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INSIDE MAVERICKS

PORTRAIT OF A MONSTER WAVE

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Introduction by Richard Schmidt

FORWARD

GRANT WASHBURN

He paddled for the first wave of the set, and missed it. It had been a spectacular session up to that moment, loaded with thrilling rides, but suddenly things had changed. It was Halloween 1992, one of the biggest days ever ridden, and the fun was over.

We'd talked many times about the mistake no one wanted to make at Maverick's, and my buddy had just made it. I looked toward the horizon as John struggled to turn his 10'6" around. It was too late. The set was big, many towering walls of water, all bearing down on the impact zone and my friend. There was no way to help, nothing to do but watch as he prepared for his ultimate nightmare.

The pit of my stomach dropped when the next wave sucked out in front of him. I'd surfed with John Raymond forever, and it felt like I was in there myself. I felt his pain and I saw his terror. There would be no escape, just the question of whether he could survive.

Ditching his board as the first wave reared over him, he got under it and eventually surfaced, but the wave sucked him deep into the maelstrom. The turmoil was horrendous as he fought to stay near the surface. Whirlpools of foam spun him down before the next wave arrived, and it was bigger than the last. He popped up again, his chin barely breaking the surface as he gasped for a breath, and the next heaving barrel was coming down right on top of him. He couldn't swim, dive, or do anything at all. Like a man buried up to his neck in sand, he was held while the thunderous impact decimated the surf zone.

I was shocked at the ferocity, the gravity, the mercilessness. Where was he? Would he be drowned? Dismembered? It seemed entirely possible that his head could be torn clean off. When the set was finished with him, he popped up, shaken but alive. Any comfort we might have gained from his survival was swept away by the shock of the encounter. We knew he had been lucky.

A day of huge surf by modern standards is a cataclysmic event. An ocean swell of 20 feet can double in height on impact, then explode with enough energy to light a city or flatten a town. Ocean swells are unpredictable, dangerous, and occasionally grow to 50 feet and beyond. Until recently, only a few brave souls in Hawaii challenged huge swells. The Hawaii-centric view of the big-wave universe has crumbled over the past ten years, and a new frontier, previously known as the "Unridden Realm," has become a playground. The biggest wave, the thickest barrel, the worst wipeout—each bar rises as ensuing generations make their mark. Surfers off the coast of California are frolicking on massive peaks far beyond our predecessors' wildest dreams. Suddenly, the small community of big-wave rid-

ing has grown, and the activity has aroused the world.

Jeff Clark first rode Maverick's in 1975. I was an awkward eight-year-old living in Connecticut. Peter Mel was just getting his water wings, and Jay Moriarity would not arrive for years. It would be 1990 before anyone took notice of Jeff's accomplishments, but he knew something special was rumbling beyond those jagged rocks near Half Moon Bay, and he wasn't going to wait. Those were quiet years for big-surf challenges. Small-wave performance was at center stage, and an adventurer like Mark Renneker could travel to Waimea Bay to find it desolate and perfect. Jeff's discovery would hang on the vine, awaiting discovery.

Meanwhile, just a few miles down the coast, some of the world's best surfers were honing their craft in Santa Cruz, and turning heads at places like Sunset Beach in Hawaii. Richard Schmidt led the charge, winning everyone's respect and admiration with his consistent performances in the islands. He earned an invitation to the 1990 Eddie Aikau contest at Waimea, and soon became California's leading authority on 20-foot surf. It would be Richard, with experience and credibility beyond reproach, whose historic session would finally break the Maverick's story to the surfing world.

Why are we fascinated by big waves? What compels someone to venture into the most treacherous conditions of the year, or the decade? Giant surf touches some of us at our core, delivering a primal jolt to our inner selves, and making us feel alive like few things in the modern world. When Captain Cooke came across the first wave-riding heathens in Hawaii, he noted the supreme pleasure the natives seemed to derive from the act. Centuries later, surfing transcends cultural boundaries, language barriers, and time itself. Is the magical force that compelled Cooke to wander the Pacific in ships (and the Polynesians in canoes) the same thing that lures us into the surf? Perhaps we are answering the proverbial call of the wild within us, and the attraction is innate.

