THE SPORTING SCENE

BLANK MONDAY

Could Grubby Clark destroy surfing?

BY WILLIAM FINNEGAN

Gordon (Grubby) Clark did not invent the modern surfboard. It just began to seem that way, as the decades passed and his company, Clark Foam, of Laguna Niguel, California, founded in 1961, came to dominate the production of the polyurethane-foam "blank"—the lightweight alabaster core without which there would be no modern surfboard. For many people, Clark Foam and surfboards became conceptually inseparable. Clark's monopoly was estimated, as of last year, to cover ninety per cent of the American market and sixty per cent of the world market. The surfing press routinely described him as its industry's Bill Gates—or, because he was eccentric, reclusive, and rich, as surfing's Howard Hughes. In 2002, *Surfer*, the leading American surf magazine, published a list of the "25 Most Powerful People in Surfing." It put Clark at No. 2, behind Bob McKnight, the head of Quiksilver, a surfwear company. Clark hasn't granted an interview in more than thirty years, but the piece was accompanied by his photograph. It showed an older man in a Hawaiian-print shirt, with his face hidden by sunglasses, and two burly forearms, two big fists, and, directly in front of his eyes, two thick middle fingers raised at the camera.

When Clark, who is now seventy-three, started surfing, in the early nineteen-fifties, there were perhaps two hundred surfers in California. "We slept on the beach, drank wine, chased girls, ate abalone and lobster that we caught ourselves, worked some odd jobs, but mostly, if there were waves, we surfed," recalled Dick Metz, one of Clark's oldest friends and the first employee of Clark Foam. Today, the world's surf population is said to exceed twenty million. Although most surfers have never had much money, Clark single-mindedly built a company that's estimated to be worth as much as forty million dollars.

Then, on December 5, 2005, Clark, with no warning, faxed a seven-page letter to his customers announcing, "Effective immediately Clark Foam is ceasing production and sales of surfboard blanks." He alluded to run-ins with government regulators, primarily over the chemicals and equipment he used, and to claims filed against him by ex-employees or their survivors: "I may be looking at very large fines, civil lawsuits, and even time in prison." His equipment, most of which he had invented, could never, by definition, meet the government's standards, he wrote. Indeed, "for the majority of my equipment and process I am the 'standard.'" To Clark, this implied a limitless liability. In any case, he was done trying to satisfy the government. "When Clark Foam was started, it was a far different California," he wrote, and went on:

Professional surfers take big chances, in powerful waves, and may break any number of boards in a season. Photograph by Tom Servais.

The only apology I will make to customers and employees is that I should have seen this coming many years sooner and closed years ago in a slower, more predictable manner. . . . My full-time efforts will be to extract myself from the mess that I have created for myself.

It was not entirely clear what he was talking about, even to industry experts. None of the relevant regulatory agencies were taking any known action against him. But Clark began dismantling his plant immediately and, soon afterward, destroying much of his irreplaceable equipment. He ordered his workers to smash his eighty-odd concrete master blank molds—all of them based on designs provided by the world's best shapers. (Shapers are the craftsmen who turn blanks into surfboards, ready for glassing.) Luis Barajas, who worked for Clark for thirty-two years and was his wood-mill foreman, told me, "Mr. Clark told us to cut up the glue presses, with torches." Clark seemed unable to watch, Barajas said, and he walked away. "It was hard for us, too." Surfers made pilgrimages to the concrete recycling plant where the broken molds were dumped—piled askew, like huge robbed caskets. A local shaper could still identify, for his companions, which molds had produced the blanks for boards that were ridden to world championships.

Rage and disbelief roiled the American surfboard business. Many shapers didn't know where their next blanks would come from. Glassers, sanders, and salespeople would all be unemployed; the price of boards would double. The age of the handmade board was over. Clark alone had been keeping the Chinese, and multinational corporations, out of surfing. Many surfers were convinced that they would now be riding clunky mass-produced plastic boards, waiting for somebody to rediscover how to blow foam as well as Clark had. How could an entire industry have relied on a single supplier? The cover of *Surfer* carried, instead of the usual colorful surf shot, a stark image of two white blanks, one unshaped and one shaped, against a black background, with the caption "This Changes Everything." December 5th became known as Blank Monday.

