

Surf Daddy – The Lesson in the Session

In my 25 years of surfing I've caught a lot of great waves. I've streaked across Australia's peeling right points, sated my need for liquid speed in Hawaii, and spent months exploring the reefs of every surfer's paradise, Tahiti. But none of those sessions could hold a bar of wax to a day right here, at Dana Point's Doheny, a spot known as surfing's bunny hill. It was my best session ever, and I never even stood up.

The day started with an online surf check. Brad, of Surfline.com, suggested sleeping in. "Clean, but knee high and weak," he wrote. I read it and thought... perfect.

I shook my four-year-old daughter Leila awake. "Get up, we've gotta get going."

She fired back the usual: "I don't wanna go to school today."

"Good," I said, "Because we're going surfing."

Surfing with my daughter was a dream of mine since before she was born, and it was something we had talked about for a year. In that time she had become a strong swimmer, learned to throw a true Hawaiian shaka, and mastered sophisticated surf terms such as "Time for the glass off session" and the ever-green "What a kook!"

So, after convincing my wife that skipping school to go surfing was, in fact, "officially acceptable until grades with homework," (okay, almost convincing her) I threw sack lunches, sunscreen, wetsuits and surf mags in a bag and turned to go.

My wife held out Leila's bucket of beach toys.

"We're going surfing," I said. "There's no time for sand castles and Barbie dolls."

My wife just stared.

"Okay, maybe one sand castle, if it goes totally flat," I said and took the toys.

Next stop was Dana Point's Killer Dana Surf Shop, where I failed to convince Leila that the blue soft top 10-footer was a much better choice than the banana yellow one. At least they didn't have pink.

At Doheny, I hoisted Leila onto the nose of the big banana, then climbed on behind her.

We paddled into the line-up and watched as waist-high waves marched in and peeled south.

"Let's catch one," Leila said, excited. I was stoked on her enthusiasm.

Then it hit me: I hadn't done this before. Sud-

denly, catching a two-foot wave with 40 pounds of clinging little girl on the nose of my board was more frightening than paddling into overhead Pipeline. What if we wiped out? What if the board hit her? Worst of all, what if it scared her away from the ocean for good?

But like paddling into the lineup at Pipe, it was too late to chicken out now; the only way to the beach was by wave. So I lined up a smooth right-hander and told Leila to hold on tight.

I stroked into that first wave and saw the face fall away as it picked us up and took over. I set our inside rail and we streaked down the line. Whether Leila was in awe or ecstasy, I couldn't tell, but truthfully, I was too busy making sure we didn't eat it to wonder.

Then it happened: she let out her primordial stoked surfer's cry and I knew she was hooked. For the next hour, we bellied waves from the peak all the way to the beach, then Leila said she wanted to try standing, "like the big girls."

We hooked into a nice open face and I got to my knees to stabilize things, then Leila went for it. She got to her knees, then, cautiously, she tried for more. But just then a section of the lip came down on the inside rail... welcome to the lesson on wipeouts.

We got bounced and rolled and popped up on either side of the board. Leila scrambled onto it and death-gripped the rails. "I wanna go in, I wanna go in," she cried, tears streaming down her cheek. I tried to calm her, but it was no use; she was terrified, and I was crushed.

On the beach, out came Barbie. I dutifully made castles and dug tunnels and quietly contemplated how to broach the subject of surfing, debating the merits of the "gotta get right back on that wave" versus "quitting is not an option" arguments. In the end, I decided that "time heals all wounds" was the best approach and berated myself for inflicting one in the first place. There's always next summer, I thought.

We ate our lunch and Leila watched waves peel across the horizon. I could only imagine her fear.

Late afternoon set in and I started packing up.

"Time to go," I said.

Leila grabbed her wetsuit, and said. "No glass off session?"

Now I was the one with tears on my cheek.



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