

## *Contest Judging*

### **Chapter 3**

*The Complete Surfing Guide for Coaches – Bruce “Snake” Gabrielson*

#### **Contest Judging**

Effective coaching requires a basic understanding of surf contests and the criteria by which contestants are judged. The contest judge is the person who decides which surfer performs the closest to the established judging criteria in any heat. Not only do judges require the experience and knowledge to allow them to make objective calls, but coaches need this same experience and knowledge base to make recommendations that can be followed for higher scores by those they coach.

#### **Judging Criteria**

This section covers some very general criteria. The formal international rules currently in place for contest judging are addressed in a later section, plus the ASP rulebook is included as a link to this chapter. A few simple-judging procedures to observe will save much dissatisfaction from contestants at a meet. The most important of these is not to miss any wave ridden or parts of rides. This one problem is the most common complaint by competitors and is usually the cause of judging arguments. Under no circumstances should a contestant or spectator speak with a judge or in any way cause a distraction that could result in a missed ride. Contest officials should only be spoken to during lulls when no surfers are taking off. Spotters or recorders should be the only ones talking to judges in larger or very consistent surf. The judge should also never talk to another judge about a ride until after the score has been recorded.

The score should not be awarded until the contestant has completely finished the ride. Never give a score for just the outside ride, and then watch someone else outside while the other contestant gets a good ride on the re-formed shore break inside. This might require watching two rides simultaneously by the judge, but is still preferable to missing part of a ride where points could accumulate.

It's difficult to judge when multiple surfers are riding waves at the same time in a large heat. This situation can occur during a set when two or three waves roll through in quick succession. If the waves are breaking outside and stay formed clear into the shore break, chances are good that most contestants in the heat will take off during the set.

The best procedure in consistent conditions is to keep the heats small. The international format of four surfers works well to prevent missing wave judgment criteria. If you must judge, let your eyes follow each surfer, moving back and forth in quick succession, trying not to miss when important maneuvers are performed. Yell out the color and score to your recorder immediately when a ride is completed while still following the remaining surfers. Odds are good that no more than one or two of the rides in progress will be exceptional and earn much higher than average scores.

## **Judging Scale**

A judging scale of 1 to 10 points, with 1/10 point or 2/10 point increments, is currently used for surf contests. Generally, the 1/10th point increment system is used in major events as it allows maximum flexibility for evaluating individual performances. This wide flexibility is necessary to prevent ties, especially when conditions are poor. The judge's first responsibility after deciding on the scoring system is determining the score for the average ride on an average contest wave. This could vary from 4 points in poor conditions to 6 points in excellent conditions. In large surf the average wave could be 8 points.

For this discussion we will define an average ride as taking off on a normal set wave, turning off the face, maybe performing one not too radical over the lip re-entry, and then riding the wave until it starts to die out with only a few more non-critical or non- exceptional turns. The turns are smooth, well controlled, but not especially powerful. Exhibiting exceptional powerful turns off the bottom and nearly vertical attacks off the lip are not considered normal turns.

Once the average score for an average wave has been established, the point spread can be determined for the level of performance on better or worse than average waves. As an example, suppose the average will score a 6.5. Now an excellent surfer takes off on a poor wave and does very well, getting everything possible out of the wave, but performing no exceptional maneuvers. This surfer should not score higher than the surfer who catches the largest set wave and performs a slightly better than average job. In other words, any variance from the average by either the contestant or the wave should be added or subtracted accordingly.

On the theoretical average 6.5 point wave, a good breakdown would be to score plus or minus up to 1 point for the wave selection, and up to plus or minus 2 points for the "averageness" of the ride. This means that the surfer who caught the best wave of the contest and did an excellent job on a 6.5-point day should still not be scored higher than 9.5 points.

The surfer who takes off on a closed out wall and then gets tubed before he or she is bombed on a very short ride should not get more than 6 to 7 points. If the surfer managed a turn before being bombed, he or she still might be scored the same as an average ride. Sometimes judges get carried away by the crowd and may score more than deserved on a little shorebreak tube that closes out. A shorebreak should almost never be scored higher than an average wave on an outside set.