Clark got his start working as a laminator for Hobie Alter, who had been making balsa-wood-and-fibreglass boards in his parents' garage in Laguna Beach since he was a teen-ager. In 1954, Alter

opened Hobie Surfboards, one of the first surf shops, along a quiet stretch of the Pacific Coast Highway a few miles south of Laguna. He hired Clark about three years later. Clark and Alter were devoted surfers, but they also shared a certain intensity on land. "Most of us seemed to take a long time to grow up," Metz said. "But they were already there." Clark had a real job, in the oil fields of Huntington Beach, a gritty town twenty miles north, but drove back after work to Alter's shop, where he slept in an old pickup truck. Both men knew well the drawbacks of balsa wood, the standard core at the time. It soaked up water like a sponge through any crack in a board's fibreglass skin, and the supply was unreliable: balsa came from Ecuador, and Southern California's airplane builders were buying up most of the better wood for use in their planes' skins. Board builders had experimented with Styrofoam and other plastics, but none had proved practical. Then Alter began working with a rigid form of polyurethane, a lightweight foam. "And I thought, By God, this is really it," he told me recently.

Clark, who had a strong background in engineering—he had studied math, physics, and chemistry at Pomona College—saw polyurethane's potential immediately. "Grubby had a really deep mechanical brain," Reynolds Yater, another early Laguna surfer and shaper, told me. Alter rented a shed in Laguna Canyon and installed Clark there. They painted the windows black to keep the project secret. It was frustrating work, with far more setbacks than successes, but after six months or so they began to produce blanks that Alter could plane and fine-sand into surfboards that were better than balsa. In June, 1958, they put their first foam-core board on the market.

They were just in time for a national surf craze, inspired by the movie "Gidget." In 1961, Alter and Clark realized that to increase production Clark would need bigger equipment, and to pay for the machines he would need to start selling to other boardmakers. Clark bought a few tools from Alter, built a new plant, deep in the ranchlands of the Laguna Hills, and formed his own company, Clark Foam.

There was still a lot to learn. Foam blanks, for example, need stringers—strips of wood down their centers, for strength—but sawing them in half wasn't working, Metz told me. "So Grubby came up with the idea of a hot wire. He put electricity through this very taut wire, got it red-hot. Then we tried to run a blank through it, and the wire snapped. We were in shorts, barefoot, diving for cover—that wire would take your head off if it caught you in the neck. We kept trying to make a better wire, but it kept breaking. We had wires whipping around every other day. Finally, we got it right."

The basic design quest was (and is) for greater lightness without loss of strength—for a faster, more maneuverable, more responsive surfboard. In the midst of the sixties craze, some companies from outside the surfing world began to make molded boards. These were crude knockoffs, and although they were inexpensive, surf shops refused to carry them. They were sold, instead, at Sears and Montgomery Ward, and bought only by the clueless. Serious surfers wanted to ride the same boards that the top riders—featured in magazines and surf movies—rode. A real surfboard was hand-shaped and hand-glassed, and could be made only by a surfer.

I started surfing in the mid-sixties and, though fairly clueless myself, I knew enough not to go near a "pop-out"—a mass-produced, molded board. I first got a good look at pop-outs on the beach at Waikiki, where they were rented to tourists. They were huge, indestructible pink-and-white beasts. They seemed more related to barges or scows than to surfboards. The first board I bought, when I was eleven years old, was secondhand, but it came from Dave Sweet, a reputable builder. My next board, financed by weed-pulling, was made for me, and cost a hundred and twenty dollars. I ordered it, carefully specifying the length, the tail width, the color, and anything else I could think to specify, from Larry Felker, a shaper in my Southern California home town, and then prayed that it would arrive in less than six months.

