

BENEATH

THE WAVE WAS BIGGER THAN ANYTHING Laird Hamilton and Brett Lickle had experienced — 80, maybe 100 feet high — and though they were fleeing it flat-out on Hamilton's jet ski, it chased them down and squashed them like a steamroller. "The only conversation we had was Laird yelling 'Go go go!'" Lickle remembers. "Then it was like hitting the eject button on a jet fighter."

Hamilton, riding on the rescue sled being towed behind the jet ski, dove off at 50 mph as Lickle took the avalanche full bore. Buried deep under the foam, Hamilton's 20-pound surfboard was driven fin-first into Lickle's calf, flaying him open from his Achilles tendon to the back of his knee. "It felt like someone crushed my leg," Lickle says. The pain of the bone-deep gash was blinding, but irrelevant. Because if Lickle couldn't somehow kick his way back to the surface, then swim a mile to shore, he knew he'd never see his wife and kids again.

The wave that overtook the two surf veterans was one of thousands of giants that raced across the northern Pacific ahead of a historic December 2007 storm, a cyclone that formed when a dying tropical depression over the Philippines met a frigid blast tumbling down the Siberian steppe, found warm water, and went nuclear. "The moisture supercharged the storm," says Sean Collins, chief forecaster and president of Surfline.com. "It was like throwing dynamite on a fire."

Within a couple of days, a 1,000-mile line of hurricane-force winds was rushing east across the loneliest stretches of the

KILLER SURF

Garrett McNamara rides a monster at California's fabled Mavericks on December 4, 2007.

THE WAVES

It was the most intense surf big-wave riders had ever seen, with record swells from Hawaii to California. But for Peter Davi, a paddle-surfing traditionalist amid a rising tide of tow-in surfers, it would be his last.

by CHRIS DIXON *photograph by* TONY HARRINGTON



Pacific. Mountainous swells piled up on one another, ripping weather buoys from their moorings. "Swell data showed 50-foot waves," Collins adds. "Occasionally there was a 100-footer." Bill Sharp, director of the Billabong XXL Big Wave Awards (the Oscars for surfing's top daredevils), says, "It's the most extraordinary week I've ever seen in big-wave surfing."

In the surf world, news of phenomena like this travels faster than the waves. Before dawn on December 3, scores of Hawaiians were waxing their big-wave surfboards and tuning jet skis as forecasters predicted a swell that might flip the switch at Oahu's famed Waimea Bay. But Hamilton had a hunch the forecasts were wrong, that the best surf would be at Maui, 120 miles east. By daybreak, with Maui's North Shore under siege from unsurfable 50-foot walls of water, Hamilton revised his prediction: Storm clouds and mist obscured reefs farther out that might focus the chaotic waters into peeling waves. So Hamilton and 47-year-old partner Lickle hatched a new plan, setting out on jet skis from Spreckelsville for a reef called Outer Sprecks.

"If anyone had any idea of the waves on the way, they would have turned on the tidal wave warning systems," Hamilton says. No small craft, much less surfers, would have been allowed on the water. In retrospect, Hamilton could have used the warning — he and Lickle would soon be battling for their lives at the mercy of the waves.

IT TOOK ANOTHER DAY FOR THE WAVES TO MAKE LANDFALL IN central California, but there too surfers were jockeying to be first on the water. At the foggy crack of dawn on December 4, as half a dozen tow-in teams left Half Moon Bay for the offshore break called Mavericks, California's most famous big-wave spot, another 25 teams motored out from Monterey Harbor, 100 miles south, to a remote corner of rock-strewn shoreline known as Pescadero Point. Many surfers call it Ghost Tree.