## **Things to Look For When Judging**

Judgment is in reality an opinion based on considering conditions, ability of contestants, and experience. Finer techniques displayed when surfing are easily spotted once the judge knows what to look for, but placing a figure of merit on these techniques is not so simple. This section will present a brief summary of important areas to consider when judging an event. It is intended for non-surfing administrators, coaches who need to understand what they are watching, team members new to judging, and even as a refresher for judges. (*We hope that other judges who read this will have opinions they can offer to help us upgrade this section in the future.*)

## **Wave Judgment**

The right wave choice is essential for maximum performance. Position also plays an important role. Look for the surfer who takes off on the largest MAKEABLE wave. If a good set rolls in, the surfer who paddles over several good waves in order to position him or her near the peak of

the largest wave will have the greatest chance for a maximum score. Slightly higher scores can be given for taking off behind the peak and making the wave, especially when the contestant must drive under (or over) the lip at maximum speed in order to gain a position high on the shoulder for the next maneuver.

### **Takeoff and Turns**

Paddling into the wave and the initial turn are sometimes over evaluated by judges. The way a wave is entered by the contestant should fit the type of surfing conditions. A late takeoff from way back on a steep wall necessitates paddling towards the shoulder with only a slight turn towards the top of the wave. The reason for the late takeoff should be to obtain maximum speed and most critical positioning, not just because it was the only way to make the wave.

The surfer who drops clear to the bottom on a fast wave, makes a nice powerful turn, comes up to the lip once, and then straightens out in the soup or kicks out over the top should not be scored nearly as high as the surfer who turns at the top on a similar wave, drives across the face, and then attacks through or over the curl, and then continuously works the wave until it dies out.

In slow, mushy waves, initial turns after takeoff are very critical. The loss of momentum on a bottom turn will cause the contestant to stall slightly and allow the wave to catch up. Too strong a turn off the rail causes the contestant to go over the top or too high for the board's fins to hold effectively. The best scores are given for the surfer who can drop in well under the peak and execute a powerful turn into a critical wave position with no loss of speed.

In slightly slower surf, deep turns into the peak are difficult and should score higher. Under these conditions, watch for the surfer who drops clear to the bottom behind the peak and then moves under the peak with a powerful turn off the board's rail to a high enough position on the opposite side to allow for the most radical maneuvers. No speed should be lost from the turn. If such a turn can be executed on a large fast wave, and the maneuver is successful, the surfer should be able to achieve a solid score for the ride.



You have a real problem when judging in nearly flat or small wave conditions. In many contests, there will be times when the surf simply doesn't break or when the tide gets so high that the waves start to roll in without breaking. When this situation happens, the real challenge is often simply catching enough waves or pumping on the wave enough to get a long ride. If the waves aren't breaking, you must still judge each ride using a point spread wide enough to allow winners to be selected. This isn't a problem in professional

contests with delay for quality surf but it happens often in amateur contests. Don't simply give a 2 for a poor ride simply because the waves are bad. It's best to score 1 for a standup and immediate fall off and then go higher for at least a turn while falling. Whatever you score, make sure you stay away from creating ties among heat members.

### **Evaluating Turns**

The surfer who can execute the most maneuvers on the face or curl of the wave will naturally have the opportunity to score the most points. Judges should use higher scoring for surfers who ride the steepest part of the wave while making smooth but radical cutbacks and maneuvers. Look at the surfer's angle relative to the wave. If the body position can get nearly horizontal relative to the bottom of the wave then a good score for turning is indicated. To



achieve such a position, the surfer must have executed a powerful enough turn that centripetal force will keep his or her body weight against the board while in an unusual position.

Another area to watch is the bottom on the wave where a cutback is initiated, and how far back into the curl the surfer can get before turning out to the shoulder again. By turning at the most critical location, the most force can be generated, and the most speed can be achieved. Remember that average turns off the bottom should receive only average points.

Extra points should be given for cutbacks on steeper waves when executed close to the lip. After the cutback, the contestant should try to drive right into the curl before turning back out into the face again. On slower waves, speed is needed; so several powerful turns back and forth close to the curl are needed to maximize points. Turns should be executed while in the steepest area of the face. Cutbacks on mushy waves should carry the surfer over the breaking crest and back off the bottom for maximum points.