Felker was a celebrity in my adolescent world, though his company was, in truth, just a half step above a garage operation. Even the big boardmakers, with shops on the Coast Highway, were only a couple of steps above the garages. But the difference in price between a factory-made knockoff and a top-of-the-line custom board was surprisingly small. That was in part because the shapers and other surfer-workers were so poorly paid—an exploitation relieved, in theory, by the unquantifiable benefit of working in the coolest possible industry. (Also, when the surf was good nobody was really expected to show up at work.) Boardmakers believed, moreover, that if they raised their prices surfers would just go down the street. Despite the sport's popularity, nobody was getting rich selling surfboards. Gordon Clark, however, was doing very well making blanks.

"Blowing foam is a black art," Bill Bahne told me. Bahne, a sun-browned, cheerful man who seems to have carefully divided his time, over a long career, between the surf and running various factories, is chairman of the board builders' group at the Surf Industry Manufacturers Association. He went on, "If the sun is out, your foam will come out different. Humidity is crucial. Gordon tried to control all the variables, at huge expense. Even the big chemical companies that make the raw materials—Bayer, BASF—couldn't make foam as good as Clark's."

To make a blank, the main components of polyurethane are mixed together and poured into a two-and-a-half-ton concrete mold, roughly surfboard-shaped, where they froth and rapidly expand. Innumerable things can go wrong—air bubbles, soft spots, hard spots, pour streaks. Clark's tinkering was meticulous and tireless. Much was made of his "formula," which he refined constantly. He also wrote long, fantastically detailed manuals for his workforce, which grew to more than a hundred. In an interview with an obscure surf magazine in 1972—the last formal interview I've been able to find—Clark said, "It takes a long time to develop your particular process and it's just a lot of little two-bit tricks." He added, "There's no romanticism in foam. . . . It's dirty, messy, and it's hard work."

It's also hazardous. Clark made his own resins, in a polyol reactor, from isocyanates that he bought by the ton. Bill Bahne told me, "That polyol reactor was like an A-bomb. You really wouldn't want to have a reactor without the safeguards and knowledge that Gordon had." Bahne, contem-

plating starting a foam-blank company himself, once showed part of Clark's polyurethane formula to polymer chemists at a major company. "And they said, 'This is dangerous. This is for a guy who can drive an eight-thousand-horsepower dragster.' Gordon could do it. But these polychemists said, 'No way. Do *not*.'"

Of the blanks produced by the various early manufacturers, Clark's were not the easiest to work with. Chuck Foss made big, soft, powdery blanks that shaped like butter but lacked strength. Harold Walker's were creamy, spongy, and a pleasure to have in the shaping bay. "Grubby's blanks were brittle, and mean to work," one early shaper told me. "But they had the best cell structure: small and tight. And he listened to shapers."

Clark could be morbidly competitive. Don Hansen, an early boardmaker in Encinitas, once hired two Clark ex-employees to help him make his own blanks. Clark sued Hansen. In the small community of boardmakers, people were appalled. Hansen won the case, and Clark did not lose gracefully. Until then, he had sold his blanks exclusively to the established boardmakers. Now, in his view, they had betrayed him by moving into his niche. His revenge was to start selling blanks to anyone—amateurs, garage shapers, kids—at the same low price he charged big customers.

Clark also started punishing disloyal customers. If his deliverymen spotted someone else's blanks in the racks outside a shaper's bay, the boardmaker would hear about it. "His drivers would say, 'Hey, you got some oddball blanks in here. What's going on?'" a second-generation California boardmaker told me. "And maybe you'd get a call from Grubby, or somebody else at Clark Foam. But your deliveries would definitely start slowing down." A few boardmakers stopped using Clark Foam. But nobody could make blanks as efficiently, as cheaply, or with such consistently high quality as Clark. Walker Foam—Clark's last real domestic competitor, though only a fraction of his size—closed in 1973.