The ominous name comes from bleached trunks of dead cypress at the end of 17 Mile Drive, the Monterey-to-Carmel road along some of the most dramatic coastline on earth. On rare winter days with the proper westerly angle, waves are focused by the deep Carmel Canyon to rear up 60 feet in deadly proximity to car-size boulders. Don Curry, a chiseled 48-year-old surfer and personal trainer, made his name here at Ghost Tree and at Mavericks. "The waves are right there," he says. "It's the only place you literally feel the waves shaking the ground. If you don't make the drop, you'll bounce off the rocks. You're dead."

In the days before jet skis, a few brave locals paddled out to challenge Ghost Tree, but the consensus was that the wave heaved in too fast and broke too close to allow anything more than scratching in at the end. Curry, for one, charged other big waves nearby, and on the biggest days he could always count on one surfer to paddle out with him: a larger-than-life contemporary named Peter Davi.

Davi was a big, bearish surfer of Sicilian descent, one of the few who had paddled at Pescadero. One of six children with roots in the Monterey Peninsula generations deep, his grandfather Pietro Maiorana was a pioneering seine fisherman during the days of Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*. Although not above accepting an occasional tow, Davi believed surfers should have the physical prowess to earn their waves.

On December 4 longtime friend Anthony Ruffo and Randy Reyes gave Davi a ride on their jet ski out to Ghost Tree, where photographers, resting surfers, and spectators were floating outside the big waves. Among them was Kelly Sorensen, owner of Monterey's On the Beach



HIS LAST WAVE

Davi tries to paddle in at Ghost Tree on December 4 but comes up short (above, circled); Davi at home in Monterey, January 2007 (inset); out of the hospital, Jake Davi sits with his dad's big-wave board, now an impromptu memorial (right).

surf shop, who had sponsored Davi for 21 years with clothing and gear. Sorensen watched as Davi and Mavericks regular Anthony Tashnick tried to paddle in. "Tazzy" managed two short rides, but the waves were too fast and mostly rolled underneath them. Davi paddled his eight-foot-six board over and sat on the back of Sorensen's jet ski, and the two marveled at the horrifying wipeouts and barrels big enough to drive a bus through.

Curry, a tow-in regular at Ghost Tree since 2002, rode a 60-footer on March 9, 2005.

That day's poundings were also legendary. Justen "Jughead" Allport broke his leg in four places, and Tyler Smith took a 50-footer on the head, his brother's rescue attempt nearly killing them both. Several of that day's waves, including Curry's, earned surfers coveted XXL award nominations for "Ride of the Year." So Curry wasn't surprised to see 25 teams vying for waves, some of the overamped newcomers clearly not waiting their turn.

"The biggest weaslers I've ever seen," says Ken "Skindog" Collins, who claims that events like the Tow-In World Cup and the XXL (which he won in 2006) have spawned a legion of gasoline-powered aggro-nauts who are so determined to drop in, they neglect the unwritten ethos of crowded surf breaks. The backlash against towing in has caught the attention of regulators overseeing the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, which contains both Mavericks and Ghost Tree (small jet skis were banned in 1992, but a loophole still allows three-seaters and larger). Barring a late deal, this is the last year towing will be legal in central California's heaviest arena.

"When we started towing Mavericks in '98, there were plenty of waves and not enough people," Collins says. "By the next year everyone who deserved to tow-surf, because they could paddle, had a ski. But then everyone else had one too, showing up when it's 10 to 15 feet, cutting across paddle surfers and taking waves from guys who are worthy. Some of these guys were just trying to get the next Body

Glove ad or win the XXL. From now on, if you win the XXL and you weaseled a wave, I'm going to throw a rock at you."

Up at Mavericks, Peter Mel had surfed two amazing waves and was up on his third when it hit an undersea ledge, throwing him off-balance and burying him. With no time to avoid a six-story wall of water, Mel simply ducked, covered, and prayed. "It was like I was run over by Niagara Falls," he says. "I thought it was going to tear the limbs off my body." His partner Ryan Augenstein rushed in, but his jet ski stopped dead; the ocean was so churned, the impeller couldn't get a grip in the foam, like a car spinning its wheels in snow. As another wave bore down, the ski suddenly caught, Mel grabbed the sled, and the two shot to safety. "It was one of the most amazing saves I've ever seen," Mel says. At 12:30 a rescue team motored out; a crab boat named *Good Guys* had gone down, its two fishermen lost to the waves.

