team members stack up against each other and against their opposition. A coach can easily destroy his chance to ever have a winning team simply because of the inability to recognize who the team winners are. One of the biggest mistakes a coach can make is base judgements strictly on what other members of the team say.

Two other skills are important to a coach, a working knowledge of surfboard design and a basic understanding of how surfboards are made. Understanding board design will allow the coach to recommend specific board types for various surf conditions. An understanding of board construction will help the coach be better received by his team.

## **Problems in Coaching**

One of the biggest unique problems facing a surfing coach is the individuality of surfers. Surfing does not lend itself easily to organization as a team sport because most surfers excel and thrive only on the basis of individual performance and peer recognition by other surfers. Team organization may only add another avenue for expression for surfing, not the primary focus for achievement. Tennis programs sometimes suffer the same problem. Team surfing may never become popular with the better surfers, but will simply serve as a method of deciding whose school has the best individuals on a given day. With top competitors, the major emphasis may be "I" can beat them not "we" can beat them.

Many school officials and coaches might disagree with the "I vs. we" perspective. This author, as with many older surfers who have been serious formal competitors and attained a high degree of excellence when younger, feel the "I" is a more realistic view. Unfortunately, most coaches and school officials (as is the case with any other sport) are only weekend surfers at best, and haven't experienced the I vs. we relationship of younger surfers.

Often school administrators' feet that the team (we) framework is the only way to run a surfing program or any other athletic program. Only a very skillful and knowledgeable coach can get his team to think in terms of 'we' instead of "I" while still placating the school administration.

## **Installing Team Spirit**

The problem still remains of how to instill team spirit in a group of individuals who participate in a very individualistic sport. Many volumes have been written about coaching on-campus sports, but only a little about non-traditional off-campus sports. Herein lies the key to the "I vs. we" relationship. To get your surfers to think in terms of "we", a coach must work with his team as an off-campus group. Traditional school administrators may frown upon this procedure, but directly coaching in the environment where it exists will apply direction where it counts.

Coaching in an off campus environment is not as hard as it sounds. The majority of surfers at a particular school have one local spot they frequent most of the time. All a coach needs to do is start surfing this spot consistently and he will suddenly transform his team members' daily activity into actual team workouts. Once the coach has established himself as a member of this off campus group. It is very easy to direct team members towards "we" rather than "I" type activities.

Very good surfers really don't need the school social structure other school athletes have developed, and may even shun this group if possible. These individuals might also go surf a good break with a friend rather than spend a wasted day at a contest. However, to spend a day with

your surf buddies' trying to beat some other school is an entirely different matter. Successful coaches can create this framework and social structure within their team.

## **Avoiding Ego Conflicts**

It is interesting to note how many teams are organized and run by the best surfer or a very good upper classmen on the team. In this situation, the team operates as a club, with the coach simply acting as an advisor. While sometimes successful, teams coached as clubs have a very hard time being consistent because of the constant search for a new leadership replacement each year,

Personal ego conflicts between better surfers are a real problem. Strong resentment between local surfers, often representing competing board manufacturers, can lead to one group or another dropping out of the program. A strong coach who can keep individuals focused on both their own abilities and the overall level of the team will fare much better than the coach who gives individual surfers a chance to build on their own conflicts.

One method to avoid tense situations is to constantly break up the best surfers into balanced heats in any order for contests. Also, keep the exact order of the top surfers on the ladder private as much as possible, and change the top two or three every so often for a particular event. In this way no one surfer can dominate the team, even though it might be obvious to all who the best is. What you want to establish is natural leadership, not positional leadership on the team.

## **Rigidity and Scheduling**

Now we come to one of the most difficult concepts for a surfing coach to understand that of rigidity. Surfing is very unique, and a surf coach will have a difficult time following a rigid framework of rules and procedures like other athletic teams. Surfers for the most part don't like rules placed on them by what they consider the adult "system". Such rules are considered part of the establishment, and will normally be resisted as much as possible.

Going back to the off-campus concept, successful coaches must not follow strict regulations concerning workouts or meetings, and should remain for the most part separate from the mainstream athletic crowd within their organization. Coaches who are regular surfers should find this easy, as this is probably their normal lifestyle anyway.