Clark's was an unusual monopoly, though. For all his forward-thinking industrial practice (and competitive ruthlessness), he had done more to keep board building a cottage industry than anyone. Thanks to his inexpensive blanks, garage shapers were flourishing in every beach

town on both coasts, in Hawaii, even in Europe, South Africa, and South America. And they were crucial to a board-design revolution that started in Australia, in 1967, and that soon reduced the average size of a surfboard from nine and a half feet long and more than twenty pounds to seven feet and less than ten pounds. (Later, it would fall toward six feet and six pounds.) Many big-name boardmakers, saddled with large inventories of longboards, got hit hard. Some of the new back-yard shapers found favor with the top riders and became the next big-name boardmakers. Clark Foam was the only established company that slid through the shortboard revolution unscathed.

Clark had always tried to give shapers blanks of whatever shape, size, density, and stringer arrangement they wanted. As board design got dramatically more subtle and varied, he began to build special concrete molds based on "plugs" that the top shapers provided him. Eventually, he was publishing a catalogue offering blanks in more than seventy shapes, at eight densities, with stringers in four different woods, along with a library of five *thousand* templates for the "rocker"—the lengthwise curve in the bottom of the board. The variations were effectively endless.

Rocker is a critical element in shortboard design. Once, in the days of redwood and balsa, boards were basically flat from nose to tail. Today, serious surfers believe that every sixteenth of an inch of rocker in a blank template matters. Clark developed what became known as the "close-tolerance blank." His foam cores were no longer big, rough approximations of a surfboard for a shaper to transform with saw, planer, and sandpaper, but something very close to a board's finished shape. A skilled shaper could turn one into a wafer-thin, high-performance wave-riding instrument, ready for the glasser, in less than an hour. And, while the price of a finished shortboard ranges from four hundred to eight hundred dollars, until last year blanks still sold for less than a hundred dollars.

Clark's plant, which by 2005 had been in the same spot in the Laguna Hills for more than forty years, worked three shifts a day, often seven days a week, and was said to ship a thousand blanks a day. That number has never been confirmed, since Clark didn't release any figures. Still, Bill Bahne told me, "as a business model, it ranks with what anyone's done in the U.S."

Peter St. Pierre and his partners have run Moonlight Glassing since 1979. Many thousands of surfboards have been shaped and glassed in the bright warehouse space they lease in an industrial zone a few miles from the coast in northern San Diego County. St. Pierre is an affable, bearded craftsman in his early sixties. In his opinion, Clark's close-tolerance blanks weren't good for the latest generation of shapers. "Grubby took a lot of the guesswork out of it for them—they could poach other people's rockers," he told me, one morning in June. "We get young guys who call themselves shapers who will bring us a board without fin markings. They just say, 'Put 'em where you want.' They don't even understand fin theory!" Fins are inserted after a board is glassed—and glassing is the basic service Moonlight provides, along with custom paint jobs—but their placement, number, shape, and size are supposed to interact dynamically with a board's design. However, St. Pierre also sees some of the best artistry around. Wandering through his shop, I noticed racks of magnificently shaped blanks, awaiting color and glassing. In a rack of boards to be patched, I saw the scribbled names of some of the world's top surfers.

Moonlight is a word-of-mouth establishment. It doesn't sponsor any surf stars, or feel the need to advertise. In that sense, although St. Pierre is well known, his business is pure garage. "I don't want to just mindlessly send out boards," he said. "I like to have interactions with the customer. I see our boards in the water, I want to know how they're riding. How's it flexing? Everything, good and bad. It's the only way to archive what really works—at the beach." He took a sip of tea. "Boards can be like a tennis ball. They can go flat after a few weeks. And they can come alive again, too." He laughed. "You know how it is."

After forty years of surfing, I suppose I do. But I still have no idea what part of a board's performance to attribute to the glass job, to foam density, to fin placement. I generally figure the main variable is my state of mind.

