

King lid quite a Player



Quiet achiever .. Ben Player's enjoying the ride of his life.

Photo: *Simon Alekna*

Will Swanton

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GO HOME LIDS.

There used to be a sign spray-painted with those disrespectful words on a wall at one of the great breeding grounds of Australian surfing, Merewether Beach in Newcastle.

It was a directive for anyone riding a bodyboard to piss off, basically.

The consensus was that if you couldn't stand up, you couldn't surf and should go and play with the children between the flags.

Bodyboarders who did take their esky lids into the *real* surf were treated worse than lepers.

Sydney's Ben Player is trying to change perceptions - and succeeding. He's won the past two world titles and gained the respect of the undisputed king of traditional boardriding, Kelly Slater. In Australia, he walks around unnoticed but overseas, he's a superstar.

"Ben gets a fair share of respect from the crew there," Slater says of Player paddling into the cauldron of Pipeline in Hawaii, where locals let you know with their fists if you're not welcome.

"He doesn't really say all that much but seems to get the job done right. He has a good eye for how to ride a wave. A great surfer is a great surfer, no matter what they ride."

Player has earned his dues.

Overcoming fear is the one true way to earn respect in the water and he's done that time and again. A savage wipeout at Teahupoo in Tahiti left him with blood pouring from both ears. He takes the drop on Pipeline bombs that others shy away from. He tackles the ferocity of Arica in Chile without flinching.

"That world title - it's so bloody important to me," Player says.

"I'd been dreaming about it since I was 10. It was something I really wanted to do but there was a stage when it looked I might be running out of time. There's not much recognition here in Australia, no one has a clue who I am and the sport doesn't get much of a mention.

"But I want it to boom. The more people get to see it, the more they'll get into it.

"We're all out in the water, we're all out there because we love the ocean and want to ride waves. It doesn't matter what you ride. Who says one car is better than another?"

There have been rough patches.

Three years ago, he lost more than \$100,000 in sponsorships in one day, meaning he could barely afford the umpteen coffees a day he likes to guzzle.

In 2005, a defining moment: a world tour event at Shark Island off Cronulla was hampered by poor swell. Competitors had the choice of either splitting the \$120,000 prizemoney and ranking points, or throwing themselves into heats.

Player wanted to get out there. No one else did. The contest was cancelled. His frustration left him sobbing with anger in his car.

He went out and surfed to show his defiance at the decision of his rivals. 'You fools,' he thought. 'This is what we're supposed to do.' He came back in with a slashed hand - but a point proven.

He powered to two world titles. Today, his quest for a third begins at Pipeline, one of surfing's greatest cauldrons.

He's starting to feel the love. The sign at Merewether saying *GO HOME LIDS* is no longer there.

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