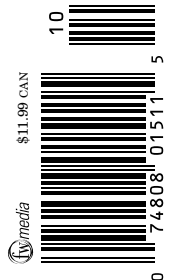


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PLAYTIME
IS
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OVER





Reviewed by Allan Weisbecker

Ahead of the Curve

Thomas Meyerhoffer's radical new longboard has polarized the surf community, but how does it perform?

THE MEYERHOFFER BY MODERN LONGBOARDS

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When I caught my first glimpse of Thomas Meyerhoffer's radical new hourglass-shaped longboard, I was struck by how good it would look on a wall. Its abstract, feminine curves and creamy white skin made it look like a minimalist *objet d'art* (Woman Flattened by Steamroller), in contrast to the waxed-up, pressure-dinged surf stick leaning in my garage. My suspicion that the board was more about aesthetics than actual surfability seemed bolstered by the pitch for Meyerhoffer's creation on his distributor's website:

"Instead of surfing the wave, the wave surfs you. The board integrates with the wave seamlessly. You become one with the wave."

Fer *sherrr*, dude! Spicoli remembered! Puh-lease!

This marketing-speak is emblematic of surfing's evolution over the last generation from a *personal endeavor*—requiring neither competitors nor a spectating mob to make one's efforts meaningful, and for which one sacrificed all else, especially money and career—to a mainstream *sport*, with all the attendant trappings and hoopla. Nonsurfers might dismiss this sort of hype as irrelevant, but since most wave riders view their water time as a break from the deceit of the pop-culture image machine, such surf-jive gibberish might appear to be an ill portent, the resulting "bad

vibe” negatively affecting how the board actually rides.

So before my first session, I conferred with a longtime surf buddy and shaper who has been making my boards for several decades. He visited Meyerhoffer’s website, perused some photos, and watched a video of Meyerhoffer explaining his design. His verdict:

“This board won’t work.”

“Why not?”

“Meyerhoffer’s shop is too clean.”

A commenter on a Northern California surf blog reached a similar conclusion, snidely remarking that Meyerhoffer’s shaping bay “looks like a dot-comer’s loft.” Indeed, Meyerhoffer’s résumé (product design for Apple, Nike, and Porsche, plus the creation of the Chumby, the world’s first “soft computer”) is not likely to impress your average grom, who would probably prefer that the guru behind his surf stick had spent his career in a tree house overlooking the reef in Padang Padang rather than tinkering with high-tech gizmos in Silicon Valley.

Still, putting aside Meyerhoffer’s pedigree, the cleanliness of his shop, and the marketing of his product, the question is: Does the board *work*? Is Meyerhoffer on to something with his dramatic minimization of the mid-board? Or does he, as some would have you believe, have his head up his ass?

My first paddle out on a 9-foot-6-inch Meyerhoffer longboard underscored how

different this design really is (and how design-conservative most surfers are). My entrance turned heads along the length of the mobbed NorCal beach I’d chosen. Breaking one of my cardinal rules, I kept my eyes to myself while jockeying for my first wave. I ended up getting jammed behind a guy who mistook my embarrassment for timidity and rudely cut me off. Before I even got to work in a top turn, the wave broke in front of me, effectively ending my ride. I learned little about the board that I didn’t already suspect—that with its pinched midsection, which meant a smaller overall planing area, it wouldn’t catch waves as well as my conventional plank of the same length.

As I waited for another wave, the odd sensation of straddling the Meyerhoffer’s wild-ass curves made me consider the theory behind the hourglass template that is the board’s principal design innovation: The board’s waist allows its back half to have the outline of a more maneuverable shortboard while retaining the planing area right up front. In theory, this would allow the surfer to nose-ride as he would a conventional longboard.

“Turn from the back; trim for speed from the front” is pretty much the longboarder’s mantra. For the advanced longboarder, mid-board is purgatory, a place you pass through on your way to the nose. So on a theoretical level, I understood what Meyerhoffer was trying for. Sitting on the board, however, I was also reminded

that no design innovation can defeat the toughie of your turning radius. You still have to bring that distant nose through the arc of space.

But when I finally had a decent wave to myself, I found that with its extra-wide hips, the Meyerhoffer was in fact loose and maneuverable ridden from the tail. Initially, I found the sparse planing area from the waist forward awkward to negotiate, but once I got used to it, the board nose-ride pretty well.

Although Meyerhoffer might not be the first guy most surfers would expect to change the way we think about surfboard design, consider this: Starting with the ancient Hawaiians, it took some 500 years before hard-core surfers realized that if you attached your surfboard to your body (leg, arm, waist—anywhere but the neck), you wouldn’t have to swim in after a screw-up. I mean, *duhhh*.

The guy who had the epiphany that led to the surfboard leash was probably a lot like Thomas Meyerhoffer.

So don’t discount him, his too-clean shop, or his longboard design. My advice to fellow surfers is to ignore the baggage and give the Meyerhoffer a shot.

Allan Weisbecker is a lifelong surfer, writer, and filmmaker. His memoir, In Search of Captain Zero: A Surfer’s Road Trip Beyond the End of the Road, is considered a seminal work in surf literature. His website is www.banditobooks.com.

The 8-foot, 9-foot-2-inch, and 7-foot-6-inch Meyerhoffer longboards

