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Mavericks: Beyond the Raging Waters

Across the world on the frosty edges of Alaska and the northern coast of Japan, pressure builds, low and silent. Creeping and creeping, force and momentum climb. A stone has been dropped in a great big pond and the ripples are gliding, directed towards just north of Half Moon Bay, California. Gaining confidence, the “creature” races its way across the Pacific Ocean. Ready to strike an ambush, the swell rises higher and higher, reaching heights of 60 feet, before the creature hurls itself into the rocky edges about half a mile out from Pillar Point. On the cliffs, surfers stare, eager to dance and commune with Mother Nature’s monstrous creation. Feeling the adrenaline pumping through their veins, these daredevils ride fully wetsuited, trying to out-surf the avalanche of water chasing after them as the wave attempts to snatch them off their boards. Seagulls screeching in the sky above, this magnificent wave astounds the pros, drawing the attention of surfers all over the world with the craving to get their own shot at Mavericks.

The Mavericks International Surf Contest, as it has been known for several years by the surfing community around the world, has effectively ended due to the recent years of controversy, politics, and logistical issues surrounding the contest. When revamping the WSL’s (World Surf League) “Big Wave Tour”, changing rules, regulations, and unveiling the new and improved “Big Wave Platform”, these issues lead to Mavericks being axed from the tour

schedule for good. Yet, what was Mavericks International Surf Contest, was recently revived on its own under a new name and new video format, The Mavericks Surf Awards. The new video format, as opposed to the traditional one-day heat format, has changed the nature of the competition, giving rise to new advantages for surfers, sponsors, and the ocean itself. This also includes the elimination of thousands of dollars spilling out the door for county and city required permits and licences. With the new video format, there is a more directed focus towards the surfers and their skill being left out there on the waves. Chris Cuvelier, local entrepreneur, states, “What we came up with are five key objectives that will guide our decisions: celebrating the wave, providing financial support to the athletes, promoting unity, inclusion, equality, and environmental stewardship, providing value back to sponsors, and promoting water safety” (qtd. in Hernandez).

Before Mavericks was widely known throughout the big-wave surfing community, Jeff Clark, a name now commonly known among surfers, became famous for spending 15 years alone surfing Mavericks. For years, Jeff studied this specific spot spending more time out there in the water than anyone else, deciphering direction of the swell, escape routes, currents, where the reef and rocks lie, and the overall nature and behavioral patterns of Mavericks. As Jeff’s passion grew for the wave, so did his desire to share it with other surfers. He began to encourage more and more people to come with him, but there were few takers. There were several people uncomfortable with the idea of going out and surfing 40 foot waves. Aside from the massive power of Mavericks, the waves emerge after a winter storm making the shark infested water temperatures range from 50 to 60 degrees Fahrenheit. Thomas Lunguard, an avid Mavericks surfer, told NBC Bay Area, “A monster wave is like a giant moving slab of water. It goes from

super deep to super shallow and the waves jacks up super quickly. The water is dark. Since the water is colder here and like heavier, it packs more of a punch. It's raw. There's rock. There's a reef. So that factor makes it super unique because you can't find that"(NBC Bay Area). At the time, The Eddie Aikau, located off the north shore of Oahu, was the only big-wave surf contest. Jeff was one of the only Californians to be invited to "The Eddie" leading him to his decision to create the Mavericks Surf Contest so that the big wave surfers in northern California could have a contest of their own. Clark states, "I wanted to create something that would really showcase the men and women who surf Mavericks and so Peter Mel and I sat down and talked with the guys from Quiksilver". The contest began in 1999. After this, other big wave spots around the world began showcasing their waves including Nazaré in Portugal, and Nelscott Reef in Oregon. However, to get Mavericks up and running required about ten permits (now about fifteen), putting a big strain on the competition which wasn't making nearly enough money at the time. Jeff expresses, "Last year the total for the permits was \$130,000. Just for permits, before you could ever come up with the prize purse, or being able to have judges, water patrol, staff, take care of the surfers that would fly in and out. So in order to run the contest you're looking at anywhere from \$250,000 to \$350,000 or \$400,000" (Clark). This contest was a big crowd drawer for San Mateo county, bringing in thousands of dollars to businesses nearby. As organizers for the event, it made it extremely difficult to raise this amount of money, with little to no help from the county that was benefiting. Jeff states, "They thought we were all making just a ton of money--and I started doing this for the love of having one of the best waves in the world and having my friends and all those people who came, enjoy the wave like I did" (Clark). With the problems from permits and the county, other politics joined the mix. Those in charge of running

the contest struggled with the announcement and organization of the surfers. Without Jeff as contest director, these leaders had less experience with the behavior of the wave and could not issue the 48 hour notice to surfers. No one was making the call. The Mavericks Invitational Surf Contest ended with its last competition 2016. 2019 brought a new hope for Mavericks with the drastic format alteration.

