

## **The Establishment of High School Varsity Surfing**

**by Bruce Gabrielson – July 2017**

In 1971 I was the president of the Huntington Beach Surfing Association and also the District 5 Director of the Western Surfing Association events. Besides having numerous surf friends at all the local high schools, I had worked with the Orange County lifeguards that spring at their first Orange County High School Surf Club Championships. San Clemente won the first invitational with 6 clubs entered but no high school clubs from Huntington Beach entered. Being a HB local, I wanted more participation from my town.

When I started graduate school for a teaching credential the next fall, I signed up for classroom observations and was assigned to Edison High School. With support from the students, the first day of class I met with the principal and was allowed to start the club. We had a very large turnout. The next spring (1972), led by David Van Druff, Edison won the Orange County meet with Marina's surf club also entered in the competition. Huntington Beach High School students had put together a social club a few years earlier, headed by a student named John Davis. However, that club was no longer functioning and was not allowed to compete.

In the fall of 1972, I signed up for student teaching a class at Huntington Beach High School, and again met with the principal and also the athletic director. I was given approval to re-establish Huntington's surfing club but the principal would not allow the school to participate in any competitions without formal approval by the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF).

Fortunately, I was friends with Mr. Len Ewers, the student activities director in the Huntington Beach High School District. Len told me to write a detailed proposal with competition format, rules, excreta, plus also a strong reason why CIF should allow surf competitions. For the format and rules, we used the same thing Chuck Lennon and I had developed when they started the surf Club at Long Beach State. For the reasons, I stated the traditional things like sportsmanship and loyalty, plus keeping surfers in class to make grades so they could compete would be a valuable incentive. Len submitted the proposal to CIF's executive committee on behalf of the entire district, and after answering a few questions, I was told to get all the district schools to create clubs and then establish a league. If the league was successful, surfing would be recognized.

One of the issues I saw in creating teams at all the schools early on was there were few club advisors willing to come forward as surf coaches who had any coaching experience or competitive background in surfing. I had been writing a book on how to make surfboards, but quickly changed its emphasis and added chapters on coaching, running and judging surf contests, and how to perform maneuvers that would score well with judges. This book, *The Complete Surfing Guide for Coaches*, published by Huntington Beach News, was given to the perspective new coaches and at least from my perspective, seemed to alleviate my concerns.

Finally, after a series of letters to each of the district's high schools, a meeting was held in the HB Union HS District offices to set up a surfing league. Rules were formalized, schedules were created and we were off and running. This was the first complete high school district to establish a formal competition program in the United States.

With the league in place, CIF's executive committee sanctioned the league as a special league for competition purposes. The newspaper clipping is from the Orange County Daily Pilot describing this historical event. I was awarded the certificate shown in the Figure by the HB High School District for my organizational support in the league's establishment.



## Surfing New CIF Sport

Surfing is now an officially recognized sport in the Huntington Beach Union High School District.

The California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) has sanctioned the district's six high schools to form a special league for competition purposes, said Supt. Jack Roper.

Dubbed the Orange Coast Surfing League, the new high school sport has the full support of CIF's executive committee, Roper added.

Interest in the wave riding sport appears high, said Roper, with 85 students already signed up for team tryouts and seven coaches already selected.

The official surfing season here will run from January through May, starting next year. Eligibility, scholarships and other CIF rules applicable for student participation in athletics will also govern surfing.

Season schedules for next year have been drawn up, with six high schools competing in a two-day meet in mid-January.



**TOP SURFER**—Jeff Smith, center, was awarded the Huntington Beach Co. perpetual trophy as this year's outstanding surfer in Huntington Beach Union High School District. Surfers from six regional

high schools competed. Flanking him are Bruce Gabrielson, left, district surfing coach, and Jack Wallace, assistant to the vice president, Huntington Beach Co.

During the 1972/1973 school year, a single event took place at Huntington Beach High School which probably had more influence than any other factor in formally recognizing surfing as an athletic sport at that school. Jeff Smith, a senior at Huntington, won the United States Surfboard Championships in juniors, and was subsequently awarded the Huntington Beach Company's Perpetual Trophy as the years outstanding surfer in the school district. This was a big media event for the school, and even resulted in a school assembly for Jeff. The picture is a clipping of Jeff receiving his award at a June 15, 1973 ceremony.

Unfortunately, Jeff was graduating and would not be able to receive an athletic award

from Huntington Beach High School for surfing, but this local exposure and recognition was enough to convince the school athletic department to accept surfing as a regular varsity sport like each of the other

recognized sports for the following year. I was given full varsity coaching status at the school, on an equal basis with each of the other varsity sports.

About the fall of 1973, four plus years after starting the process for recognition, I held tryouts for Huntington's first varsity surf team. Surfing was officially a spring sport, but in those days the team surfed year around.

The stars of Huntington's first varsity team were Tony DeNuccio and Greg Clemmons. There were also several other tremendous surfers on that team and subsequent teams who went on to establish themselves in the sport. Rick Fugnetti, Bobby Neishi and Rick Bauer were among those. The team picture is the first officially recognized and state sanctioned high school varsity surf team in the United States.



In the spring of 1974, after another successful competition season, I spoke about the process by which surfing had finally evolved into a recognized sport at Huntington High School's varsity awards banquet. Only a few of the parents, school coaches, and students present were fully aware that history was being made at that banquet, but those who did, recognized its significance to the surfing world. Huntington Beach Union High School District, and in particular Huntington Beach High School, had finally formally recognized surfing as a real sport with a real place in athletic competition. There was a tremendous amount of momentum for the program by then, and even a certain amount of jockeying among various coaches for district support. Organized high school surfing had firmly established its place as a true athletic event.

I few other things happened during my tenure as coach. Team members, along with some HBSA members, took its first trip outside for a competition against Ensenada Surf Club. This was a fun event and significantly helped build team spirit. The team also sponsored and won the Orange County High School Championships, held May 17, 1975 at the Huntington Beach Pier.

As to what happened to high school surfing, there were not enough female participants when Title IX was imposed on California public schools a few years later. CIF withdrew formal recognition but left in place the provisional approval for schools to compete outside CIF if they wished to.

The coaches at the time were able to get together and create the National Scholastic Surfing Association which still runs successful high school competitions today.