

Compiled by Phil Mehan

PLEASED AS PUNCH

Phil Mehan, 72, says he punched a 20-year-old man recently at Torrance Beach because he was surfing too close to the swimming area.

From: [The Daily Breeze](#) - July 5, 1997 †

By Keith Sharon
STAFF WRITER

The old man popped the young surfer in the mouth, one quick jab for the ages.

The problem started June 20 at Torrance Beach when the young surfer, 20, maneuvered his board a little too close to the old man, 72, who was bodysurfing in waves where he has ridden nearly every day for more than 55 years.



Jay Findley

Phil Mehan, a Redondo Beach shopping center developer nearing retirement, yelled about keeping surfboards out of the swimming area, which is marked by red flags. Jay Findley, a Torrance surfer,

Senior citizen hangs five on surfer at Torrance Beach

yelled back. It was an argument that is not unfamiliar at Torrance or any beach.

"Most people are more sensible than I am," Mehan said. "They get out of the surfer's way."

Mehan kept bodysurfing in the same spot.

The young surfer, "an Adonis" Mehan would say later, hopped off his board and charged the old man.

And the old man, who "did some prizefighting" in the 1940s, balled up his fist and let it fly. The punch drew blood from the young surfer's lip.

There was the old man's wife, Iris, standing on the beach watching the whole thing.

"They've got all those other areas to surf," Iris Mehan said. "So why are they surfing between the

red flags? There are children there."

She saw the stunned surfer recoil from the punch, grab her husband and start pummeling him under water.

A lifeguard stopped the fight before the old man stopped breathing.

Torrance police spokesman Ed LaLonde said the case is under investigation. A police detective is trying to determine just who is at fault.

Mehan wants Findley arrested on suspicion of felony battery, while Findley is angry that Mehan got the police involved.

"He hit me first," Findley said. "What am I going to do? Let some 72-year-old man hit me? He busted my lip open.

"He hit me so I tried to drown him."

Findley said Mehan caught him by surprise.

"I didn't think he was brave enough to hit me," Findley said.

That's where Findley made his first mistake.

Nobody messes with Phil Mehan, no matter how old he gets. He learned to fight at Gardena High School in the 1930s.

"I didn't want to fight this guy," said Mehan, rubbing his fist, which is still sore from the punch.

"I wouldn't have challenged this guy even when I was in my prime. But I don't back down."

Mehan, once a prominent South Bay real estate agent, made a name for himself almost two decades before Findley was born.

In May 1959, Mehan wound up on the front page of the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner* — above a story about Elizabeth Taylor marrying Eddie Fisher — for his dogged pursuit of a bandit who had stolen hundreds of real estate signs from the

lawns of homes in Hollywood Riviera.

To catch the thief, Mehan tied one end of a fishing line to his sign and the other end to his wrist. Mehan slept a few feet inside the door of a house for sale.

But the thief cut the line and made off with the sign anyway.

Then Mehan tied his wrist to a line linked to another sign at another house.

This time, he buried the fishing line under the front lawn, hoping the thief wouldn't see it.

But the thief cut the line and got away with the sign, again.

So, Mehan got serious. He tied his wrist to another sign, but this time, he made the line taut — so taut that he had to sleep with his arm suspended over his head. When the thief cut the line, Mehan's arm fell.

He awoke, ran out of the house, chased the thief down the street and tackled him.

"I knocked him unconscious," Mehan said.

The thief, as it turns out, was an 80-year-old

man who sat on the Torrance Art Jury. He didn't like the look of real estate signs in the Hollywood Riviera neighborhood.

"Everything I get into gets complicated," said Mehan, who once drove 30 miles chasing a guy who stole the newspaper from his lawn.

Mehan tends to defend his position relentlessly when he feels he is confronted by injustice. He has been in his share of fights, of which he is not proud.

He drives his wife

crazy.

As Iris stood on the beach that day watching her husband fight, she wondered why he didn't leave the water and tell the lifeguard that the surfer was in the wrong place.

"I would rather him go to the lifeguard," Iris said.

"But he won't do that. It's ridiculous. Nowadays, you can't take things into your own hands."

"I'm not backing down, Iris," Mehan said, interrupting.

72-YEAR-OLD MAN WIPES OUT SURFER

From: [North County Times](#) - July 6, 1997 †

TORRANCE (ALP) Phil Mehan did some boxing in his younger days. And at 72, he still doesn't back down from a fight.

So when a young bodyboard surfer repeatedly strayed into a swimming area of Torrance Beach last month, the senior citizen popped him in the mouth.

The surfer had ignored the red flags and Mehan's

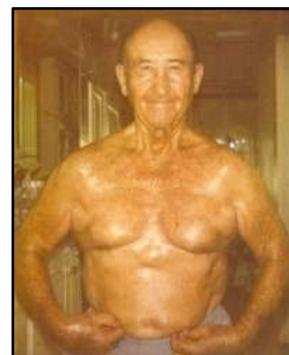
shout to stay out.

