



Don't tell us – Surfing's maturing

Surfing's supposed to be about being young and crazy, but the figures tell another story, writes Nick

Recently the surf company Billabong issued a press release telling the world about their latest surf team recruit.

He's an 11-year-old Gold Coast resident whose name is Jay Occhilupo – and as you might have guessed already, he just happens to be the son of 46-year-old former world

champ and mega surfing legend Mark.

An 11-year-old kid, sponsored? At first look you might think, of course! Surfing's been tagged as a youth sport now for over a generation – it's the basis of most of the big surf companies' marketing campaigns. Naturally a kid like Jay is



with Nick Carroll



palmBeach



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in line for some PR.

But a second look, via the lens of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, makes us wonder if the sponsorship is designed to appeal to Jay's generation, or if it's really intended, in some very subtle way, for Mark's.

The ABS's latest research release into Australia's sport and recreation habits is dated 2011-2012, and for anyone interested in surfing, it's a real eye-opener.

When broken down by age, the research states that far from surfing being a kid sport, over 60% of Australia's surfers are now over the age of 35.

Even crazier, it seems that there's way more surfers over 45 than are under 25 – 28% of the total, as against 17%. And to round it all off, there's more surfers over the age of 65 than there are between the ages of 15 and 17.

It's an extraordinary generational shift that many of us have sensed occurring in lineups around the nation, but that is thrown into sharp relief by this ABS research.

Indeed, it's the elephant in the room of surf culture in numerous ways.

For instance, surf organisations both here and overseas, perhaps sensitive to the sport's original underdog status, have spent years steadily inflating the planet's surfing population to extraordinary imaginative heights.

Thus the figure of 3.5 million – in common use by Surfing Australia, National Surfing Reserves, and other surf interest groups in order to demonstrate surfing's vital importance in the general scheme of things.

According to them, that's how many surfers there are in Australia today.

That's a LOT of surfers. Indeed, it's about 15% of the entire population of Australia.

It's understandable why these organisations might want to believe in the big numbers. That's how you talk governments and big businesses into supporting your programs. But a cool headed observer might reasonably

suspect that these groups have all been quietly kidding themselves...and this sense is backed up by the ABS figures, which clearly state the total number of active surfers – "active" meaning going for a surf at least once a year – as being 226,100. In other words, about 1/12th of what everyone seems to think.

That number, 226,100, seems a lot more in sync with other key indicators of surfing population, like surfboard and SUP sales (around 200,000 a year), than the super-fantasy 3.5 million one.

It's not that bad, by the way. Surfing's ahead of many other sports that you might call "recreational" – that is, not requiring some sort of field, court, coach or referee – though it does seem to be nudged by fishing (just over 247,000).

And the ABS doesn't include a critical group: the kids under 15, the targets of Surfing Australia's Vegemite SurfGroms program.

The kids like Jay Occhilupo. If the sport's gonna grow again, that's where the real numbers will come from.

But meanwhile, we might have to face the fact that while surfing may keep you young at heart, it's no longer young itself. In fact, it's a little too close for comfort to the word "mature".

June's often a great month for surfing, and its role as host of the Australian winter solstice is no coincidence – as we all know, winter and good waves just roll together.

That's why International Surfing Day is such a good fit for this month. On June 20, surfing's environmental and social organisations celebrate ISD, and the Surfrider Foundation is no exception.

Surfrider's Australian chairperson Brendan Donohoe is overseeing a big ISD fundraiser bash at Avalon Bowling Club that evening from 6pm, \$20 per head with surf films, prizes and all kinds of crazy stuff. Brendan



wants to encourage surfers around Australia to do the same: Throw a party and donate some proceeds to Surfrider. He points out some of the good works Surfrider has done in the

local area, such as the long (and successful) campaign for upgrades to the Warriewood sewage treatment plant and the "Line In The Sand" protest against destructive seawall work

proposed for Narrabeen and Collaroy (pictured).

We say, fundamentally, any excuse for a party. Contact Surfrider through their website surfrider.org.au

Ergo, it works

A couple of weeks ago, Mona Vale's long serving boardmaker Ron Wade came to see us with a new product he'd sourced from a US surf inventor.

The Ergo PaddleAir vest looks at first just like most rashie type vests, except for a small tube encased on one side.

Hmm, we wondered, what's this? Turns out the Ergo vest can be inflated slightly across the midsection, just around the baseline of the ribcage.

The idea being, according to Ergo's doctor's testimonial, that strain on the back and neck muscles during paddling is relieved, and paddling suddenly becomes a fair bit easier.

We borrowed an Ergo from Ron, took it for a spin and to

our mild amazement, it actually works!

The inflating bit feels like padding under the ribs, and it lifts your upper body clear of the board – just far enough so that you feel like you're paddling slightly downhill, without the irritation of a hyperextended lower back and neck.

You can control the angle easily to suit through inflating and deflating, using the attached tube.

The Ergo probably isn't for highly competent surfers who've already developed effective paddling styles. And as its literature states, it's not a lifesaving device.

But for anyone who struggles with neck or lower back pain during or after surfing, or who's starting out in surfing at a slightly older and less flexible



age (see - after 30), it could be a real help. Contact Ron for more info, dealers etc. info@ronwadesurfboards.com.au

Nick Carroll is a leading Australian and international surf writer, author, filmmaker and surfer, and one of Newport's own. Email: ncsurf@ozemail.com.au