This past year, Jeff and Chris Cuvelier, launched the new and improved contest called, “Mavericks Surf Awards”. With this new contest came a new format. The local newspaper, The Half Moon Bay Review says, “Instead of a one-day event with 24 competitors, the new Mavericks format is open to any surfer who completes, documents and submits — via video — a wave ridden at Mavericks between Friday, Nov. 1 and April 15, 2020” (Half Moon Bay Review). With this new video format, Mavericks lost a lot of its hit-factor not drawing as large of a crowd that would normally come for the one day event. However, this change brought new advantages for the surfers. Luca Padua, 18 year old big-wave surfer and Half Moon Bay local, expresses:

With the video performance contest you can have a whole season to surf, and if you're not feeling it one day it doesn't matter, you will have the next session to get after it. That's the cool thing, that it's not just one day. It's really good, especially when surfing big waves to go with your gut, because it's a dangerous sport you could die doing it. It's cool 'cause if it's not your day then you don't have to worry about it, whereas if it's not your day and it's 50 feet and you have to go there and try to win a contest. That's a whole different story. Usually when you do stuff like that, that's when you're going to get hurt. Besides that it's so different, you almost can't even compare the two things. I think there

should be both going on at the same time. A video contest and an actual surf contest too would be the best.

Padua also explains:

It's not like basketball or football or baseball or something that's always in the limelight...It's pretty hard to be a civilian person or surfer, athlete, whatever, and see people surfing and competing in giant waves and not being drawn to it and want to watch it. So I think that's a cool part of it 'cause it just shows high level athletes facing mother nature in her rawest form.

This new approach has taken the stress away from timing the contest, calling the line up of athletes competing, among other things, and completely transformed the contest into free surf.

It's all about the surfers. Jeff explains:

You have a female performer of the year, male performer of the year, biggest wave, best barrel, and ride of the year... I mean if it's 24 men and women heat on one day, that has to all happen in one time period, whereas this is an appreciation of the whole season and everybody that comes and surfs. We want to take first, second, and third place in every category so now we have 15 people getting awards rather than the six finalists and I think that just appreciates the contest a lot more and it really shares the love. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for the time they put in and this is a way to acknowledge a lot more people...At the end of the year we will have an award ceremony or an award show basically and the judges will be former finalists of Mavericks, so you're being judged by your peers and there's nothing better than that. It's inclusive. Our mission statement is: To celebrate the men and women who surf Mavericks, provide sponsorship for surfers,

provide equity, promote men and women, and environmental stewardship. Especially inclusion (Clark).

However, to these surfers the contest is not everything and many don't even care if they compete. Their goal is to go out and enjoy surfing just because they love it. At the age of just 13 years old, Luca Padua became the youngest person to ever surf Mavericks. Padua is Half Moon Bay local born and raised with Mavericks roughly two minutes from his house. Now, 18, training down in Malibu with the legendary big-wave surfer, Laird Hamilton, Luca is dedicating all his time and energy to improving his skills at becoming the best big-wave surfer he can be. When asking Luca what the Maverick's contest means to him, he responded, "I surf big waves cause I f%ckin really like surfing big waves. Contest or not I'm going to be out there doing the same thing. I think it's cool. I think it's a fun part of surfing Mavericks and I think it's good for our community but at the end of the day it doesn't make a difference to me, you know". Padua, like many of the next generation of surfers out there, find the politics surrounding the contest a giant waste of energy that could be better spent free surfing.

"It's just a bunch of drama because it's a pretty small community when you really get down to it. At the end of the day when it really comes down to it, it doesn't matter if you are black, white, green, yellow, f%uckin girl, guy, whatever it's like if you want to be a part of this f%uckin go out and surf. Go out and catch a giant wave and prove it, and if you can't do that on the highest level then you shouldn't be involved. It's about who can surf, survive, and perform on the biggest waves in the world and the best of the best are going to be invited and it doesn't matter if you're a guy, if you're a girl, whatever. It should be all about performing. That's where I stand".

For Mavericks the future looks promising, bringing in the new generation of surfers and keeping the stoke. Surfing is a universal language understood by all those who participate. It is something that brings good vibes, not stress, and those at Mavericks recognize that. When asked what the next five years looks like for Mavericks Surf Awards Jeff Clark explains:

The next five years huh? Politicians aren't involved in our contest. At all. Surfing happens the way surfing should. Guys go surfing when the waves are good. Or women go surfing. That's how surfing should be. Swimming is on a time clock. You're going to run a race that's on a time clock. This whole thing about surfing when you have a 40 minute heat, the ocean doesn't operate like that. The format in which I think the competition should be run in surfing is more like the way it's going to happen now. The guys will go into the water when they are feeling the best and want to be in the water.

When asked the same question Luca's response differed from Jeff's from a competitor's perspective:

The whole big wave surfing, professional surfing it's cool but at the end of the day sponsors, money, cameras are not. We are going to go out there and catch the biggest wave of our lives, get barrelled, go fast, have fun, eat shit, learn from each other and take advantage of the sport we've been blessed with and have fun together. That's more my thing. I don't really have this whole crazy competitive thing where I'm like, "I want the Mavericks Contest to come back and I'm gonna win this in the next five years with this and that.

For all the surfers out there looking for their shot at Mavericks, Jeff advises, “If you got what it takes or you think you got what it takes and you can go out there and catch the biggest wave of the year, stoke more power to you. Throw it down. People should have that commitment to themselves and the sport that they love. If it happens it’ll happen. Do it because you love it.”