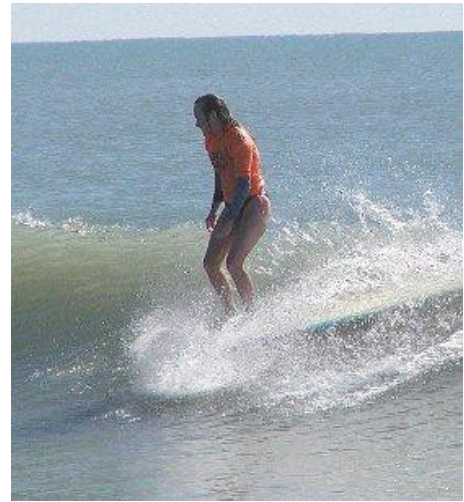
### **Evaluating Maneuvers That Give "A Little Extra"**

One or some additional 1/10th points should always be given to the surfer who tries and completes something a little extra on the wave. The same trick over and over, or several different tricks on one wave shouldn't generate more than a couple of points, but can have the effect of becoming "old" with the judges if used over and over. Normally, a short tube or an over the lip roller coaster will add a



couple of points, while an occasional controlled fin slip, switch stance, spinner, etc. can gain a point. A 360-degree turn (helicopter on longboards) is much more difficult and can gain two or more points depending on wave conditions. For longboard judging, nose riding with one foot over, or better yet with both feet, or 10 toes over, obviously draw high scores from judges.

In small shore break conditions, with no outside waves available, tricks can be given the highest consideration for judgment. In such conditions, combining two maneuvers, such as switching stance at the top of a roller coaster wave or side slipping inside the tube are good for 1.5 to as many as 2.5 points. Long rides inside the tube or large backside roller coasters over the lip can earn three extra points in good waves.



***10 Toes Nosetide***

### **Inside The Tube**

One of the classical positions in surfing is the tube ride. This occurs when the surfer positions himself or herself underneath the breaking lip and well back into the wave as shown in the figure. Judges have traditionally scored a tube ride higher than virtually any other maneuver in surfing. Even a short tube (a simple head dip) can usually earn an extra point or so during a competition. With all other conditions being equal, the surfer who gets the best tube ride will usually get the higher score.



***Well Positioned in the Tube***

### **Length of Ride**

At least .5 to one point should always be reserved for rides where the surfer exhibits many different abilities. The surfer who has an average ride from outside clear into the shorebreak should be able to score on more maneuvers than the surfer who pulls out before the wave forms inside. However, simply riding a long wave with no continuous additional maneuvers does not score additional points. Remember the surfer who can continue momentum generation sufficient to get him or her through flat spots on a wave has demonstrated more skill than one who hasn't demonstrated the ability to maintain momentum. Also, remember that an inside trick in the shore break could generate an extra 1/10th point or more.

No matter what tricks are accomplished on an inside wave, the surfer on a shorebreak wave only should never be able to score as high as the average ride on the outside wave. Many times inexperienced judges score as high for an inside tube ride that ends in a closeout as they do for a good solid outside wave ride. When outside waves are present, a couple of tricks on an inside wave can't possibly be scored as high as a much longer ride on an outside breaking wave, even if it is a slightly below average ride.

As an example, say the shorebreak surfer takes off, makes a quick turn, gets completely tubed, and then kicks over the break with a floater or re-entry. In a 10 point scoring system, the surfer could get 1 or 2 points for wave judgment (he found a non-closeout), 0 or 1 point for the turn, 2 points for the tube ride, and 1 or 2 points for the re-entry. The maximum this wave could generate on an average breaking day is 6 points, not the 7 to 9 points possible for an average ride on an outside wave. This view of judging becomes less stringent in poor wave conditions or when the outside break is inconsistent.

### **Style**

Since style is developed by striving for the ultimate attainment of perfection, at least 1 or 1.5 points could be reserved for this surfing ability, particularly on quality breaking days. Points for style are not always given, and should only be granted when a contestant's ability clearly indicates his or her excellence. All turns should appear smooth and free from any artificial effort. The surfer should become a part of the wave, flowing with it, or dancing to its natural music. The surfer should appear to be the master of the wave, showing no reluctance going where he or she wants, with no fear of ability to direct his or her own actions. In perfect ten-point surf, as many as 2.5 extra points could be awarded for smoothness and perfection on a wave.