At that moment, a trim, dark-haired man appeared, accompanied by a boy. They were carrying newly finished boards, looking shy and pleased, and they thanked St. Pierre. "He shaped those himself," St. Pierre said. The man's board was a rudimentary shape, but his son's was a tiny, finely wrought three-fin shape known as a thruster. It looked to be of professional quality. On the bottom of the board was a graceful painting of a compass rose. I assumed that was Moonlight's work. But St. Pierre said, "He did that, too. All we did was the glass and fins."

Not many surfers shape their own boards these days—or ride boards shaped by their dads. "But the back-yard guys are the heart and soul of design innovation," St. Pierre told me. He rattled off a list of shapes and shapers, all famous in the world of surfing. "The Campbells made the Bonzer in their back yard. Stevie Lis made the Fish in his back yard. Even the shortboard came out of a back yard—it was a grassroots revolution. Surfboards have always been a homemade thing. All the businesses are just offshoots of some guy's garage."

In the early nineties, top shapers began to experiment with computerized shaping machines. They would supply a master blank of a shape that rode especially well, elaborate measurements would be taken, and these would be programmed into a foam-cutting machine, producing a virtually identical board that required very little hand finishing. This represented a large savings in labor, and, as the price of shaping machines dropped, some of the major boardmakers bought their own. Clark opposed this development, on the ground that it jeopardized the health of the handmade-surfboard industry. But machine-shaped boards were an attractive option not just for overworked shapers but for professional surfers as well. Their boards are, as a rule, the lightest, thinnest, most highly refined instruments in use—meaning, also, the most delicate. Pros ride their boards unusually hard. They take big chances, in powerful waves, and may break any number of boards in the course of a season of competition. They do not want to have to adjust to a handmade board's quirks every time they jump on a new one.

There was also a new line of pop-outs being developed by experienced surfers and shapers, who believed that polyurethane foam had reached the limit of its potential. It was time, some boardmakers

PRISONER'S RIGHT

Yoke of years that we lived in a prison
Grants no rights: we're entitled to naught.
Not to pulpits. Nor lecterns. Nor glory.
Nor power. Nor halos of saints.
Nor in memoirs to mix with fatigue
Our colorless ashen complaints,
Nor that armies of youths should now run astride life
By the path that we treaded for them.
All will go as 'twill go. There's no point
To pound out the wheel's rut in advance.
An illumined interior suffering core:
May, for everything, this be our one recompense.
It's the loftiest gem of all earthly gemstones.
And, to carry it home undefiled,
Let, of our phantom rights, then, the very least be:
Our secreted right to an equal revenge.
There's a number. So endlessly long,
Comprehensible just to Chinese and to Russians,
All those fallen, extinguished, without guilt or trace:
In that number we're nil upon nil upon nil. . . .
Our right is but one:
To be rancorless sons
Of our luckless and sad Russian land.
Let our grievances burn, rot, decay deep inside
To the outside we'll spring living shoots: only then,
Looking up, will our Russia's fatigued countryside
See the Sun it awaited so long.

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

(Translated, from the Russian, by Ignat Solzhenitsyn.)

believed, for the development of a stronger, lighter board from new materials, perhaps some form of molded plastic. Prototypes were built in California, but when these were ready to go into mass production the work was done in Thailand. For Clark, this was a double blow—post-polyurethane pop-outs that were not barges, and that were made overseas with cheap labor.

Although Clark gave no interviews, he had, for many years, sent roughly annual state-of-the-industry letters to his customers. In 2004, he devoted much of his letter to the threat of overseas, particularly Asian, manufacturers. "Their approach to production and distribution will not follow our traditions but will be based more on conventional business school theory," he wrote. The "backyard" quality of American board building would be highlighted, humiliatingly, by the innovations of low-salaried engineers. "Looking at other manufacturing industries within the United States," Clark warned, "you will note that they have disappeared one hundred per cent. That could happen to surfboard manufacturing!"

