

# Bob 'Ole' Olson recognized among all-time great surfboard shapers

BY WALTER CHIHARA

POSTED: August 12, 2010



Bob "Ole" Olson will be honored for his induction into the International Surfboard Builders Hall of Fame at the 16th annual Ole Longboard Classic at Laniupoko Beach Park on Saturday. Photo by Walter Chihara.

LAHAINA — Long about 73 years ago, a youngster named Bob Olson gazed over the cliffs at Palos Verdes in Southern California in fixed amazement at surfers riding waves in the ocean down below him.

"I've never lost that vision of those guys surfing down there," said Bob "Ole" Olson today.

Fast forward down the line across those 73 years to the Ole Surfboards shop in the heart of Lahaina's industrial district, and you'll find Olson still in the soul of the Hawaiian Sport of Kings.

He's ridden hundreds of thousands of waves in locales around the world and continues to shape and produce surfboards — now approaching 10,000 — for surfers and art collectors from the Mainland to Japan.

Ole is now in an elite group of surfboard shaper-artisans — those that still hand plane their product from a template drawn on a foam blank or sometimes wood, rather than from electronically measured, massed and mold produced "pop outs" of the industry.

His boards are being ridden on the shores of Tokyo to the perfection of Malibu, and down the line at Trestles and over the ocean to the pristine curls of Mala Wharf in West Maui.

The surfboards also sparkle as artful wall pieces in parlors and shops of surf aficionados from all walks of life.

This weekend, Bob Olson's passion and positive influence on the sport and culture of surfing will be recognized, as he will be honored as the 39th inductee to the International Surfboard Builders Hall of Fame.

Most fittingly, the presentation will be the feature event of the 16th annual Ole Longboard Classic at Launiupoko Beach Park on Saturday, Aug. 14.

The ISB Hall of Fame award originated in 1999 in a "talk story" session between longtime Huntington Beach surfers and industry businessmen Bob "The Greek" Bolen of Surfboards by Greek and Mike "Mickey Rat" Ester.

"We wanted to find a way to recognize the board builders and decided to go for it with this award," said Ester, who has come to Maui annually over the last ten years to surf and visit with Ole.

"The first winner was Bill Holden, and other winners were Dale Velzy, Hap Jacobs, Maui's Woody Brown and Ole's fellow 2009 inductees Phil Becker, Barry Bennet, Mike Doyle, Delbert "Bud" Higgins and Barry "BK" Kanaiaupuni.

"It was past winner Phil Edwards who nominated Ole for this recognition," added Ester after a session at Mala last week to prepare for the contest this weekend.

"Ole has been a great friend to me and is a nice person and a bundle of (surfing) history. I ride an Ole board."

Ester explained that Ole couldn't make it to the award ceremony last December on the Mainland. "So, we decided that where would be a better place than at the Ole contest? We present a handcrafted trophy to each inductee," he said.

Olson, who celebrated his 80th birthday last November with his wife, Beverly, at his side, remains the gentle, natural progression of the soul of surfing into the new millennium.

It was 62 years ago that he rode his first wave in the shadow of Huntington Beach Pier, and soon after that, Ole began crafting his own boards under the guidance of legendary mentors Hobie Alter and Harold Walker.

After working as an industrial arts teacher at Rancho Alamitos High School and military service in the Korean War, Olson set up his first shop in Seal Beach, California.

The Ole evolution then set its roots — set its fin for a sweeping bottom turn — in the sleepy aura of 1971 Lahaina.

He had planned to stay for a year or so — but he never left — and the man has outlived his surfboard shops at an old garage (where Blackie's is now) and another within the old Cannery.

His current location is tucked in the tube way back in the Lahaina Industrial Area, where only those with a relationship to the true soul of surfing can find it to order a board — Ole puts out about 100 a year — or one of his classic T-shirts.

Closing in on 50 years in the artful passion, Ole sees the light of the beauty and treasure of Lahaina living.

“There is so much to life here. It is such a beautiful place, it was too good here to leave. Maui has everything — we just spent two nights in Haleakala Crater, and I like to ride waves at Mala Wharf.”

Perhaps Kim Ball of Hi-Tech Maui, one of the leaders of the water sports industry on Maui today, said it best: “Ole is a rare gem. He continues to be through the ages an outstanding artisan who handcrafts boards, which few do today. He still paddles into waves at 80 years old. He's a legend.”