### **Simple Examples of Judging**

Let's say we have an average wave day with an outside break and waves consistently about four to five feet, slightly choppy, and steep. The waves do not form inside but provide about a 40-yard ride.

With a 10-point scale, an average wave day could allow maybe 8 points as the highest possible score considering conditions. This means that an average ride on an average wave for an average competitor will score around 5, and for a very good competitor will score probably 6.

The contestant paddles into the pocket on his or her takeoff just before the wave breaks, turns at the bottom just under the lip, and then finishes the wave with smooth but straightforward turns on the shoulder. Let's say the turns appear to the judge as slightly too quick to allow for maximum transfer of power, and that the curl is attacked just once during the ride to help increase speed. The wave is of average height and lasts about the same as most others. The wave breaks left with the surfer riding regular foot.

A judge watching this ride could consider it as average and award maybe 4.5 points for the overall wave judgment and ride, and one to two points for the maneuvers under the lip and into the curl. An extra 2/10ths point could be added for riding the full wave while turning. The total score for this ride would be in the range of a 6 to 7.

A second regular foot surfer drops straight in at the peak on the next average wave and makes a nice smooth turn off the bottom under the peak. He now turns straight up into the lip and cuts back with his board almost as high as his whole body. He jams back into the hook and powerfully turns his board back towards the bottom and then up into the face again. He then finishes his ride with average turns and no other difficult maneuvers.

This time the judge would primarily consider the initial few maneuvers of the ride as most important for scoring. A 5 point score could be awarded for wave judgment and overall ride. Up to 1 point would be given for the first turn with an extra point for the difficulty in gaining a near horizontal position, and 1 to 2 additional points for the power of his second and

subsequent turns. A score of 7.5 points is a good score and should not be given unless a very solid ride occurs. Judging scores higher than 8 would indicate the surfer exhibited exceptional ability.

The next surfer in the same heat (also a regular foot) takes off at the peak on the left breaking clean-up wave of the set – a five footer with nice shape. After driving to the bottom, a powerful turn brings him right through the lip (Figure 3.4), over the curl, and back high onto the shoulder where he immediately turns along the steep edge of face under the curl. The wave is ridden all the way until it dies using a number of nice turns and re-entries, but not quite the maximum that could have been obtained if he was more aggressive. However, the surfer's style is classy making his maneuvers look easy.



*Powerful Off the Lip Re-entry*

This ride deserves almost a maximum score. The overall ride is better than the earlier contestant's, and is on a better wave, deserving an overall wave judgment and ride score of 6. The initial maneuver through the lip with power sets up the rest of the wave, and could be given 1-2 extra points. Riding the wave to the end with smooth maneuvers could also gain a 1/2 extra point, with maybe 1/2 more point scored for the surfer's overall style. This wave could easily earn a total score of 8.5 to 9.

How to beat this ride? Again, this is an opinion call, with another judge possibly offering different views. Let's say the contestant, a goofy foot, paddles into a peak on a similar cleanup wave from the left side, drops across the face low, then drives backwards over the top and down the inside face under the curl. At the bottom, the surfer again makes a powerful turn nearly straight up into the curl, finishing high on the shoulder where he again drops low across the face. The wave is also ridden to the end using a series of turns intended for maximizing the length of ride. Just as the wave starts to die, the surfer switches stance and rides a few more yards. This surfer also has a classy style, but not quite as perfected as the previous surfer.

For this ride, not only did a very good surfer make maximum use of conditions, but he also put out that little bit extra to go ahead of the previous contestant. Breaking the scoring down, a 6 could again be awarded for the overall wave judgment and ride, 1 to 2 points for the initial maneuver, and 1 to 2 points for milking the wave that little bit extra. A 9.1-9.3 could easily be given for this ride.

### **Interference**

Wave possession and interference calls are a sensitive issue with most competitors and judges. Precision judgment is required to reach decisions that involve disciplining a competitor for interference during a heat. Even judges often disagree on interference calls. Therefore, when an interference occurs, a judge must distinctly remember the precise circumstances and reasoning for the infraction. While interference is less common in one on one competition, it can be a real problem in large heats when waves are inconsistent and not much time is available.