By now, the reader may be wondering how to develop ideals in team members which form the very purpose of athletic competition while still catering to the individualism and non-rigid personal framework of the surfers themselves. Ideally, a coach has as his function to instill sportsmanship, create the drive to achieve (and win), and to instill fellowship and group interaction among his charges. By offering the avenue of team competition, promoting a visible person for team members to identify with (himself or a good upper classman), and by creating the atmosphere for close association and friendship, a successful coach can accomplish these goals.

Notice that there was no reference to a rigid set of rules to instill authority recognition among team members, or to the creation of "working" friendships rather than "natural leader" type

friendships. Although instructional and a major benefit of many other athletic programs, these rules are best taught indirectly by a coach within the surfing environment.

## **Working Program for Surf Teams**

In this section we shall explore a simple program for surf team development. This program is designed for new coaches or experienced people looking for new ideas. Following the procedures outlined will definitely improve the quality of surfing your team exhibits. Surfing instructors in an organized academic teaching program can also use some of these ideas and drills. It should be noted that this program is oriented towards the knowledgeable surfer and those with little contest or judging experience must modify the program accordingly.

To begin with, set up a schedule of regular meetings with your team. Try to make these meetings interesting by offering slides, movies, or VCRs of meets or general surfing as a draw. Bringing in someone with experience as a shaper, shop owner, or even a widely recognized surfer to speak for a few minutes also works well. These meetings are especially useful after a meet to bring everyone together regardless of the meet outcome.

After the presentation or talk, discuss some highlights of the recent meet, or discuss plans for the next activity. It is best to leave individual discussions of areas needing improvement to one-on-one with the surfer involved. These general meetings create a sense of equal involvement by everyone, especially those who might not be advanced enough to make the varsity squad.

Allow the team a chance to voice its feelings about any matter at the meeting is their meeting, not necessarily the coach's. The coach should take notes, and also offer the opportunity at least once during the season for a written evaluation by the team. This strategy works very well in helping the coach form his personal policies for the following season.

If the meeting is before or at the beginning of the season, plan a general team tryout for everyone interested. This should be done after a few meetings have already been held and information has gotten out to everyone interested. A good idea is to try and schedule at least four team tryouts, two before the season, and two more early into the season. Remember that surfing is very much an individual as well as team sport. Not every good surfer in your school may want to tryout for the team initially. Also, some of those who join may decide that team competition is too establishment oriented or too much trouble and quit. Give those who aren't initially interested, or those who might have had a good wave come through during the tryout an opportunity to make the varsity team. Simply going with what you have like in other sports doesn't work as well with surfers.

During the actual school tryout, the coach should judge all surfers himself. Keep the heats to three surfers at one time if possible. There are two reasons for judging by the coach. First, all surfers will be evaluated equally. The possibility that someone might be neglected just because there were several super stars in the heat will be reduced. Second, scoring is a judgement call with even regular contest judges suffering criticism of their scores. Avoid looking good or bad by keeping your evaluations private.

The final ranking after your first tryout should be based on the total score of the top three waves using a one to twenty scale. A one to twenty scale allows plenty of flexibility if ten is used as an average wave. Use the totals as the basis to form your initial team ladder.

A second tryout should be held one or two weeks after the first tryout. This time some seeding should be used based on the initial ladder placement. This time some seeding should be used. Set up heats using at least three people in order from your ladder and one or two new people in each heat. Again, the coach should serve as the only judge with surfers allowed ample time to catch several waves. This time surfers can move up on the ladder by defeating others positioned near themselves on the ladder, and new people will also have a chance to establish themselves in direct competition.

A good idea is to hold a second round heat at the second tryout so the approximate starting order for first competitions can sort itself out. The coach should make comments on his score sheets and these should be discussed at the next regular team meeting. This will help the surfer in his own development as well as providing the coach with a direction for future work.

Once the ladder is formed, the team has been evaluated, and cuts have been made, an initial team workout should be held. Run the workout the same as a meet, with team members in formal one on one competition against each other. Only evaluate two surfers at a time, insisting that they stay near each other during the evaluation. By closely evaluating each surfer, the absolute order of the team should emerge.

### **First Meet of the Season**

After the first workout is concluded, the team is ready for its first meet. Although the meet may be publicized throughout the school and elsewhere, it is a good idea to call each team member the night before to make sure they have transportation and reminding them where and when. Surfers are a not the most on time people around, so even with reminders, a coach might not have his entire team make it to the beach when expected.

Different organizations hold different types of competitions. Sometimes schools compete one on one, while other time's preliminaries, semis and a final of six is held. The following example would be for a competition where only straight scoring heats are held.

