

# STATE OF THE NATION



**There's been a fair bit of discussion recently on the state of the UK bodyboard scene. With new brands emerging and arguably the best competition season for many years, ThreeSixty asked Rich Hall (left) from the British Bodyboard Club to give an opinion on the way things are developing in the UK and what the BBC is doing.**

We're now nearly a year on from the initial BBC re-launch meeting, where a few like-minded bodyboarders got together to discuss the UK scene and what we could potentially do to help it. There were plenty of other people who could (and in retrospect probably should) have been invited, but we knew that if we didn't start the ball rolling nothing was going to happen in 2007. We pulled some ideas together and spoke to a few more people, and the rest is

history.

The subsequent delays we experienced through the in-fighting at the BSA have been well documented — it was a frustrating time for us all. We had many plans for 2007 that just kept being put back because we couldn't get people to sign off on them. In the end we just had to take the initiative and take a punt organising things on our own, and fortunately most of what we did has turned out okay so far.

The web forums have been full of discussion recently about the current state of UK bodyboarding. People have put forward a lot of very interesting perspectives, especially on [www.kernowbodyboarding.co.uk](http://www.kernowbodyboarding.co.uk), and many of these points are issues that the BBC has been exploring in the last eight months or so. I'm not going to try and cover everything, but I thought people might be interested in what we've been doing in some of the following areas:

**TV COVERAGE.** The whole TV exposure=sponsorship=money premise was fairly prominent in our minds from the start. We had a number of discussions about the best way to achieve some TV exposure for UK bodyboarding and we explored a series of potential terrestrial and pay-to-view opportunities with different production companies. As we found out, TV companies are happy to consider broadcasting footage, but they won't pay for it; so a creditable programme would have to be externally funded. We had extensive discussions with the makers of C4s 'Freesports' programme (as terrestrial TV would obviously maximise exposure), but in the end they couldn't fit us in to their 2007 schedule; but encouragingly they were open to the concept. We believe getting a good bodyboard showcase documentary programme out there is a great idea (and one that's still on our agenda), but it's a lot easier said than done.

**SPONSORSHIP** There seems to be two angles here, internal 'surf industry' sponsorship and external sponsorship from outside of the industry. Some of you might remember a piece written a couple of years ago in ThreeSixty by Brandon Foster about how bodyboarders could potentially make an impression on the mainstream surf industry by not buying their products. I don't necessarily agree with that, as in the UK the 'top tier' surf brands like Billabong, Rip Curl, Quiksilver, Animal, have all become part of the generic fashion industry. These brands are no longer 'owned' exclusively by the surfing public, so I don't see that one small segment boycotting their product will make any impression. Equally, I don't think our limited purchasing power will make a huge impact on their marketing strategy. So how do we engage with them? If you go into most Animal shops you will see some 'action sports' footage on their TV loop; part of this is additional footage from Jack John's segment on ATG. Of all the mainstream brands Animal are the only ones

actively utilising bodyboarding in their advertising, so perhaps they are the company for us to focus on?

**EXTERNAL SPONSORSHIP** As most people are aware, Smith & Williamson and Solomon Hare have sponsored the Nationals for three years in a row. They have also underwritten both the Student and English bodyboarding events this year too. We are fortunate to have found them, but their budget is likely to become more stretched in the years to come (as they are starting to focus on the 2012 Olympics). We're hoping to keep them involved, but it would be prudent to start to think about a medium term replacement. Input and leads from the bodyboarding public will be vital in this, and our efforts for the 2008 events will begin in December this year. We have been given some interesting new leads and we'll be following those up, but if anyone has any thoughts, ideas or leads please let me know at [rich@british-bodyboardclub.co.uk](mailto:rich@british-bodyboardclub.co.uk). We are also carrying out a survey of the UK bodyboarding public [see [360mag.co.uk](http://360mag.co.uk) —Ed.] and this will help us as we go forward.

**DEMOGRAPHICS** I'm moving more into the realms of personal opinion now, but I believe UK bodyboarding could be in the middle of a demographic step-change. What I mean by that is that we seem to be retaining the generation of bodyboarders who are now in their mid- to late 20s. In years gone by there would have been a temptation either to drop bodyboarding and move over to stand-up, or give up bodyboarding entirely as other life pressures started to impact on them. But there seems to be a stronger group identity around bodyboarding these days, which is fostered and developed by the online communities like KBB and others; people are remaining loyal to bodyboarding. These guys are at the height of their spending power, and are the recipients of a well developed kit distribution network that has driven prices down. This has to be a positive thing for the next generation of bodyboarders too, seeing the guys that they surf with and look up to staying loyal to their sport.

Also, bodyboarding is starting to attract (or attract back) the 30- and 40-something market. These are (in the main) guys with families and other commitments, but they tend to be people with influence and contacts — a resource that can potentially be utilised to good effect. The girls are getting their stuff together too, with a couple of clubs/forums in their infancy.



**LAURIE MCCALL DOES A FAIR IMPRESSION OF ROACH AT LEVIE.**

**GROUP IDENTITY** I touched on this earlier; as a group I believe bodyboarding in the UK is starting to build a stronger group identity than at any time before. Standup surfing has hundreds of years of history behind it and has been part of the general public's psyche since the '50s; we however have only had a couple of decades to build our culture. US, Australian and now UK clothing brands furnish us with distinctive apparel; our kit is cutting edge and no longer a joke, and amongst the standups who count there is a begrudging recognition that bodyboarding has earned its place in the surfing world. I think our profile is increasing considerably, and this presents us with an opportunity to capitalise upon.

**EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION** We all have a responsibility to maintain our group ethos. I know a number of relatively new bodyboarders who have stuck with the sponge because they like how friendly a bunch we are. There are still a few egos out there, but generally the camaraderie in and out of the water is a big plus. If you see another bodyboarder in the water who you don't know, our first reaction tends to be a nod and a quick

"Alright?" rather than the sneer of "I'm cooler than you" misplaced self importance we've all seen from the other side....

**TO GROW OR NOT TO GROW?** That is the question. A reliable industry source recently estimated that up to 40,000 bodyboards will be sold in the UK in 2007; of which only 5% would be top-end boards. Given that (say) 60% of serious bodyboarders buy a new board each year that means that there may have been anything up to 800 'new' bodyboarders making an appearance in UK waters. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? We increase our influence as a market segment, but there will be more pressure on limited waves. Aside from its accessibility, many people are attracted to bodyboarding rather than standup surfing because it has a more 'underground' character without the pretentiousness of other areas of the sport. So to maintain our defining characteristics within the context of the growth of the UK bodyboarding public will be a real challenge, but one the BBC will be spearheading.