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YOUR Best BOARD

*How to
experiment with
and choose fins*

BY LIZA MONROY

How important are fins to surf goals and performance? Former pro-surfer Adam Replogle of Billabong, who rides high-performance shortboards, says, “Fins can turn a good board into a great board, and a good board into a bad board.”

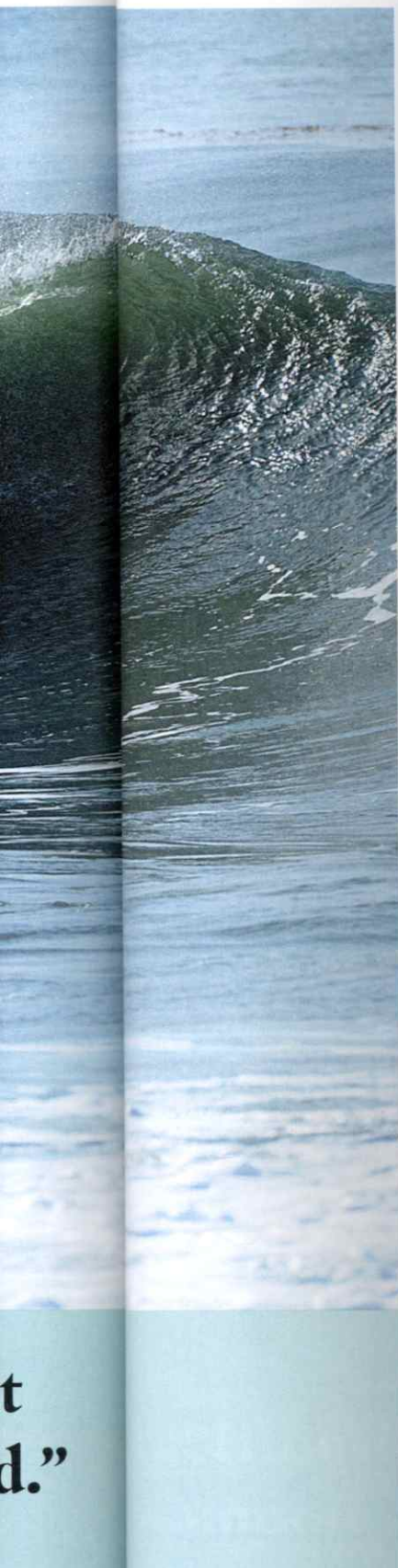
Given these high stakes, what are the ultimate keys to fin selection? When it comes to fins, where do the boundaries of experimentation lie? Fins and fin setups are, much like surfboards, always going to involve a compromise: better turns vs. more stability, a looser feel vs. more control. Local shaper Carl Gooding calls them “almost a dark art.”

“I don’t think there’s anyone who can tell you the definitive thing” about what to expect out of your fin experiments, Gooding says, because there’s always the X-factor of the ocean.

But if there is anyone who can at least offer some solid fin advice,



Photo: Tyler Fox



we talked with them for this guide: Replogle; Glen De Witt, purveyor of Rainbow Fins; and longboard pro Tessa Timmons. We hope their hints help demystify the “dark art” of fins so you can leave findecision behind and get finspired for the next swell.

Fins 101

Locally, we're fortunate to have a family-owned fin manufacturer, Rainbow Fins, right here in the community. Situated above a cliff with dramatic views of La Selva beach and run by Glen and Kathy De Witt along with their daughter Sarah Broome, Rainbow has been creating longboard and shortboard fins since the late '60s.

The primary aspect of fin selection, Glen De Witt emphasizes, is the relationship with the shaper. You should begin “right where your shaper started you originally and that shaper’s preference, or [go with] a fin-maker who has ridden all the boards and deals with it.” [Such as himself.] But the shaper is always the one to start with, he says. “I would encourage people to get a shaper to build their boards so they have a person who is knowledgeable.”

In making fin suggestions, Replogle first wants to find out what boards and kinds of waves someone is riding. When De Witt discerns what fin choices a client should make, he seeks specifics on the rider: how tall they are, how much they weigh, and even the size of their feet all have an impact on what fins he would suggest.

Finally, when selecting fins, De Witt says it’s all about “what you want to achieve.” As an example, he pulls out an orange cutaway

fin, which allows for more vertical maneuverability on a longboard. “This alone is loose as a goose,” he says. “Side-bites [adding two smaller fins to create a 2+1 setup] make this ride so much better.” Every board has its baseline, and within that lies room for experimentation.

Shortboard

As we move from longboard to shortboard fins in his showroom, De Witt says, “That’s another movie.” Factors affecting performance for shortboard fins are the area of the fin, depth, and the width of the base, along with how they are placed on the board.

