

MY WORD

SURF LIFE WAIVER

DAVID COHEN EXPLAINS WHY HIS PASSION FOR SURFING IS RIDING HIGH, ALTHOUGH HE HASN'T CAUGHT A SINGLE WAVE.

WHEN I WAS a teenager in the 1980s, many, if not all, professional surfers were named Wayne: Wayne Lynch, Wayne Jaggard, Wayne 'Rabbit' Bartholomew... It may have been that there were more people named Wayne in general back then, and the world of professional surfing merely reflected the community at large. I haven't really looked into it that deeply.

I wasn't called Wayne, and perhaps that's why I never succeeded as a surfer. The other, perhaps more compelling, reason is that I never actually surfed. And I remain firmly committed to not surfing. I like to watch surfing, read about surfing, think about surfing, listen to surf music; but when it comes to *doing* surfing, a catalogue of private terrors – drowning, jagged reefs, mockery – keeps me away from the more wavy parts of the ocean.

In Australia, many, many people follow a sport, and surfing is my sport of choice. But I've always looked upon it as much *more* than just a sport. Sport is, after all, only meaningful by virtue of a set of arbitrary rules: who wants to play or watch a game of football if the goalposts are removed? You don't need goalposts or a team or an opposing team in order to surf. All you need are some waves and a board.

But beyond this, surfing has always had a transcendental dimension. When someone catches a wave, they are harnessing a power – that of nature – which is the same now as it was when the world began, no matter how many corporate sponsors get involved. Remember that the ancient Polynesians, none of whom was named Wayne, regarded surfing not as a sport but as a kind of spiritual ceremony.

My enthusiasm for not surfing dates back to the aforementioned decade, when I was in high school. My school, located only a few kilometres away from some of Perth's northern beaches, produced its share of surfing champions – insofar as the school was a place these surfers avoided in order to practise surfing and thereby become exceptionally good at it.

To me, these surfers made it possible to be an athlete and cool at the same time. I envied their passionate quest for the perfect wave; their adrenaline-producing and yet poetic communion with nature; their sun-bleached (as opposed to bleach-bleached) hair; their panel vans and appetite for Chiko Rolls...or am I thinking of *Puberty Blues*? I envied them because girls watched them surf, and, when required, went and bought the Chiko Rolls (surfing was still very much a male business back then).

I actually did try to surf once, and that was only after prolonged egging-on by my schoolfriend Trevor, who, although brainy and bespectacled, could carve up a wave pretty well, and thereby managed to straddle the nerd-surfer divide. I still recall the smell of wax in my nostrils as I lay shivering on Trevor's board, while the sea, like Alexander Pushkin challenging someone to a duel, periodically slapped me in the face with its salty glove.

There was a set of waves in the distance, but no matter how hard I



tried, I never seemed to get any closer to it.

And then I saw, no more than 10 feet up ahead, a dark fin slicing its way through the water. As I maniacally paddled shorewards, I wondered: why isn't anyone else panicking, and why can't I hear the shark siren? I later realised it was a dolphin, but you don't draw these fine distinctions when you're out there with nothing between you and the entire ocean but a pointy piece of fibreglass.

The incident prompted me to refocus my energies on not surfing, and I have succeeded in not surfing to this day, choosing instead – like a true sports enthusiast – to watch it on television in the comfort of my home, where there are far fewer sharks/dolphins to contend with.

Every now and then I contemplate making the leap from not surfing to surfing. But if I made that leap, there'd be no going back. It would mean confronting some of my deepest fears. It would mean redefining, on a fundamental level, my sense of who I am. It would mean buying a roof rack. And I'm simply not prepared to spend money on a roof rack.

» David Cohen is a Brisbane-based writer. His story, 'Regarding the Ibis', appeared in The Big Issue's 2012 fiction edition.