Penalties for interference are based on contest rules in place prior to the event. Usually they are scored one of two ways. The most straightforward is to subtract points only when the majority of judges agree that a contestant on the wave was interfered with. This method allows each judge the freedom to make an independent call on what occurred. The second method requires each scorecard with an interference call to have its score adjusted prior to the totals being tabulated.

The chances of being called for interference during a major contest were critical during the days when US Championships often were held in poor surf conditions and when six surfers competed in the heat. Such a situation happened during the 1974 US Championships in Huntington Beach to Corky Carroll. The dispute erupted during the final point tabulation, and resulted in the heated discussion between this author and Corky documented in the movie *Five Summer Stories*. Rules are rules, and, as I told Corky, I didn't make them. However, in order to keep a contest from falling apart, it is of utmost importance that the Contest Director enforces whatever rules apply equally to all contestants.

The surfer with wave possession is the surfer who stands up first and is closest to the breaking part of the wave. In big surf, contestants can sometimes take off late by paddling into the peak



above and behind the surfer already on the wave. Although some judges may disagree, especially Hawaiian judges, the surfer dropping in behind the first surfer is interfering and should be penalized.

Another interference which is often missed is the surfer who waits until another surfer inside of him gets in position to take off, and then paddles across the inside surfer and takes off further into the wave at the same time the first surfer takes off. This maneuver called wave hopping is a common tactic and should be spotted by a judge immediately.

Sometimes it is possible for two surfers on the same wave to cause no interference, especially if the outside surfer pulls out early. The judge should determine an interference if the surfer in front caused the inside contestant to change style, ride in a place other than the best wave position, or take any chances that would not normally have been taken. The judge should also determine if the wave itself broke differently as a result of the second person riding it. A potential interference could exist with the situation shown in the figure below.

A few examples may be helpful in understanding how to determine a simple interference call. Say on an average five-foot fairly consistent day, the first contestant sees a nice wave and paddles into position near the peak. At the same time, a second surfer who is more outside and farther away sees the same wave and starts to paddle for it. The second surfer paddles across and behind the first just as the wave reaches them and both take off at the same time with the second surfer on the inside. Without realizing another surfer is near, the first surfer drops low into the wave causing the second surfer to cut back and out of the break. The first surfer then continues on the wave for a scored ride.

Which surfer was interfered with? This is the classic case where the second surfer was wave hopping the first. The first surfer had initial position and therefore wave possession. The second surfer interfered with the first when he paddled across and took off. The first surfer's cut back causing the second surfer's wave loss has no significance.



*Potential Interference Situation*

Next, consider the situation where two surfers position themselves on each side of the peak on a slow, mushy day. One surfer, a goofy foot, takes off to go left while the other, a regular foot,

takes off to go right. The right shoulder doesn't look very good, so the surfer going right changes his or her mind and then cuts across the peak to the left shoulder. In this case, the surfer on the left had first possession, and will be interfered with by the new surfer on the wave. This situation could have been changed if the regular foot had taken off at the peak and gone left initially.

Another situation commonly occurs at point breaks. Two surfers take off on a wave some distance from each other. The surfer farthest back has more speed and almost, but not quite, catches the surfer in front. The wave holds up nicely and the first surfer's wake is pretty much gone before the second surfer reaches it. Even though the first surfer may complain, the judge should not score interference in this case unless some actual physical results were observed.

One of the most difficult situations for a judge to evaluate occurs when two surfers on a wave change positions. This happens in larger surf when the surfer in front cuts back above the trailing surfer and ends up on the inside section of the wave. Although difficult, this maneuver can sometimes occur without any interference to the trailing surfer. Some judges are of the opinion that it is possible to change wave possession under these circumstances, and the surfer in front will have to relinquish the wave.

As a final example, consider the case where a surfer paddling out is caught inside during a set. If a contestant surfing on one of the set waves hits the surfer paddling out, no interference should be called, as the surfer on the wave should maintain control of the ride. On the other hand, if the surfer must kick out to avoid hitting the paddler, interference may or may not be called. The judge should determine in his or her own mind whether the contestant paddling out could have avoided the situation, or if the surfer on the wave was trying to draw interference. In most circumstances, if the paddler has stopped in the water, it is the wave rider's responsibility to avoid him or her.