



Shaping

Surf writer BOB FEIGEL of Matapouri profiles Roger Hall, the surfboard designer and manufacturer who is helping to shape the future of surfing – from Ruakaka.

What do American actors Cameron Diaz and Tom Cruise have in common with Kiwi 'juice king' Mark Ellis and Kamo dentist Laurie Brett? Besides perfect teeth, that is. Time's up! All four are keen aficionados of surfing, the 'Hawaiian Sport of Kings.'

Knew the answer? Then I bet this next question will really stump you. According to a 1998 Hillary Commission survey, what was New Zealand's fifth most popular sport – with over 176,000 participants? Again, the answer is surfing, and the sport's popularity has grown since 1998. But what may be most surprising of all, is that one of this international sport's most respected surfboard manufacturers makes his home (and his surfboards) in Ruakaka!

So what's a world-class surfboard designer and shaper doing in Ruakaka? Only Roger Hall can answer that.

"It's beautiful here," says the 45 year old businessman. "There's something about coming back over the Brynderwyns and looking out over that view that's always welcoming. I see all the islands and headlands, the bay and the beaches . . . and I know I'm coming home."

Hall has called Ruakaka 'home' ever since he first arrived with his family in 1966. He was eight years old and it didn't take him long to get involved in surfing . . . or surfboard making.

"I started out with a home-made bellyboard that my brother and a friend named Grant Eford made out of half an old surfboard." However, it was his next board that set the scene for the rest of his life.

"My first surfboard was a 5'2" Bob Davie twin-fin I'd bought from my brother. The day after, he borrowed it back. Somehow it blew off the Mini on the way to the beach and was badly damaged. When he handed it back he said, 'Guess you better learn how to repair surfboards.'" And that's exactly what Roger did.

It didn't take long before local surfers started bringing their dinged and damaged boards to him. Before he knew it, he was Bream Bay's one-man surfboard repair business.

From there, Roger would get old 'duners', rip off the fibreglass coating (a memory that makes him cringe today) and reshape the foam blanks underneath, using his own designs.

"My friend Grant Eford was a couple of years older and always nudged me in the right direction," says Hall. "After reshaping old boards and glassing them, we bought an old blank mould so we could start blowing our own foam blanks."

Thirty-something years later, Surfline Surfboards in Ruakaka is not only supplying surfboards nationwide to New Zealand's robust market, it is filling export orders from Australia, Indonesia, the Pacific Islands and the US, including surfing's birthplace, Hawaii.

Not that building an international business from Ruakaka has been an easy task. "In the early days, we were very isolated from the rest of the industry and from most of our customers," says Hall. "But as time went on, that became less and less of a problem. In fact, looking back, it's been one of our strengths – because that isolation helped us with the creative concepts and innovation that Surfline became known for."

That flair for innovation also led Hall into a heated controversy that saw him dismissed by some as a "fruitloop" and praised as a "visionary" by others.

Hall had entered surfing during one of its most pivotal periods. By the late-sixties, international competition had become surfing's driving force and, after an upset win by an aggressive young Aussie named Nat Young at the 1966 world championships in San Diego, surfing changed. Although the board Young was riding was less than a foot shorter than normal, the stunned American surfing media ignored his amazing performance and credited the win to what they called 'the shortboard revolution.' Actually, there were other factors in the board's design that were far more significant, but the die had been cast. Within a few years, the average length of surfboards shrunk from between 9'4" - 10' to 6'8" - 7'4".

In 1980, when the length of "mainstream" surfboards was somewhere between 5'6" and a little over 6 feet, Hall built a 7'11" board that was considered heretical by the short board adherents of the day. "In his isolation, Roger developed his own unique direction that was independent of popular commercial trends," says long-time surfer, Tony Reid. "The name he chose for his label was 'Wooden Ships' and it took years for mainstream surfing to accept that Roger's thinking was way ahead of the pack. It's interesting to see him getting the last laugh."

These days, Roger enjoys the respect of his peers and the rewards of the huge personal investment he's made in his own career. For a number of years he'd spend a gruelling six weeks of our winters as a 'guest shaper' in Southern California – "recharging" his "creative batteries" in the process. He is also credited by many as being responsible for the renaissance of 'longboarding' in New Zealand. According to ex-pat American surfer, Greg Page, "Roger was making and riding longer boards than anyone else when I first came over in 1980. And he was the only good surfer really taking longer boards seriously."



However, Roger isn't the kind of bloke to rest on his laurels. He and business partner Colin Unkovich are constantly looking at newer and better ways to design and build. And that's what custom surfboard making is all about – designing a board to fulfil the specific needs of the person who will surf it. As a result, Roger has to carefully assess a number of factors, including the customer's skill level and potential, the conditions in which the board is going to be surfed and what the customer wants to achieve with his or her surfing. That in itself takes time and patience as well as the ability to listen and the experience to discern.

With surfing's tradition of handcrafted boards going all the way back to ancient Polynesia, the only dark cloud on the horizon is the steady encroachment of the cheap, machine-moulded surfboards being mass produced by factories in countries like Taiwan, Thailand and Slovakia. But Roger has faith that serious surfers in New Zealand and around the world will always prefer their boards to be handcrafted. He has no plans to retire.

"Surfing is about passion and so is making a surfboard," he says. "When you go through that first wave paddling out, it's like you've gone through a door into a different world. You see nature at its best . . . you paddle into a wave, feel the surge lift you up, then drop into that wave and go for it . . . it's a wonderful feeling. And the whole thing is so simple – a little bit of wax on your board and away you go."

No entry fees. No tickets to buy. No rules, regulations or officialdom – and it's a great way to keep fit. Sorry, gotta go, Surf's Up!

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