Surfboard Encyclopedia Article

Surfboard

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Early polynesian peoples were the first to ride ocean waves on surfboards, but no one knows which particular group of islanders invented them. At the time, there were two types of boards: the *alaia* and the *olo*.

The smaller alaia boards, which weighed only about 11 lbs. (4.98 kg) and were made from the breadfruit tree, were typically used by women and children. They measured approximately 6 ft. (1.83 m) long, 14 in. (35.56 cm) wide, and 1/2 in. (1.27 cm) thick. The larger olo boards measured 15 ft. (4.57 m) long and were 6 in. (15.24 cm) thick. At 160 lbs. (72.43 kg), these boards were considerably heavier and were carved with tools made of stone or bone and then smoothed and polished by hand.

Construction of the boards remained virtually unchanged until early in the twentieth century. Duke Paoa Kahanamoku (1890-1968), a Hawaiian Olympic champion swimmer, was among those who worked on improving surfboard construction and design. Tom Blake, one of the earliest Caucasian inventors of surfboards, built the first paddleboard--a big, hollow board with straight rails (sides), a semi-pointed tail, and laminated wood for the deck (top surface).

After World War II, surfboard builders in Hawaii and California accelerated their experimentation. Single and double skegs (fins) were tried along with various convex and concave shapes. Boards during this period were made of solid wood, laminated wood, or plastic. One innovation that largely changed this was the introduction of foam rubber and fiberglass, materials which rendered wood, at least as a primary material, obsolete.

Ensuing design improvements included the creation of scoop noses that allowed the tips of surfboards to stay on the surface rather than dip under the waves. One person closely associated with such improvements was Robert Simmons, who lost his life in a surfing accident.