

Nippers

article and photographs by
Jill MacGregor

Every Sunday afternoon during the summer, the nippers of the Paekakariki Junior Surf Club go to the beach. They're not there just to build sandcastles and soak up the sun. They're training to become lifeguards in the future, and there's a lot to learn.

Today is the last Sunday of the season, and it's Beach Carnival Day. Junior Surf teams from other clubs are also coming to the carnival.

The sun's shining, the water's warm, and the surf is perfect. Before the visitors arrive, the nippers clean up the beach. They pick up pieces of driftwood and pumice, shells, and dried seaweed. Jake and Aidan even rake the sand smooth for the running races. They help the lifeguards put out the patrol flags and check the bodyboards.





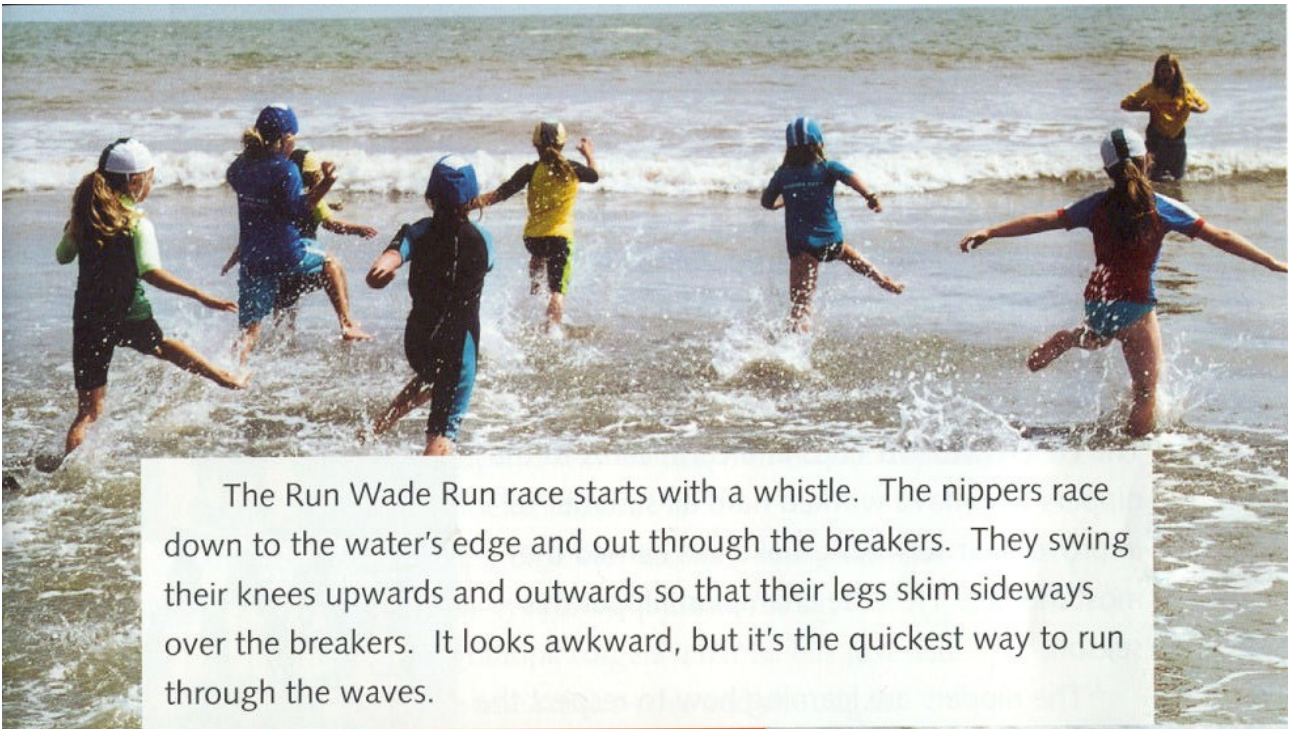
When it's time for the events, the nippers smear on sunblock, pull on their surf hats, and put on their bright new rash vests. The coach writes their ages on their hands.



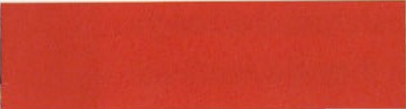
First up are the running races. As the nippers sprint across the sand, the spectators in the noisy crowd cheer for their favourite teams.

For the Beach Flags race, the nippers lie on the sand with their toes on the line and their chins in their hands. The starter calls, "Heels together. Heads up. Heads down ... GO!" The nippers have to be quick off the mark. They spring up, turn around, race across the hot sand, and dive for a piece of hosepipe (the "flag"). There's always one fewer flag than there are competitors. One by one, the nippers are eliminated until there's only one flag left. Aidan gets there first. He's the Beach Flag champ this time.

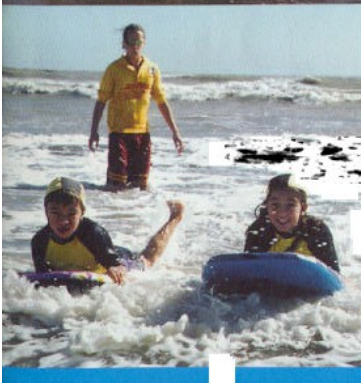




The Run Wade Run race starts with a whistle. The nippers race down to the water's edge and out through the breakers. They swing their knees upwards and outwards so that their legs skim sideways over the breakers. It looks awkward, but it's the quickest way to run through the waves.



The last event is the bodyboard race. At the starting line, the nippers tuck their boards under their arms and race for the water. They lift the boards over the waves and jump onto them. Then they paddle as fast as they can round the marker buoy. Ariana is the first to catch a wave back to shore and carry her board back over the sand to the finish line.



It's been a good day. Nobody needed rescuing. There were no injuries and no jellyfish stings, and everyone swam between the flags.

When all the guests have gone, the nippers hose down their boards and stack them neatly in the storeroom. Then it's prizegiving time. The coach presents cups and certificates to the nippers who have worked hard all summer to improve their surf skills. Jake has earned the most medals. He's the champion nipper this season.

The nippers are learning how to respect the sea and to enjoy their time safely at the beach. But they'll have to wait until they are fourteen before they can join the team of lifeguards who patrol the beach in summer. ■



In It for Life

Surf Lifesavers have been patrolling New Zealand beaches since 1910. In that time, they've saved many thousands of lives and prevented many serious accidents.

The aim of Surf Lifesaving New Zealand is to prevent drowning and injury at New Zealand beaches. Their motto is "In it for life".