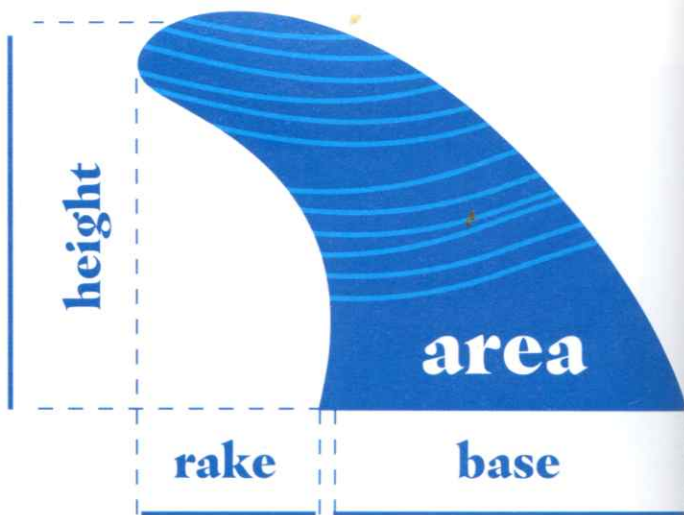
“You lose this much area, that much control left your board,” he says.

He points to smaller tri-fins with less area as great for smaller people and groms, whereas a “young, light person” might find bigger fins too stiff. “Half an inch less area makes a huge difference,” he says. The takeaway: size matters — a lot.

Meeting with Replogle early one morning at Billabong, he contextualizes his suggestions down to details including what swell direction you’re working with. “South swells are fast; you have to get up and down the line quick,” for which case he suggests a quad rather than a thruster. Four fins provide “a lot of release, planing speed, are quick, and great in a south swell,” he explains. “A thruster has a little more control but is slower.”

With fins, as with boards, as with surfing, as with everything in life, it isn’t possible to arrive at a point at which you know everything. There is always more to learn. And Replogle emphasizes

Glossary of Fin Terminology



Area:

The area of a fin can be distilled to a pretty basic formula:

GREATER AREA = increased hold and drive,

LESS AREA = looser and faster

Base: The part of the fin that attaches to the board. A longer, wider base provides more drive for drawn-out turns. A narrower or shorter one allows for sharper turns, but less drive.

Cant: The fin's outward angle in relation to the bottom of the board. Center fins have none. Side fins with no cant will be faster, while cant on the side fins offers more control during turns.

Depth: How far the fin extends away from the board. The deeper in the water it goes, the greater the stability (i.e., more depth = good for noseriding) Shallower fins offer more release through turns.

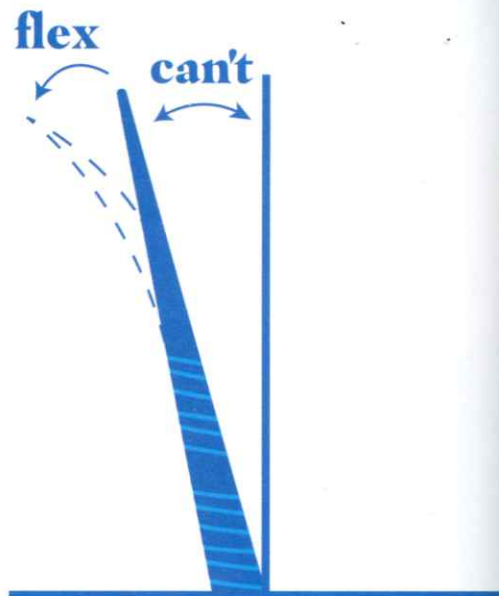
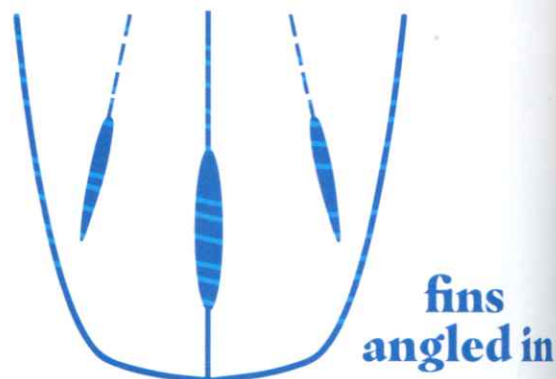
Flex: How much the fin bends side-to-side.

Foil: The fin's contours and shape from front-to-back, which functions to generate lift. (Think of the foil on an airplane wing.) It affects how fast and fluid the ride is.

Rake: The arc or sweep of the fin. A fin with more rake has more curve. More rake means less pivot.

Size: The larger the fin, the more hold and control. Smaller fins are more easily maneuverable on the wave, providing a looser feel.

Toe: How much side fins pointed in toward the stringer. No toe = maximal speed; more toe'd-in = more control, more maneuverability.



Illustrations: Julie Rovegno

that, when it comes to fins, there's more than one right answer.

"There's no best way to be an artist," he says.

Longboard

Timmons loves discussing fins because "there are a lot of differing opinions in the longboard world of what to use, shapers' opinions, plus what you want to get out of it."

Classic 1960s longboards used the D fins to stabilize the board and go down the line.

"They are the hardest fins to ride," Timmons says. "Those boards were so heavy, and you needed something that big to help steer it, to stay in the waves. Its purpose is more to set a line and trim. They're really hard to turn." She advises not to bother with D fins, unless you are experimenting

with those old boards.