The main hope of the American industry lay with what Clark called the "sophisticated buyer." This was a surfer who, in the hard-core case, insisted on working directly with a shaper, but anyone who could pick a board to ride from a well-stocked shop rack and give a "sound technical reason for the choice" qualified. Sophisticated buyers, presumably, would continue to reject the whole notion of generic surfboards produced anonymously by non-surfers, in faraway places, like pool toys.

The downside to increasing the number of such buyers was that the surf was too crowded already. This is the bane of most surfers' lives, and the main reason so many of us travel to the ends of the earth, camping on the sides of volcanoes and in equatorial rain forests. Clark largely stopped surfing in California long ago. After he bought a place in a rural area of the Big Island, in Hawaii, in the nineteen-seventies, and was introduced to some uncrowded local breaks, he is said to have resumed.

The crowds weren't only in the water. Orange County, a sprawling place that contains Laguna Beach, has grown in population fivefold since the days when Clark and Alter began their experiments. The Clark Foam factory, when it was built, was surrounded by cow pastures, orange groves, and bean fields in the Laguna Hills. Today, it is in the middle of an upscale suburb, Laguna Niguel, population sixty-five thousand. The hills around it are laced with tile-roofed subdivisions and shopping malls. A minatory pale-glass office building dominates the nearest bluff.

This encroachment brought Clark unwanted attention, mainly from the Environmental Protection Agency, several state environmental agencies, the county fire marshals, and something called the South Coast Air Quality Management District. There were concerns about toxic fumes, fire hazards, and worker safety: the polyurethane used in surfboards contains a possible carcinogen called toluene diisocyanate, or TDI. Clark revamped his ventilation system. But he grew frustrated with the inspectors. "They don't know chemistry," he complained to Reynolds Yater, and in one of his industry letters he wrote about having "to prove to some government idiots that my system worked."

In a non-union, cottage industry where glassers and shapers often work shirtless and in shorts, amid clouds of poisonous dust and fumes, Clark eventually had his employees who worked with foam wearing elaborate air-supply apparatuses, and regularly tested for chemical exposure. Still, he got hit with at least four workers'-compensation claims. (One of these cases, turning on exposure to TDI, was also filed as a wrongful-death suit in late July.) Clark's insurance went up, and so did his sense that he was being persecuted.

In 1993, Clark bought a large working ranch in central Oregon, and he began to spend more time there than he did in California. But he talked almost daily to

his managers at the plant, and continued to micromanage his company's strategic planning. And his business touch wasn't getting any lighter. His old partner, Hobie Alter, had begun designing sailboats in the sixties—his Hobie Cat eventually became one of the world's most popular catamarans. Alter's board business was now a longboard specialty house. (Longboards, which are easier to ride, both for beginners and for aging surfers, had made a comeback, of sorts, beginning in the eighties.) His sons ran the surf business, using Clark blanks. Then Clark heard that they were trying to get some soft-top boards made in China. (Soft-tops are a new niche item, for beginners; they don't use polyurethane.) Clark apparently started giving them a hard time. Hobie heard about it, and they spoke. There were angry words, and they have had little contact since. "Gordon's always been very opinionated," Alter told me tightly. "And his opinions always work to his advantage."

As Clark passed seventy, the question of succession was raised occasionally. He had two children from his first marriage, but neither had shown an interest in the business. He had a stepdaughter from his second marriage, and she worked at Clark Foam for a while, then left. Clark seemed in no hurry to retire, anyway. His 2004 industry letter was widely considered one of his sharpest. It contained a lecture on tariffs and a disquisition on brand value that used, as an example, a prostitute who claims she's from Paris, and the prices she can charge, compared with a prostitute who says she's from Calcutta—vintage Grubby.

Then, in the summer of 2005, Clark took a trip to China. When he returned, he spoke to Luis Barajas, his wood-mill foreman. "He said, 'Luis, they got us. They build an Orange County every couple of days,' " Barajas told me.