Down at Ghost Tree, Ruffo had tow-surfed into four scary bombs. Davi was determined to tow into at least one wave on his traditional paddleboard. "I'm 45 years old and I want one of the fucking waves," he said from the back of Sorensen's jet ski. "Those were the last words I heard him say," Sorensen says.



LAIRD HAMILTON HAD guessed right. The farther offshore from Maui he and Lickle got, the clearer it became that the storms' big swells were setting up hills of water 50 feet high, hills that were crashing over the reef and offering rides three quarters of a mile long.

"It was absolute perfection," Lickle says. "Not a drop of water out of place." As the waves grew, the pair found it nearly impossible to control their skittering boards, so they returned to shore to pick up Hamilton's favorite: a six-foot-seven wood missile shaped by Hawaiian Dick Brewer, thin as a water ski, heavy, and fast. By the time they returned, Outer Sprecks had gone mutant.

Helicopter pilot Don Shearer, who's flown film and rescue missions during Maui's hairiest swells, flew in under the low ceiling and was completely awestruck by waves 12 to 15 stories tall. "I've seen every big swell that's come in since 1986," he says. "This was far and away the biggest I've seen in my life."

"They were sucking the water off the reef, breaking top to bottom," Hamilton says. "We could barely get into them, even at full speed."

The aluminum fin on Lickle's board had bent, so Hamilton lent him his Brewer. The foot straps were too wide, but Lickle couldn't resist the opportunity to chase down "the two biggest waves of my life." But as he blasted down his third the entire wall reared up in front of him. With no chance to outrun it, Lickle swung to the top, narrowly flying over the back. He was done. Then the horizon went dark: It was a rogue wave, straight out of *The Poseidon Adventure*. Hamilton wanted it. Lickle pegged the throttle.

After letting go of the rope, Hamilton felt as if he were flying. Plunging down the wall, he had to make split-second adjustments to deal with the warbles and ripples in his path while also focusing far ahead in case the wave lurched up into a closeout. Then he realized that was exactly what was happening. Tearing along at 40 knots, Hamilton's only hope was to dive into the wall, kick like hell, and pray he didn't get sucked downward as the wave thundered shut.

Lickle, tracking behind, was horrified when the wave closed out. Then his buddy popped up unharmed, but waving frantically: The next one was even bigger. Hamilton grabbed the sled and Lickle nailed the throttle, shooting toward land at 50 mph. It wasn't fast enough.

"The wave hit us like we were going backward," Hamilton says.

Lungs near bursting, Hamilton and Lickle finally surfaced in choking foam a foot thick. "I could barely keep my chin above the surface," Lickle says. Another wave followed, then another, dragging the pair a third of a mile until they reached a calmer stretch. Then Hamilton heard Lickle say something like "tourniquet." Pulling his leg out of the water, Hamilton was shocked by the carnage. "It had to be taken care of right there," Hamilton says. Almost a mile of sea and shorebreak lay between them and safety. "Or he was going to bleed to death."

Shearer's helicopter flew over, but he couldn't see the pair in the foam. Hamilton ripped off his wetsuit and tied a sleeve tight around Lickle's leg. Then he spotted the jet ski a quarter of a mile away, floating perfectly upright. He gave Lickle his vest and said, "I've gotta go."

As Hamilton swam off, Lickle felt more alone than ever before. "I've got kids, 12 and seven," he says. "I had bled out to the point of weakness. I was just drifting, wondering if I'd ever see my family again."

Lickle's light-headed fog broke when the jet ski arrived with his butt-naked buddy at the helm. The ignition lanyard gone, Hamilton had used stashed headphone wires to MacGyver a replacement. When he punched the ignition, the waterlogged ski fired right up.

