



Surf mats had been on my radar for many years. I must confess, I'd barely seen anyone ride one in the real world. They have made fleeting appearances in various surf movies and seemed mainly popularised by George Greenough but remained a mysterious dark horse to me. I've always had a penchant for the weird and wonderful, but it was not until I started up the surf shop in Newquay that I contacted Graeme Webster, a British surfmat builder about getting some mats in for the shop that my own journey began.

The thing is, if I sell a surfcraft, I want to be able to ride it and offer advice, an honest educated opinion based on experience. When the mats first turned up, I got one for myself. I was shocked at the weight of them, they are so incredibly lightweight and to be honest, the price of a mat is a little overwhelming at first but it's not until you realise the amount of time, knowledge, and durability of build that you can truly understand their price tag. Putting a surfmat through its paces in the hands of an awkward clumsy beginner such as myself, stands as testament to the amount of abuse these bags of air have to withstand not to mention the unfathomable 'magic' going on in its design.

I already knew that Matsurfing was notoriously difficult. At first glance you cannot help but think 'how hard can it be?' Those are the famous last words of anyone arrogantly thinking they will just jump on a surfmat and 'wow' the crowd as I was to find out for myself. Graeme had told me "You have to commit, you have to surf the mat for at least a dozen or so times to even start getting results" I didn't listen, well, I did listen, it's just that I was still at the stage where I wanted to surf all the other surfcraft at my disposal, my singlefin surfboard, bellyboard, Paipos, handplanes etc. It all started on a sunny day at Fistral, tourists were everywhere, it was leash dragging and ill-fitting cheap wetsuit season. I grabbed my swim fins, blew up the mat (nearly fainting from exertion) and strolled across the sand to the water's edge. The surf was only a couple of foot, so thought it would be a good size to start out and get a feel of what I was dealing with. I got some strange glances from tourists and smirks from 'surfers' for carrying what to them must just

look like some idiot carrying a Lilo on holiday. I don't care about all that, I am old enough and ugly enough not to worry about what others think, I was on a mission.

As I entered the water, it was a strange sensation to have such a pliable craft on the water. I waded out, walking backward in my fins and mounted the mat. Well, I say mounted, what actually happened is, I looked like I was wrestling an alligator (picture Tarzan doing the death roll) The pliability and movement of air in a mat is somewhat disconcerting and awkward when pushing your hands and elbows into a soft deck after being used to the hard deck of a surfboard. Mat surfers laughingly call this such terms as 'cuddling the squid' or 'wrestling with a greased pig'. I felt like an idiot until I calmed down and started to paddle out, still feeling awkward but at least things were going in the right direction. A surf mat is not ridden at full inflation as you would be led to think. There are many thoughts and views on inflation, but it is generally agreed to start riding your mat with enough air in there until it bends over at a 90-degree angle. To the layman, it appears you have a puncture (as many a surfer will like to point out) but when your body weight is on the mat, the air disperses to the rails and gives the appearance of a fully inflated mat, it's not until you get back off the mat that you can see it is indeed 'half inflated'. The general theory on this is that the more inflated the mat, the more hold, and the less air, the more speed can be generated. I'm guessing size of rider, mat and weight of the surfer would figure into it too but you are looking for the best of both worlds. I now ride my mat at far lesser inflations than when I started as I am a sucker for speed, relying on the mats 'in built' concave and wizardry instilled by the magic matmaker.

I paddled out to the line-up, feeling like a squashed cockroach with my legs akimbo and my arms digging in as I paddled. I had devoured hours of mat surfing videos on YouTube, and this is something that is so frustrating about mat surfing, it looks so easy, however, I was about to spend the next few months learning that I was learning almost nothing. It's actually as if you have to unlearn most things you know about surfing a board before you can learn.