Not long afterward, according to friends, Clark was in Hawaii, dirt-biking with Jimmy Pflueger, who is something of a local magnate, on Kauai. During a break, Pflueger told Clark a story. He had got into trouble with the state and the E.P.A. over some grading he'd done without a permit. There had been a rainstorm and a mudslide, and a lot of dirt had ended up on a coral reef. The state fined him four million dollars. The worst part, though, Pflueger said, was the way the government calculated some fines, compounding sums daily by a formula that, given time, could break the Federal Reserve.

Clark flew back to California. He brooded all weekend, according to a friend. On Monday morning, December 5th, he went into Clark Foam and approached the first worker he saw pouring foam into a mold. "That's it," he said. "That's the last foam we pour."

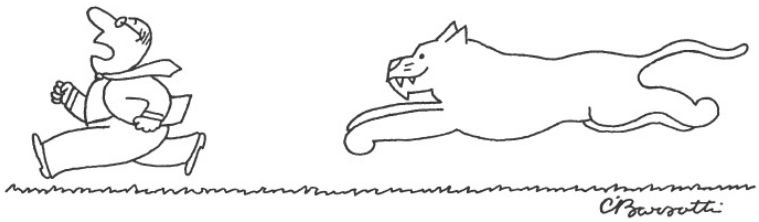
In the immediate aftermath of Blank Monday, the price of a blank doubled—if you could find one at all—and the prices of boards went up as much as two hundred dollars. Foreign blank manufacturers diverted shipping containers to California, Hawaii, and Florida, where shortages were most acute. Harold Walker, of Walker Foam, who had reopened, in a modest way, during the nineties to service the longboard revival, began ramping up production. There was a general scramble to hire Clark's ex-employees. And, within six months, there were two dozen new companies making, or preparing to make, polyurethane blanks for the American market, including four new factories in Mexico.

"There's good foam out there, but you've got to shuck and jive to get it. Nobody's up and running with a real program now," Tim Bessell, a veteran shaper, told me. I visited Bessell at his shop in La Jolla in June. He had a grab bag of blanks stacked outside his shaping bay. "These are from Brazil, England, Australia, South Africa, California," he said, pulling out blanks from the rack, grimacing. Bessell, who has been shaping for thirty years, had his worst quarterly loss in fifteen years during the first three months of 2006, and his second quarter was just as bad. "My gripe isn't Grubby quitting, but how he did it," he said. "This was a rash old man who decided, 'I'm taking my toys out of the sandbox, and fuck all you guys.' All he needed to do to be a hero was give three months' notice."

Alongside his traditional polyurethane-foam-core boards, Bessell had a number of alternative designs for sale. There were boards with cores of expanded polystyrene (EPS, the stuff of coffee cups), which has recently been refined to make it more shaper-friendly, and which does not have the TDI problem. There was a board with a core of extruded polystyrene, a material that Bessell praised. There were no examples of the most commercially successful pop-outs—the California-designed, Asian-made molded boards from a company called Surftech—but there was a remarkable-looking hollow board. It was black, and astonishingly light, with a carbon-fibre weave under an epoxy-resin skin. It even had a plug for draining any water that managed to get inside. At eleven hundred and fifty dollars, it was roughly twice what a regular shortboard costs. Some shapers believe that, in the long run, the forced innovation Clark brought about will be good. Even Bessell is excited about the possibilities. The big question, though, is whether the independent hand-shaper will be able to survive, economically, without the extraordinary support that Clark Foam provided. Everyone, including Bessell, says, "There will never be another Clark Foam."

Clark did end up selling most of his wood mill, where the stringers were made, along with his library of rocker templates. Green Valley Mill, in Oceanside, bought both, and hired Luis Barajas and his crew.