If the competition team has twelve surfers competing in four heats, seat team members according to the following chart. An exception would be if you have a surfer who can beat anyone on a given day, but also has plenty of terrible days. He should be seated fourth.

Heat	Ladder Standing
Ht #1	4, 5, 6
Ht #2	3, 7, 9
Ht #3	2, 8, 10
Ht #4	1, 11, 12

Your top surfer in this type of meet can usually carry two others and your second on the ladder may also be able to carry the other team members in his heat. Try to put #4-6 in the same heat as your opponents #1 surfer. This puts your off and on surfer in the best heat to score a decisive win and also only allows the opposing team's best surfer to carry his team members against your potentially weakest heat.

After the meet has started, a good coach must be constantly aware of exactly what is going on in the contest. This means making sure judges are paying attention and not missing waves, contest rules are not being violated, and mistakes are not made by score keepers. Knowing all the rules is absolutely essential in order to successfully coach a team. If a team manager is available, have the manager check each score sheet for mistakes. Also, the coach should be in a position to signal his team members if other areas of the break look more productive than where the surfer is located.

## **Training During the Season**

As the season evolves, several team workouts plus additional tryouts should be held. A good idea is to hold workouts both after school and on occasional weekend mornings. Daily workouts are not necessary due to the individuality of the sport, but they are necessary for unity and so comparisons can be made.

A trip together to an out of the area break is a good way to build team unity and spirit. A surf trip to a distant, fabled surf spot is very good for moral I liked to take the team on a few overnight or weekend trips. This author's greatest team member, an eventual US champion, was along on every trip taken for several years despite the notoriety he received after turning professional. He went not only because of the surf, but because he enjoyed the fellowship generated by these functions. Several other of the original Huntington Beach High School surfers who turned professional went on these trips, and every team member who did still remembers them. If you find your team's moral is sagging, try a weekend at a good break. The boost they get will be amazing.

Another idea is to plan a few after school workouts on skateboards. The skateboard workout should be restricted to turning and switching stance type maneuvers on a gradually sloping hill only. This workout will help develop style and turning ability. Holding a skateboard race similar to a giant slalom in skiing will help the power aspect of a surfer's individual style. Longer and heavier type skateboards, just like surfboards, are best suited for this type of training.

By following a program similar to the one outlined here, a coach will get the most out of his team, and also get his surfers into condition for the end of the season competitions. Since championship competition requires the surfer to be physically as well as emotionally ready, the coach should plan an individual talk with each team member late in the season and then right before he competes. The late season talk should let the person know how he has developed during the season and how he has contributed to the teams' success. Also the coach should ask if there are any personal problems that he can help with.

The final pep talk before the championship meet is important. First, get your team to sit down on the beach together and as a group evaluate the break. Find the best right and left break, where the waves are most consistent, and where the best takeoff spot is. Discuss any special rules that will be followed, and also let team members know what will be expected of them socially during and after the meet.

Before his or her heat goes out, the coach should sit down with each surfer one last time. If the breaks have changed since the meet started, go over where the best spot suited to his style is located. Let him know who he must beat, what the judges are scoring the highest for, and above all, express your confidence in his ability to get the job done.

One last point to mention is social functions. Most surfers are "down home" people who don't need the big excitement of other sports. This is not meant to imply surfers aren't party animals, only that they seem to prefer small parties or even dinners occasionally. Plan a social function for the end of the season outside what the school has planned. This will help to build a lasting bond among teammates.

## **Contest Organization**

Contests may be simple or elaborate depending on how far the organization wishes to go. A small contest may only require four or five colored T-shirts, a flag, a couple of judges, and some scoring sheets. Large events often require a P.A. system, air horns, a lifeguard boat, five to seven judges with recorders, tabulators and scorekeepers, a beach coordinator, heat judge, and contest director. This chapter will define the duties and procedures to be followed in organizing surfing events.

Small, informal contests can be held easily with the least amount of preparation, equipment, and setup on the beach. This contest type is usually an inter-club or inter-school activity where minimal or no entry fee is required, and very minimal if any awards are given. Surfing team tryouts fall under this category where the shop owner, school coach, or even a couple of team members may judge the individual entrants.