"How deep in the water a fin goes is the main component for a good noseriding fin," Timmons says. "A rakier fin is more responsive, turns the board better; and pivot fins offer a lot of stability if you're on a bigger, heavier board."

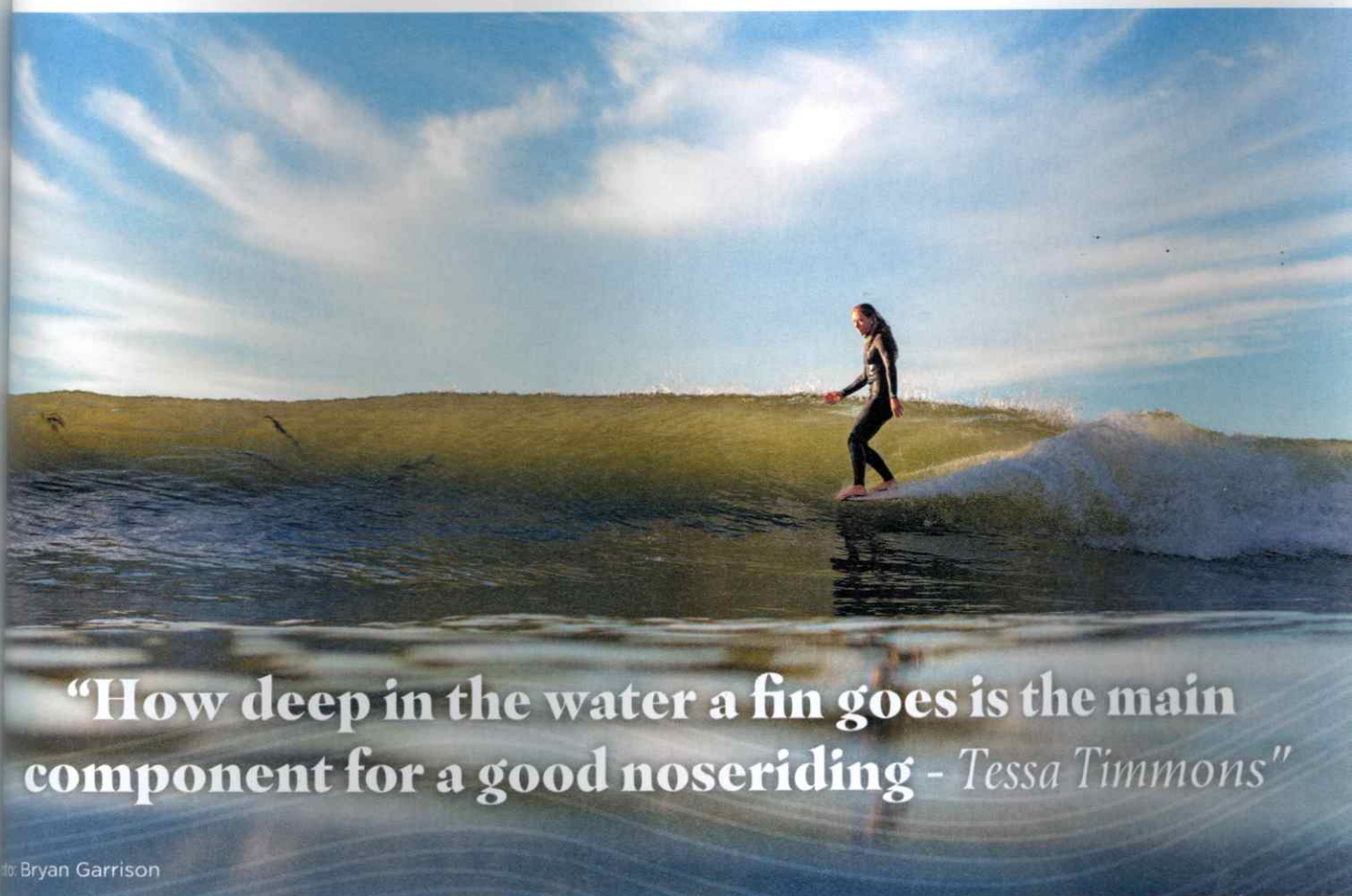
For those looking for a good noseriding fin, Timmons says longboarders are experimenting with fins longer than what you'd normally purchase. The theory is it will "lock the board more so you can noseride. A longer fin will noseride better, but if it's too long it will create drag and resistance. If it's not long enough, it will feel like it's going to slide out the back."

Timmons credits a lot of figuring out what works fin-wise with experimentation. When

experimenting, "try to mimic the conditions you're in — try [different fins] the same day or later that day."

At Rainbow, De Witt layers various longboard fins on top of each other to demonstrate both subtle and dramatic differences in their templates and area, explaining how each will result in a different experience: "If you have two fins appropriate for one surfboard, you basically have two boards." The fins with less area make a longboard turn more easily, and with more area you have more stability for walking to the nose. De Witt shows examples from each category: D, Pivot, Hatchet, and Flex, in a mini-crash course every longboard surfer should take.

Happy finspirimenting! 🌀



"How deep in the water a fin goes is the main component for a good noseriding - Tessa Timmons"

Photo: Bryan Garrison