I first witnessed this wonder of nature in full bloom on January 29, 1992, the day Schmidt charged a 50-foot Maverick's tube, and I have been mesmerized by it ever since. Though I barely got near the great waves that morning—in fact, they stunned and horrified me—I left the water giddy and eager for more. Maverick's has captivated me, just as I was charmed by the surf as a child in New Jersey. I am drawn to the hunt each season, and I find the pursuit more thrilling and rewarding than I had dared to imagine.



INTRODUCTION

RICHARD SCHMIDT

(Editor's note: Richard Schmidt caught a wave for the ages at the 1990 Eddie Aikau contest in Hawaii. Pulling off an electrifying air-drop and making it off the bottom, Schmidt scored a perfect 100, one of the most memorable rides in Waimea Bay's long history.)

When I dropped in on that wave at Waimea, I thought nothing could be as gnarly. I called my brother Dave, back in Santa Cruz, and was just frothing about it—the quality of the waves, the caliber of surfing, to this day one of the most incredible days of my life.

The next day, that same swell hit Maverick's. Dave was there with Tom Powers and Jeff Clark, the day that changed everything. When he called me that night, he was frothing worse than I was. He was just going off, like, "You would not believe this spot! You could fit semi-trucks in these barrels! It's right there in Half Moon Bay!" Just on and on and on.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Here's my brother telling me to bring my Waimea board back home. Usually in California, a "gun" would be like 7'4" or 7'6". But I did bring my Hawaii gun, and that spring we had some great sessions at Maverick's.

I was shocked when I first paddled out there and saw 25-foot surf by anyone's measurement. The sheer volume of the waves reminded me of Hawaii, where I routinely spent three to six months a year surfing big waves. To think that there was a wave like this in California—it was just unbelievable. The place had the size and energy of Waimea, except that the Bay is much more inviting. You've got the warm blue water, the lifeguard on the beach, just a whole "come surf me" kind of thing. Maverick's was more foreboding and ominous, as challenging as any wave I'd surfed in my life. Probably more challenging, because when the wave hits the reef, it instantly jacks up five to eight feet and if you're not in the perfect spot, you're either going to get pitched or you won't be able to get over the ledge. And there's no comparison on the length of ride. The way Maverick's keeps jacking up, one bowl after another, makes it infinitely longer than any other big wave.

SHAWN RHODES: “I’ll always always remember how heavy it looked the first time I paddled out. I went right over to the bowl, turned around, took off on the first wave and called Richie Schmidt off it [laughter]. He’s paddling hard and I’m all, ‘Hey-hey-hey!’ and he backed out of it. I was stoked, but as soon as I got to the bottom and went through the foamball from the first wave, I started doing spinners and just ate it. Took two sets on the head, washed me all the way to the rocks, got held down, filled my wetsuit with water. I was like, OK, this place is heavy.”

FIRST-TIME VIEW

MATT AMBROSE

(In the manner of many surfing legends, Matt Ambrose speaks through his actions. Just by nature, through experience and commitment, he tends to sit deepest in the pack. No surfer in northern California is more respected, and the Maverick’s contest has crystallized his reputation. Ambrose was a finalist in 2000 and 2004, then won the coveted Jay Moriarity Award in the 2005 event.)

Where I come from, big-wave surfing is a local tradition. Dick Keating showed everyone the way, and as I got a little older, I started following Shawn Rhodes around. Whatever he surfed, I surfed. It’s not that I set out to ride big waves. That was just the accepted way to go. Spots like Pumphouse, Pedro Point, and Sharp Park were the best Pacifica had to offer.

The first season I saw Maverick’s, 1988–89, I just watched. I was right out of high school and I didn’t feel I was ready for it—mostly



THE MIND-BLOWING REALITY FOR ALL MAVERICK'S SURFERS IN THE EARLY DAYS: JEFF CLARK IN A WORLD OF HIS OWN. DATE **TK.