When I visited Green Valley, I got to see the great rocker library—thousands of long, curved, color-coded strips of wood, covered with runic markings—as well as the special basswood from Wisconsin that



"And the beauty and wisdom of the Western canon—that doesn't impress you?"

Clark found after a lengthy search. The basswood's unusual grain makes it extra strong when cut into a banana shape for a stringer, and it became known as Clark Select. But the glue presses at the mill, compared with the ones Clark destroyed, were primitive—a bunch of hand clamps on blanks that were anchored with rusty, concrete-filled car-wheel rims. No one has figured out how to rebuild the lost machines.

At Green Valley, I met Bill Bahne, the surf-industry veteran. He is a principal in one of the new blank-production companies, which owns Green Valley Mill. Some of his blanks were there, waiting to be glued up with stringers. They were made of a new, TDI-free polyurethane, but they had consistency problems. Bahne studied them dubiously. "It's a lot of trial and error," he said. I had seen his catalogue; it offered three plugs, and, like every new blank catalogue I'd seen, it described its meagre offerings in terms of the Clark plug that each model was meant to replace. When Clark said he was the standard, he wasn't wrong. In some ways, despite the futuristic talk now filling surf magazines—about greener, stronger new materials and technologies—board building has taken an evolutionary step backward.

I got a glimpse of the post-Clark Foam world in May, when I went to Indonesia in search of uncrowded waves. Half a dozen of us had booked a boat, with a home port in West Java, to sail to an uninhabited island farther west. Much of the discussion before we left concerned what boards to bring.

Peter was bringing a Surftech, which shocked me. He's a serious, skilled surfer, with plenty of boards, and here he was relying on a weird molded-plastic contraption that he hadn't even test-ridden. The thing was indestructible, he said, and he liked the challenge of learning to ride it. Kevin brought a couple of boards, including a brand-new thruster with an EPS foam core. That was going to be his experimental ride.

I settled on an odd pair: the first board Owl Chapman shaped for me, ten years ago, and a nearly identical one that he had made more recently. Chapman, who was a top big-wave rider in his youth, was working, last time I saw him, in a ramshackle shed in the jungle on the north shore of Oahu, living pretty much board to board. (I tried to reach him to get his views on the Clark Foam shutdown, but he has no phone.) I had been trying to get someone to reproduce the first board, which I adored, since shortly after I got it; Chapman himself had failed when I asked him to try. I heard about a kid on Long Island with a reputation for being able to replicate any board, and he made a valiant effort. The board he shaped rode well, but it was more conventional than my great Owl board, and it didn't drive through waves with the same authority. And it snapped within weeks, in Fiji.

That first Owl had been retired for years—it had so many dents and patched dings that it looked like a piece of tropical flotsam. But I happened to get it down and ride it earlier this year, on a whim, and was stunned to find that it had as much life in it as ever. St. Pierre was right: resurrection sometimes occurs.

Once we reached the island, Kevin's new board broke almost immediately—snapped in two by a relatively small wave. We couldn't decide if the EPS core was at fault; maybe the glasser had been unfamiliar with epoxy resin, and had just made the shell too light.

Peter seemed mystified by his Surftech's performance. His surfing is usually flowing and powerful; now he was throwing his board around in small, weak arcs. He fiddled with his stance, his fin arrangement. Finally, he borrowed a saw from the boat's skipper and cut a big piece off his middle fin. That seemed to improve matters, but he still wasn't himself. I blamed the Surftech.

I want to see independent shapers survive, but I don't see how anyone can stop Costco from selling Chinese-made knockoff boards at half the price of American originals. Parents buying first boards for their kids will shop there. Experienced surfers—the "sophisticated buyers"—are looking for something else, and somebody will figure out how to make it. In the meantime, if surfboards generally get more expensive and less satisfying to ride, the crowd problem may even ease. Not that I've seen anything to suggest that yet. In the bay off the uninhabited island west of Java where we went in May, three other boats full of surfers—from Europe, Australia, and New Zealand—also showed up and anchored, looking for waves. ♦