Mehan said 20-year-old Jay Findley hopped off the board and charged him, and he simply fought back.

Mehan's wife, Iris, watched as the surfer recoiled from the punch, then grabbed her husband and started pummeling him under water. A lifeguard stopped the June 20 fight.

Findley said he was the one attacked. "He hit me first," he told the Daily Breeze of Torrance. "What am I going to do? Let some 72-year-old man hit me? He busted my lip open. He hit me so I tried to drown him."

Mehan wants Findley arrested for investigation of felony battery.



Phil — Still surfing ten years later

==== SURF WARS ====

From: [Los Angeles Times](#) - July 21, 1997 †

■ **Ocean: Altercation between bodysurfer and surfboarder at Torrance Beach highlights the ongoing conflict over shoreline.**

By Alan Abrahamson
TIMES STAFF WRITER

It's a very big ocean, but there are only a few choice surfing spots.

So, in beach lingo, things sometimes do get aggro out there—as they

did one recent afternoon at Torrance Beach, when 72-year-old Phil Mehan, a body surfer, and 20-year-old Jay Findley, a surfboarder, got into a whale of a fight that has left both men urging

authorities to press criminal charges against the other.

Police expect to bring the case this week to the Torrance city prosecutor, who will decide if charges are warranted. Mehan

says Findley held his head under water for 30 to 45 seconds and tried to kill him. Findley has told police he had no intent to harm the older man—who, he alleges, hit him first, bopping him while both were still in the water with a left jab smack-dab in the kisser.

Their fight highlights a problem little known to those who don't regularly frequent Southern California beaches—the ongoing conflict between surfers and swimmers, both asserting a sense of ownership over this or that little patch of the big Pacific.

Hostility between surfers and swimmers is largely attributed to the same thing fueling an increase in recent years in surfer-on-surfer violence: too many people congregated in a small stretch of water, particularly at or near the same surf spot, or “break.” Sometimes those breaks are also prime swimming and body surfing locales.

“It is a problem and sometimes it's a nightmare,” said county lifeguard Lt. Bob Schroeder, who supervises the shoreline from Marina del Rey to San Pedro.

No statistics document the frequency of such fights, whether surfer versus surfer or swimmer versus surfer.

But, lifeguards said, it's fairly common to see shows of intimidation such as taunts and threats.

It's less common, lifeguards said, to see fists flail. But it does happen,

they said.

Usually, according to Schroeder, the warring parties are cautious enough to take their activity away from a lifeguard's watchful eyes—for instance, meeting in a parking lot back on shore.

There's an unwritten rule of beach culture that works as well, a rule that keeps authorities from fully documenting the frequency of fights over surf 'n' turf: If a fight does

sea.

Then, he said, “You've got two groups who want to use the water. And while they both love the water, they're not necessarily compatible.”

That, of course, is for the obvious reasons: A surfboard can zip through the water faster than any swimmer. And it can really hurt to get hit, even accidentally, with a surfboard—especially with a fin, which can cut like a knife.



Body Surfer Phil Mehan, foreground at Redondo Beach, was involved in altercation at Torrance Beach.

occur, neither party is likely afterward to run to a lifeguard—or to a police officer—to tattle. Unless there's injury, and serious injury at that, it's the sort of thing that's simply not done.

Nevertheless, Schroeder said, it's a fact of beach life that the conflict between surfers and swimmers swells in the late spring and summer.

For most of the rest of the year, when the skies are generally gray and foggy and the water is downright chilly, wetsuit-clad surfers “have owned the range,” Schroeder said. But when even the early morning sky is a vivid blue and the water warms up, swimmers increasingly return to the

For that reason, lifeguards establish zones to make it safer for swimmers—marked off by red flags planted ashore, typically about 150 feet apart.

When the red flags are up, these are the rules: If there are swimmers between the flags, no surfing within the flagged zone; if there are no swimmers, surfing between the flags is OK.

The only board-users allowed to mingle with swimmers and body-surfers are boogie-boarders, who ride a shorter, finless, flat foam board.

About 5:30 p.m. on June 20, Findley rode his surfboard between the red flags at Torrance

Beach, Police Det. Cindy Gayda said.

Even Findley admits he did, she said. Beyond that, however, Findley and Mehan have each offered a version of events that differs considerably from the other's, she added.

It is part of Mehan's daily schedule to go body-surfing. Mehan, a shopping center developer, said he has been bodysurfing in the waves off Redondo Beach and Torrance since he returned home from World War II.

On the afternoon in question, after he'd been in the water for about five minutes within the area marked by the red flags, Findley, surfing on his board, passed by within five or six feet, he said.

Mehan said he politely asked Findley to stay outside the red flags. Mehan said Findley immediately replied by swearing at him and declaring that no “old man was going to tell him where to surf.”

Mehan said he tried to catch another wave but had to dive under as Findley bore down on him again.

“What are you trying to do, kill me?” Mehan said he shouted. He said Findley replied, “I told you to get out of the water you . . . old man, or I'm going to kill you!”

