



When surfing exploded in America in the mid-1960s, Greg Noll – a big wave rider himself – recognized the commercial potential. The story behind his Da Cat surfboard series makes models like this 1966 example exceptional, says James Malcolmson

## What is it?

This is a 1966 Da Cat model by Greg Noll Surfboards. Made from polyurethane foam and covered with fiberglass and polyester resin, it is a prime example of surfboard design as well as a cultural artifact from the period of surfing's explosive growth during the mid-1960s. The endorsement of Miklos "Miki" Dora – perhaps the most famous surfer of the era – made this board highly sought after, both by surfers and collectors.

## What influenced its design?

Following World War II, surfboard design moved away from the heavy solid-wood planks that had been customary in surfing's Hawaiian birthplace. Lighter materials like balsa wood – which was then covered with fiberglass – eventually gave way to foam cores as surfers sought boards that were adapted to Californian waves, specifically the perfect peeling waves of Malibu Point, where the handful of surfers in the 1950s enjoyed rides hundreds of yards long. A surfer would stand on the tail to turn the board and then move toward the nose, increasing speed across the wave face. Style in doing so was paramount, and few were emulated more than Dora, whose fluid footwork earned him the moniker "Da Cat."



Above: Miki Dora surfing in San Miguel, Baja California, in 1968. Although Dora rarely entered surfing contests, he usually did very well. However, he never adapted his distinctive

riding style – which earned him the nickname "Da Cat" – to please the judges. Previous page and right: an early 1966 model of Da Cat by Greg Noll Surfboards, inspired by Dora

## How did popular culture affect surfing?

The flurry of beach movies and popular music in the late 1950s and early 1960s changed everything. In southern California, the relatively small surfing population was joined by thousands of acolytes hungry for a piece of the dream. Some surfers, like Greg Noll, who had made a name for himself in the big waves of Oahu's north shore, took advantage of the situation. Noll was soon running his own surfboard factory, shipping well over a hundred boards a week to dealers across America.

Other surfers, however, resented the increasing numbers in the water. At the now intensely crowded Malibu, Dora could be seen weaving his way through the throngs, occasionally pushing interlopers off his waves. Dora snarled at the new commercial side of surfing, once dropping his trunks as he rode in front of the judges at a surfing contest. Yet he exploited his status, playing surfing stunt man in various films and regularly attending Hollywood parties.

Dora preferred European fashion to Hawaiian shirts and avoided the California beach scene, which further cultivated his mystique. This motivation may be why he held out for years before attaching himself to a "name model" surfboard. Out of all the manufacturers who courted Dora, Noll prevailed, perhaps because, as a big wave rider himself, his reputation was one Dora felt could stand alongside his own.

## Can a surfboard be a cultural touchstone?

Noll's Da Cat model generated a cult following, not so much because of any design pyrotechnics (the later, thinner versions were reportedly much better riders), but because of the advertising campaign that went with it. The ads, which appeared in the major surfing publications during the board's 1966-68 production run, captured Dora's provocative anti-commercial stance – even as he was

selling surfboards. Pictured sitting atop a trash can filled with his own surfing trophies; as a German pilot; even crucified on two surfboards, Dora's image and caustic commentary tapped into the conflict many surfers felt between the actual experience of wave riding and the beach party being sold to mainstream America.

In fact, it was all over just a few years later. By the late 1960s, a new generation of riders armed with much shorter, more maneuverable boards had established a more aggressive style than the graceful glide that had been developed in Malibu. Many of the major surfboard labels were unable to adapt and eventually shut down. Dora himself retreated to Europe and Africa, where uncrowded waves beckoned, and most of the eight thousand Da Cats manufactured – now hopelessly outdated – were relegated to garage rafters.

## How collectible is it?

As with many vintage collectibles, rarity and provenance add greatly to the value, with the highest prices generated by boards attributed to revered surfers in the "wood era" before the sport's meteoric growth. Continued interest in Da Cats, however, make them something of an exception. This model in original condition recently sold for US\$8,000, many times the price of equivalent name models from the '60s. It pays to know that most modern foam surfboards bear scars from use, including sun-yellowed foam and fiberglass damage. Skilled restoration can add significant value to boards with the right provenance. Original, pristine condition, however, is obviously preferred by most collectors. It seems the abrupt retirement (and preservation) of so many Da Cats at the end of the '60s might be paying dividends to collectors today. ♦

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