Hamilton screamed into the radio for EMTs as Lickle knelt on the sled, trying to keep his calf closed for the grueling 12-minute race to Baldwin Beach Park. By the time the ski ground into the sand, paramedics were waiting.

THE NEXT DAY PETER DAVI WOULD BE LESS FORTUNATE AND leave several on the water that day wishing they'd stayed with him.

To hear locals tell it, Davi was the most loved, feared, and respected surfer from the Monterey Peninsula. He chased wintertime swells from Big Sur to Santa Cruz to Mavericks; in his teens he left for Oahu's North Shore to take on the world's most towering waves — and outsize egos. With his size, talent, and sheer force of will, he befriended Oahu's most imposing watermen, from Marvin Foster and Johnny Boy Gomes to Michael and Derek Ho to Garrett and Liam McNamara. "Because Pete charged hard and was so big, he could have been a bad boy if he wanted to," Liam McNamara says. "But he was a gentle giant, a soft-spoken family man who earned respect. He took care of you like a brother."

In the mid-1980s Davi lived on Sunset Point, where he earned the nickname Pipeline Pete. "I had my most memorable sessions at Pipe with him," says McNamara. "I remember him and Derek Ho coming out of double barrels together, waves no one else could have made."

"He was a good surfer, built like a lumberjack," Hamilton says. "There weren't many bigger. And he was always a gentleman."

"The big Hawaiians really loved the guy," says Ruffo, whom Davi called "Ledge," for "Legend." "He was a big *haole* [foreigner] who had their respect when the locals were still punching people out. He opened the door for a lot of Santa Cruz guys like me and Peter Mel."

With money he earned fishing in 1986, Davi and his girlfriend Katrin Winterbotham bought some Big Sur property, where they planted fruit trees, fertilizing them with the guts of fish he hauled in. Two years later they had a son, Jake, who grew up with his dad hunting wild boar, surfing lineups from California to Oahu, and scouring the beaches and hills for shark teeth, arrowheads and slabs of jade. A picture in Jake's room shows a father beaming with pride, wrapping a burly arm around a towheaded little kid in a pink wetsuit.

"Pete had a huge heart," says Katrin, "and Jake was his favorite thing in the whole wide world."

AT GHOST TREE, REYES HANDED DAVI THE ROPE AND TOWED him off Sorensen's ski onto a wave; no monster, but plenty dangerous on a paddleboard with no foot straps. The big man played it safe, riding near the top beside Reyes. Ruffo was sure Davi would be trapped between the whitewater and rocks, but Davi somehow raced around the corner. "Everything was cool," Ruffo says. "We laughed about it."

Davi told Ruffo he was going to paddle back to Stillwater Cove, a 15-minute arm-powered journey. Ruffo offered him a ride, but Davi refused. "He was almost mad at us for suggesting it," Ruffo says.

What happened next is unclear, but a friend of Sorensen's claims he saw Davi catch a wave near the end of (continued on page 129)

Pescadero Point, only to wipe out, snapping his leash. "He knew what to do," says Sorensen. "He was so big he could float just sitting in his buoyant wetsuit."

But Stillwater Cove is full of shelf rocks, with a particularly bad one in the middle. As Davi was drifting toward it, Sorensen's friend saw him rise on a swell. Then a sheriff ordered spectators off private land on the Point. That was the last time anyone saw Davi alive.

Fed up with the crowds, Ruffo and Reyes called it a day. "Every time a set came, five teams would go for the same wave," Ruffo says. Rounding the last rocks 200 yards from Stillwater Pier, Ruffo saw something bob up in the wake of another jet ski: *a seal?* Then he saw a body floating facedown. He thought it was a diver until he saw the snapped leash. "I wasn't ready for that moment," Ruffo says. "I'm thinking, *Is that Pete?* We were just confounded. At a moment like that you don't know what to do. I jammed to the pier and yelled to someone to call 911."