Mehan said he tried to catch a wave to get back to shore. He said he got halfway there when Findley jumped off his surfboard and “began to physically attack me.”

In self-defense, Mehan

said, he fired a left jab. Findley, he said, grabbed him by the neck and held his head under water. Mehan said he came up for air for good only when a lifeguard separated them.

Findley did not respond to repeated attempts to contact him for comment. In an interview with police, however, he insisted that Mehan was the aggressor, according to Gayda.

Findley told police that he and Mehan argued after his first pass into the swim area.

Gayda said Findley told her that he hopped off his board after a second trip. He said Mehan yelled at him some more, shouting, "Can't you stay on your board?" and calling him a name.

"Total lie," Mehan said upon being told of Findley's comments. "I don't talk that way," he

said.

It's not clear, meanwhile, whether Findley was surfing into the swim area inadvertently or on purpose.



Jay Findley

"If [a surfer] gets a nice wave, they're not going to stop because of an invisible line in the sea," Schroeder said.

Added Steve Hawk, editor of Surfer magazine: "Every surfer has . . . ridden a wave into a bodysurfing zone. That's when you get extra-cautious and you get out

of there. The last thing you want to do is hurt somebody."

As Mehan was yelling at him, according to Findley's comments to police, he told the older man, "Why are you bugging me? Just leave me alone."

Findley, 5-10 and 175 pounds, said he headed for shore. Halfway there, he told police, he encountered Mehan, also heading for shore. They yelled at each other some more, Findley told detectives, and then Mehan, 5-11 and 190, adopted a boxer's stance.

That, Findley said, made him laugh.

The laughter, he told police, apparently enraged Mehan, who punched him in the mouth.

Mehan continued to swing at him, Findley told police. The only thing he could think to do, he said,

was to grab Mehan and "dunk his head under water a few times while waiting for the lifeguard to come out," according to Gayda.

Mehan "is adamant that the surfer tried to kill him," Gayda said. Findley, however, is equally adamant that "he did no such thing, he would never strike an old man, and he had not aimed his surfboard at the man," she said.

It will be up to the city prosecutor to determine whether to file charges against either man, or both, Gayda said.

Meanwhile, there's a long summer to go before most of the swimmers beat a wintry retreat. And, as magazine editor Hawk pointed out: "Waves are a rare gift. When they come, it's easy to get possessive. Too easy."

Torrance Plans No Charges in Surf Fight Over Turf

From: [Los Angeles Times](#) - July 26, 1997 †

By Alan Abrahamson
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The Torrance city prosecutor said Friday that he has decided not to file criminal charges against either a 72-year-old bodysurfer or a 20-year-old surfer who recently duked it out in the surf over turf.

Herman Herzbrun, the prosecutor, said he will not enter charges against bodysurfer Phil Mehan or surfer Jay Findley because there were no independent witnesses to their

June 20 fight in the water at Torrance Beach.

The fight spotlighted a conflict little known beyond the sands—the ongoing turf squabble between swimmers and surfers, a recurring problem for lifeguards that is caused by too many people congregating in a small stretch of water, particularly at or near the same surf spot, or "break."

"The technical reason for [not filing] is there

simply is not enough evidence to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt that one or the other is guilty of any offense," Herzbrun said.

He added "Besides, it would be heating up something that's better off cooling down."

Mehan and Findley fought in the water after a series of confrontations that began with the younger man surfing into a designated swimming zone late in the afternoon

June 20, Torrance police said.

For safety reasons, lifeguards frequently establish such zones to separate surfers from swimmers. Surfers obviously travel much faster on their boards than swimmers can swim. A board, if not properly controlled, can spear or slash an unwary swimmer.

Zones where surfing is prohibited are marked by red flags planted ashore, typically about 150 feet

apart.

Mehan alleged that Findley leaped at him, then held his head

underwater for 30 to 45 seconds and tried to kill him. Findley told police he had no intention of harming the older man—

who, he alleges, hit him first, with a left jab to the mouth.

“I’m glad it’s over

with.” Findley said Friday. Mehan could not be reached for comment.

Briefs: No charges in swimmer fracas

From: [The Daily Breeze](#) - July 27, 1997 †

Neither a 72-year-old body-surfer nor a 20-year-old surf-boarder will face criminal charges because the Torrance city prosecutor said there were no witnesses to their fight, according to a report Saturday.

The fight between Phil

Mehan, the bodysurfer, and Jay Findley, the surfboarder, June 20 at Torrance Beach was part of a fight between swimmers and surfers over a small stretch of water.

“The technical reason for (not tiling) is there

simply is not enough evidence to convince a jury beyond a reasonable doubt that one or the other is guilty of any offense,” said Herman Herzbrun, the prosecutor. “Besides, it would be heating up something that’s better off cooling

down.”

Mehan told Torrance police Findley held his head under water for upwards of 45 seconds, trying to kill him. Findley replied he had no intention of harming Mehan and said Mehan hit him first.

† News articles are facsimiles formatted to fit the page. Some photos were added.