

# do the wave

FORGET NORTH SHORE - SURF THE WILLAMETTE

BY BEN FOGELSON

**E**li Jahmack, president of the American River Surfing Association (ARSA), pulled up to the *EW* office in a small, blue import. I stared dubiously at a tiny fiberglass surfboard resting behind the hatchback.

"You got your wetsuit?" Eli shouted through the window.

"Yeah," I said, motioning to a plastic bin.

"You got a towel?"

"No," I said.

"Don't worry," Eli said. "I've got one for you."

Great, I thought. River surfing. How'd I get talked into this? Oh yeah, it was my idea. Eli'd called me weeks before and pitched me the story. He'd loaned me a video (featured on public access television) that featured

him cutting back and forth on a standing river wave, planted on a short surfboard. I'd scratched my head, looked down and accepted the idea of a field trip. ARSA — I bet it's got a membership of one, I'd thought.

I'd heard of river *boarding*. I'd even tried it, beneath the Autzen footbridge, riding a sculpted plank of plywood tied to shore by nylon rope and deflated innertubes. It's got a handle like water-skiing, and you lean back, letting the flow keep you afloat.

But river surfing, with a real surfboard and nothing but nature keeping the board in one place? I had to try it to believe it.

The wave was near Valley River Center. Eli'd checked the water levels, and he knew the wave would be "hitting," as he put it, at that particular level of flow. I was shocked

when we pulled into an amoebae-shaped, semi-gated community, drove to the back and parked. A long stretch of condominium windows stared out at the bike path, and beyond that, the Willamette river.

"I've had some people come out and start taking pictures," said Eli.

There was an elderly couple on the bike path bench, holding a poodle, wondering what us young folks could be up to as we donned wetsuits in the blackberry bushes. The wave rippled unendingly 20 yards from shore, amid a patch of fast-moving current.

When Eli dove in, landing on his stomach and paddling with the board beneath him, I walked over to the elderly couple. Their dentures were clacking.

"That's the president of the ARSA," I said, pointing out to Eli, who was now a little dot shooting backwards downriver. "He's going to stand up and surf that wave."

"She's a good dog, isn't she," one of them said, leaning over. "Yes, she is."

"You're the ARSA's fan base," I said, as Eli rushed over a rock and down into the wave. He paddled hard, slowing his backwards descent. Then he was surfing, first on his belly, getting his balance, and then just like in the video, standing in one place. It didn't look like it should be happening. He cut back and forth for awhile, legs bent, splashing water left and right, and then he finally fell off the wave and floated downstream, paddling back to the riverbank.

Carried by the speed of the current, Eli ended up a couple hundred yards away from where he jumped in. He came jogging back along the bike path from where he'd scrambled up through the bushes, board under his

arm. And then, as I was afraid he would, he handed me the board.

I walked down to the river, balanced on slippery rocks 'til I was at the edge. I took one last look at the wave, dove in and proceeded to lose my river surfing virginity. I paddled out hard, pointed upriver in an effort to get to the wave before I was swept past it. It loomed across the horizon as I hurtled downwards. I cruised over a sunken rock, shot over one last drop-off and took two more strokes to try and catch the wave. No luck.

But I did get an enormous swallow of the Willamette River, so at least I've got that going for me. I climbed out and tried several more descents until my arms about fell off, still to no avail. But on my last try I almost caught the wave, leaving me satisfied as I got back into my street clothes.

Because the river surfing championships and endorsements are still only a twinkle in the eye, and thus pay less than nothing, Eli's day job is running the newly opened Mos' Faded Urban Barbershop at 960 W. 7th Ave. 606-4617. He also raises two sons, Chance and Hurricane.

"So, I bet you'll be out here again without me," said Eli eagerly, even offering to let me keep the board in my garage, just in case I got thirsty enough to try the Willamette on my own. "You're hooked, right? Addicted."

I declined keeping his board, but I must admit river surfing was very fun, gliding backwards down the river, flowing with the current. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of becoming Vice President of ARSA, now officially packing a whopping membership of two.


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