Three judges are the most desirable for small contests wherever possible. If an informal meet between two groups with limited budgets, one judge from each group will work well. Judges should sit close to the water and away from the scoring table and scorekeeper. The judges also must not sit next to each other to prevent communications between them. Spectators or contestants must not be allowed to sit with or talk to the judges during the meet. Recorders and chairs are not necessary, but will add a great deal of comfort and convenience for those judging. Recorders also reduce the possibility of a judge missing a wave.

Bright colored vests or colored T-shirts are usually necessary to distinguish individual surfers. Nylon vests are the lightest. A good number is to use twelve vests of six different colors. Black should not be used, as it is sometimes difficult to distinguish when surfers with wetsuits are in the water.

Vests that tie in front are irritating to the surfer when paddling and should be avoided. Velcro connecting fronts are great but wear out and need replacing on a regular basis. Snap fronts are also good. Try not to use vests too large for your surfers, as they are annoying if bulky and can get in the way when paddling for a wave.

If visibility is hazy and competitors are more than 50 yards out from shore, or when conditions are crowded by non- contestants, a spotter should be used to call out colors to the judges. Spotters should sit close enough to the judges to be heard, or they should use a PA. Field glasses or telephoto lenses are used when competitors become very difficult to see. When the surf break is well off shore, such as some breaks in Hawaii, field glasses may also be necessary for the judges. Sometimes spotters will sit on a stand or small stepladder so they will have a better view of the surfline.

A good air horn is a must when surfers are some distance from shore on hazy days. If surfing close to shore, a red or green flag works equally well. Surfers may not hear the horn if paddling through a wave or way outside when it sounds, but they can usually see a flag. Two flags, red and green, are the most desirable.

A watch or cooking timer is used to time each heat. Cooking timers are the best for timekeeping since they are easily reset and will make an audible sound when the heat time ends. They can be heard by both spectators and officials, as well as being seen from a distance.

A scorekeeper to tabulate judging sheets and heat results is necessary for all contests. If no one is available, sometimes the judges can add up their own scores and turn in completed sheets to the contest director. The director will then combine all score sheets and determine the final results. This approach is time consuming and can lead to tabulation mistakes, especially when spectators or contestants are looking over his shoulder.

The best approach is to use a single tabulator to determine totals and final results. Tabulators should sit at the scoring table and also be responsible for keeping heat times. Two tabulators are necessary if judges as well as surfers must be evaluated. For small meets, tabulators can also be responsible for collecting score sheets.

## **Contest Director**

Meet directors are responsible for coordination of the entire surfing event. A director must make sure enough judges show up on time, and that all the scorers, timekeepers, etc. are available when needed. The director must also set up the heats, allow for breaks or provide relief workers, bring and set up all equipment such as flags, horns, and PA to be used, and send out and receive entry forms. For small contests, meet directors usually function as beach coordinators, but another person should fill this job for larger events.

Perhaps the most important responsibility a meet director has during an event is that of making the final decision on any problems which develop. Mistakes in tabulation, heat extension due to poor surf or judges missing waves are the most common cause of complaint. All the people will

never be satisfied after any decision, so a director must be prepared for arguments or discontent to develop during every meet. A trend at contest has been for a contestant to argue with the meet director until the director gives in. This is a dangerous precedent for a director to set, and may result in the eventual degradation of any contest that director tries to run in the future.

Because of the meet directors unique position, he should not only be very familiar with rules and regulations governing contests, but also be a known and respected member of the local surfing community. This last statement may be questioned, but the actual contest competitors will agree more with a decision reached by a respected surfing official than a decision by a nonsurfing or unknown director. Meet directors are usually people who have worked at many contest over an extended period of time and understand all aspects of contest procedure.

The best way to become a director is to judge and work as a beach coordinator until the inner working of contest organization are understood. Then help an experienced director set up heats and schedules for a few meets. Never try to run a meet without having had adequate experience as hard feelings almost always develop.

## **Beach Coordinator**

The primary responsibilities of the beach coordinator are to assemble contestants for each heat, issue jerseys, and give heat instructions. The coordinator should be aware of how much time is left for the heat in the water so the next heat can start on time. Beach coordinators also keep track of who has each jersey so none are lost or misplaced.

As soon as a heat has been sent out, the beach coordinator should start issuing jerseys and calling for the next heat. Any alternates report to the coordinator before he issues heat instructions. This allows corrections to the master heat sheets for each alternate issued a jersey.

Heat instructions should include heat length, number of waves to be judged (if not the standard number), scoring system to be used by judges, where the surfing area is, and penalties which might be applied for various infractions.