Ruffo was back in less than two minutes, jumping in the water and pulling the stiff body of Peter Davi up onto his ski. Paramedics were waiting when he steamed in over the rocks and administered CPR for 20 minutes, but to no avail. Peter Davi was declared dead at 1:28 PM. An autopsy revealed he drowned after blunt force trauma to the head and chest.

"I've taken a lot of shit for saying this," Don Curry says, "but the reality is that on that day, Pete just wasn't in the shape you need to be to go out there and paddle for waves. I'm not slandering the guy; I'm just stating the truth. That's the tragedy: His death was unnecessary. Pete didn't need to go down."

Another surfer, speaking on condition of anonymity, pins the blame elsewhere: "On a day like that, you have to pay attention to people in the water, no matter what," he says. "Pete had been in the water for two hours, he lost his board, and there were huge seas and currents and rocks. There were more than 20 skis out there, with five teams resting out the back, drinking water and talking on cell phones, and all these media guys clicking away." When word spread through the water of Davi's death, some of them continued surfing. "A crew of Santa Cruz guys shut down their skis and formed a circle, but others acted like nothing had happened. That was fucking wrong."

"Peter Mel called me that morning on his way to Mavericks," says Ruffo. "He said, 'I just want to tell you to be careful today.' Pete usually tells me anything but that. I was like, 'What the fuck was *that*, dude? It was in my head all day. It's what made me go in. We all like living on the edge, but not to the point of doing things that are stupid. That's what made me mad about what Don Curry said. This wasn't stupid. Davi was out there way before this. He was a solid waterman and fisherman. There was no reason to think he was doing anything wrong."

IT'S THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS EVE, and Jake, Katrin, and Ruffo are hanging out at Peter Davi's Monterey home. It's a modest place, decorated with artifacts from a rich life on the water. Jake shows off a 30-pound rock of jade his dad unearthed, a replica of Peter's grandfa-

ther's fishing boat, and a palm-size fossilized shark tooth his dad found up in the mountains. "Dad should've had a museum," his 18-year-old son says. "If you liked something, he'd give it to you, even if he'd never met you."

Jake says Pete looked out for everyone, no matter how big or small the waves. "Two feet to 20," he always said," Jake says, recalling a day in 2002 when his dad pulled four tourists from the freezing waters off Carmel Beach. The fifth, a kid, died in Davi's arms. Davi did time in 1998 on drug and firearms charges, but Ruffo says jail was a wake-up call. "We all do crazy shit," says Ruffo, who was busted in 2005 for selling meth. "But Pete paid his debt. He worked hard to put a roof over Jake's head, fishing every day." He may have turned his life around, but there was another factor in Davi's death. The toxicology report, issued on January 10, revealed that at the time of his death Davi had methamphetamine in his system at a level of 0.75 milligrams per liter — more than enough to make him intoxicated and potentially impair his ability to survive an accident in dangerous surf.

The evening of December 3, as Peter Davi prepared to head out to Ghost Tree, Jake and some friends were sitting on Oahu's North Shore, watching waves crash in the twilight, when a pair of surfers were sucked out by a rip current. Commandeering a jet ski, they charged out and saved the kids from being lost at sea. The next morning Jake was trying to sleep, but his phone kept ringing. "Around 20 people called me," he says. "They told me something bad had happened; my dad was lost at sea. I'm thinking, *Lost at sea?* No fucking way. Not *my* dad."

Jake assumed his dad's fishing boat had simply failed to report. "Think positive," I said. "He'll make it in." But then I found out he was surfing. He died doing something he loved."

Jake stood in Saint Angela Merici Catholic Church in Pacific Grove two days later, listening to friends eulogize his father. Hundreds turned out at Lovers Point in Monterey that afternoon for a paddle-out memorial. Jake watched from the rocks until his friend Darryl "Flea" Virostko paddled by on an 11-foot-7 Dick Brewer board Peter had given Jake. Jumping into the frigid water in his full Versace suit, Jake rode the board as the crowd cheered.

