

# O'Neill, wetsuit pioneer, dies

By Teresa Watanabe, Santa Cruz Sentinel

Jack O'Neill, the Santa Cruz entrepreneur who opened one of the world's first surf shops and pioneered the neoprene wetsuit that helped popularize year-round cold-water surfing, has died. He was 94.

The one-eyed surfing icon, who cut a rakish figure with his black eye patch and bushy beard, died peacefully of natural causes at his Santa Cruz home, waves lapping at his deck, his family said in a statement.

Known for his colorful personality and marketing genius, O'Neill began experimenting in the early 1950s with ways to insulate swimwear so he could stay in the frigid Northern California waters longer. Surfers at the time were using sweaters sprayed with oily water sealant, he recalled in one interview.

He tinkered with foam rubber but switched to neoprene, which was lightweight and flexible. A UC Berkeley physics professor, Hugh Bradner, had created a prototype wetsuit and tested it in icy Lake Tahoe in 1950. O'Neill claims he hit on the idea of using neoprene in wetsuits after seeing the material in the carpeting of an airliner.

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