I would have glimpses of its potential, sections on a wave where the mat would lift and flow as if I was on a magic carpet, the mats pliability absorbing the texture of the wave and thrill at that 'feeling' but then suddenly, just as I thought I was flying and nothing could stop me, the mat would shudder to a halt as if someone had slammed the brakes on. Even now, 2 years into my mat journey, I still do not profess to know half of what is going on and when I speak to veteran mat surfers, they kind of say the same thing. The hardest part when learning the art of mat surfing is getting over the frustration, the 'wasted' surfs, the not committing to it. More people than not give up on it before getting to grips with it and this is the reason for its scarcity in the line-up, it's like a mystic art, dealing with the humility of being a beginner again and the beatings you have to endure in getting that inflatable crocodile out the back on a bigger day is a true test of dedication, strength, technique and luck, and remember, a surfmat has no leash. It is a costly mistake to let the mat be ripped from under you or to let go, you cling on for dear life or you are 100% guaranteed to be doing the long swim back to shore, the Whitewater loves stealing the mat from the foolish or limp of grip. I know some very experienced time served surfers that can surf anything but not the mat and that's what intrigued me, I am a stubborn fool and love a challenge, however, I was starting to wonder if it was all worth it. The problem was, I had no one to mat surf with or figure stuff out with. I never saw another mat surfer that whole summer until slowly, people were starting to hear I had surfmats for sale and were coming in to check them out and 'talk shop' as intrigued as I was but we were all in the same boat, sure, I had a little more experience by then but openly confessed I didn't know what the hell was going on but regardless, I was sure having a lot of fun in the process. I have talked more customers *out* of buying them than I have tried to get the sale. There's no point spending the money on a surfmat if you think they are cheap and you can just go have a mess about on them, once you are in, you're in, just like the mafia. If a customer walks in looking for a mat, I quiz them what they know. Fifty percent have watched lots of videos and devoured everything mat surfing and can't wait to get their dirty mitts on one, they know about Greenough, they know they are tricky, and the other half know nothing much at all. I usually send these latter customers out to do some research after I've chewed their ears off about mat surfing.

As a few other local surfers were starting to settle into life with the mat, we would meet up and stoke each other in the surf, it's much more fun to ride with other mat surfers. There's a very strong sense of community, just like their used to be in surfing and I love that. However, it was not until Graeme Webster said he would come over to Newquay for a mat meet, that things changed for me. We met up at Fistral, the wind was offshore, it was low tide and head high surf. I voiced my frustrations to Graeme as we paddled out the back and he gave me a 5-minute talking

to. He could plainly see where I was going wrong, I was grabbing at the front of the mat, I wasn't getting far enough to the front of the mat on take-off, I was shown the correct way to paddle into a wave at an angled take-off. On a mat you don't do a bottom turn as such, he showed me where to place my outside hand, gently lifting the top corner of the mat. A set came straight at us, and I was in pole position, I had hardly had any time to process the information Graeme had gifted me, Graeme looked at me and said "let's go". I was in perfect position for the most beautiful looking lefthander. I paddled into it with my hands flat on the deck, my arms stretched out and kicked into it with all I was worth and at an angle as I had been told, the wave reared, we both dropped into the wave at the same time (party waves are the norm, not the exception in mat surfing) I slid myself to the front of the mat on the drop, gently caressed the outside right hand corner of the mat with my inside hand still flat under my shoulder and then it happened, that 'feeling' that I had only been glimpsing at before, the mat came alive. It lifted into the most beautiful section, and I shot up into a high line, flowing perfectly and smoothly, the speed, oh man, the speed. Graeme looked back, grinning like a Bond villain, then shot off ahead of me, where he pulled that speed from I couldn't fathom as I already felt like I was going faster than anyone had ever travelled before, I imagined my face looked twenty years younger as the skin was pulled back or I that I would burst into flames and get a glimpse of the future haha... it was epic. As the wave eventually petered out, Graeme was there paddling back out for another, he said to me "you're doing alright, what are you talking about?" I didn't tell him, that wave was the best I'd had so far, my mind was blown. As I said, that session changed everything, those few nuances changed my game and I never looked back. That's the thing about the surfmat, subtle changes in movement are magnified, small changes in positioning, understanding flow, looking for the perfect line and tapping into the energy of the wave is all key. I went home after that session feeling like a five-year-old, the inner child had been found, I'd unlocked the first level of the surfmat game, stoke factor 11.

The very next day there was a bit of swell left over and I was worried that what I had learned the previous day would be lost and I'd go backward again but I need not have worried, it was still there. It was incredible that just a couple of very subtle changes in my positioning and movement had changed so much. Being a surfer first and foremost had helped of course with knowledge of assessing the waves, fitness and confidence in the surf but apart from that, mat surfing is a whole different ball game to surfing. If you are seriously interested in Matsurfing then do the research, watch the videos, and devour all the info you can, borrow a mat if you can find one, come talk to me at the shop if you come to Newquay. A surfmat is not a toy, something to mess about on occasionally, it is a whole subculture of surfing in itself, its players are an eclectic bunch, and the rewards are very high for those willing to dabble in its magic. A whole lotta magic...