Drained but unable to sleep, the next morning Jake drove to the mortuary to say a few final words to his father. There was stuff that Jake wishes he'd told him. He wishes he hadn't been so embarrassed by things his dad did when Jake was a kid, like dropping him off at school in posh Carmel with no shirt on. "He was a fucking caveman and he'd embarrass me all the time," Jake remembers. "And we fucking butted heads. He knew how to yell because he was a fucking Sicilian. But he was one of a kind. He fucking raised me right and taught me a lot of good lessons. And I'm thankful for it all."

Jake was angered by Don Curry's claim that Davi wasn't in shape to be out in the waves and by another person's suggestion that it was the drugs that allowed his father to fish through the night. "My dad worked his ass off fishing," says Jake. "If he hadn't, he wouldn't have been able to afford a million-dollar house. He had to fucking take care of shit, and he did."

On the way to the mortuary, Jake fell asleep at the wheel going 85 mph. Driving behind

him, Liam McNamara was horror-struck to see Jake's truck drift into oncoming traffic. At the last instant, Jake says, he felt a slap to the face that could only have come from his father. He swerved, avoiding other cars but plowing into trees. Sure that he'd broken his neck, paramedics airlifted Jake to San Jose, but aside from some glass in his head, Jake and his dog Hueneme miraculously escaped unharmed.

It was part of a string of signs, Jake says, that began on December 4. Shortly after Davi disappeared, Flea Virostko endured what on-lookers say was the heaviest wipeout they'd ever seen, sucked into the lip of a huge wave and augured in deep. "He told me he should have died on that wave," Jake says. "He said my dad grabbed him and brought him to the surface."

With medical bills and his father's mortgage, Jake knows he has to get serious about life right now. He wants to start up an outdoor equipment company and write a book about his dad. And one day earn invitations to the Mavericks and Eddie Aikau big-wave contests.

A few days after Davi's funeral, Jake, his sister, the McNamara brothers, Kealii Mamala, and a few other friends held a private memorial above the Carmel River mouth. As they sat, the biggest red-tailed hawk they'd ever seen perched nearby and stared at them for 30 minutes. "Dad was sitting right there," Jake says. "He saved Flea's life. He saved my life. My dad never got recognized at Pescadero Point, and they named it Ghost Tree. That was never the name. Now it's Peter's Tree. If you read the Bible, Peter means 'the rock.' Peter was a fisherman, and he was a fucking legend. Just like my dad."

IN A HOSPITAL BED A WEEK LATER, LICKLE has had time to reflect on the most intense experience of his life. "With these high-performance aluminum fins, we've always said if anyone gets hit, it could be nasty," he says. "It was a lot nastier than anyone expected."

Is there a lesson in all this? "Yeah, I'm getting too old for this shit," Lickle says. "This was the big one. The near-drowning taught me that I can make it. But do I want to go through that again? Is it worth not being able to hold my wife and kids again? No."

Hamilton might wish he could make that decision, but he can't. "A lot of it, truthfully, is out of my hands," he says. "When I see giant surf, it's not like, *Should I go?* It's automatic."

Exactly one month after Davi's death, an even stronger storm hit California, bursting levees and dumping 10 feet of snow on the Sierras. Another group of surfers — Brad Gerlach, Mike Parsons, Grant Baker, and Greg Long — found it impossible to resist the pull of the big waves, and on January 4 headed out to a legendary spot called Cortes Bank, an underwater mountain range 100 miles off the California coast, and plunged down 80-foot faces in the middle of the ocean. One speeding wave caught Gerlach and Parsons' jet ski, burying them underwater. But their flotation vests brought them back to the surface.

"I've never had a more adventurous day," says Parsons, 42. "I'm way more calculating now than when I was 24 and would drop in on anything. I know my days are numbered, but days like this are so special, you don't ever want them to end." ■