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SURFING

Riding the Wind with the King – Surfing Jeffreys Bay 2007

POSTED ON JULY 13, 2023 BY SHAUN TOMSON

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Photos by: Bernard Testemale & Steve Walsh

1:09 / 7:24



The new African moon is up over the water, turning the indigo swells into shimmering gold as they march forward relentlessly, ending their long journey and crashing forward on to the rocky shore.

It is late in the evening and I'm sitting at 20 Pepper Street, the most popular restaurant and surf hangout in the booming little town of Jeffreys Bay.

My muscles are exhausted from a series of 9-hour sessions at Supertubes, just about 100 yards away from where I'm sitting right now, and at the edge of my hearing I can feel the surf still thundering down the point. I'm not quite sure how much more of this my body can handle but

right now it's good to be alive today in J-Bay, thinking of today's great surf, and what is to come tomorrow.



Back to the Bay

I haven't been back to J-Bay for two years now. It is a time-consuming, grueling journey from my adopted home of Santa Barbara. The long point at J-Bay has always been my spiritual center and the great sessions I enjoyed starting in the late 60's through the '70's, 80's and 90's have been deeply etched into my heart and soul. I sat back in my chair and reflected on the common theme of why Kelly and I were here. Two different generations all coming together at the longest wall in the world. I wasn't here to reclaim my youth or prove anything to anyone except myself. I was here because I love this wave deeply and Kelly, he could be anywhere but he was here too, renewing the special bond that he has with this special place.

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After 2 years away that first look at J-Bay is a heart-stopper; the gentle arc of coastline along the mile long point with crescents of swells chasing each other, the wave breaking perfectly, sometimes only 25 yards from shore, along dark black mussel covered rocks, bordering a shell strewn beach. You can look out over the ocean, southwards to your right, standing on a wooden walkway, balanced over indigenous aloe and fragrantly scented fynbos, up to the start of the wave at Boneyards, and with one sweep of your head take in a 10 wave set, heading north through the sections of Supertubes, Impossibles, Tubes and ultimately the Point, the last portion of the ride, a mile and three and half minutes of wave time from the start point.

If you look behind, away from the ocean, evidence of chaotic development is everywhere – a cacophony of guest houses screaming for customers and pop-up face brick houses all scrabbling for a piece of the perfect wave. But it's easy to turn away from it all and look to the perfection coming over the horizon.



Getting low

Deep lows track up from the frigid Southern Antarctic, heading to the northeast– the icepack is like an overheated reverse furnace, chucking out molten blobs of red and magenta that roll up our internet wave modeling maps like enraged plasma – the darker and bigger the better.

While Cape Town at the southern tip of Africa cops the brute power of the swell full in the face, J-Bay is 400 miles away, to the north and east, protected by distance and landmass. By the time the swells bend into the bay they are groomed by the prevailing southwesterly wind and organized into endless arcs of bending energy. The wave is one long, flat-out speed run when it's 8 feet and ruler edged from the South, with a hard South West wind giving you the extra lift for the high line drive through each critical section.

This year an earlier massive easterly Fall swell coincided with ultra high equinox tides and resulted in extensive destruction all along the country's east coast. Roads and beaches were washed away and entire surf spots were simply erased from existence. J-Bay wasn't immune and huge quantities of sand were scoured out of the rocks bordering the beach and deposited 100 yards south. This makes paddling in and out, especially on solid swells on a high tide, an absolute nightmare. For me booties are a necessity especially when you get sucked between 2 mussel covered crags of rock where there used to be a sandy refuge. All the pros go bare foot and there is a keyhole going in and going out, but if you miss it, you are in for a rough, rocky ride.

This particular swell just kept coming on. Lows and cold fronts were stacked up, back to back all the way back to Antarctica. It reminded me of the '70's when I would drive down from Durban and stay for weeks on end surfing swells that never seemed to stop. This time, the Northern hemisphere was stone dead and it seems that all the power had shifted south. It started out at 6ft on the Sunday after the contest and then stayed solid for 10 days maxing out at 8 feet.

Choices

J-Bay is not a wave of life and death – there is an element of risk but the challenge comes from the complexities of dealing with the speed of the wave and the length and vast expanse of the wall.

There are just so many choices to make and so many opportunities to make the wrong decision. I like to take the highline and carve the turn low and deep aiming for a point 25 yards away. I'm a natural born carver and that is what the wave is made for – no half turns or head rolls, just power on power, calves and quadriceps against a wall of unyielding pressure. Pulling out the right board is also important – while anything works reasonably well at J-Bay I like a little extra length to carve huge arcs on the wide-open face. The top pros are riding 6'0" to 6'1" – I like at least a 6'6", as sometimes the wave can get a touch flat off the bottom and the extra length helps to come hard off the bottom and drive down the line to make the wave.

It can get cold out there in the line-up. Water is in the low to mid 60's but the wind is a knife cutting through nylon lined neoprene – throughout the swell I putting in daily six to 9 hour sessions so a 4/3mm wetsuit combination is essential.

I know life on the pro tour must at times be a grind and home is enticing but it always amazes me when the best surfers in the world walk away from insane surf and a building swell but this

is exactly what happened. Taylor Knox and Jeremy Flores stayed on for the first day only and both of them laid down some super fast clean lines. Taylor's old school power carves are perfectly suited to the long lines of Jeffery's and watching him when it came up would have been a real treat but he bailed.

By day two, with the exception of Kelly the entire WCT contingent was gone.

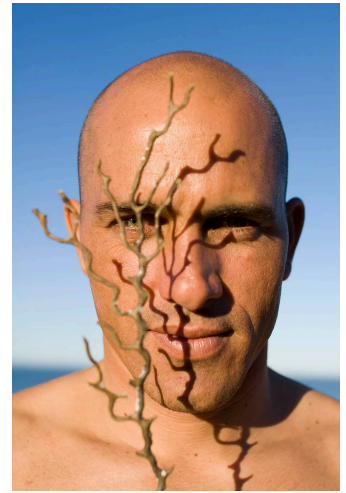


I like to sit way up the point at Supers – the best and biggest ones hit a little button out there and speed along the point, doubling up through the inside. Occasionally, on a very low tide, a set will strike Boneyards perfectly, double up and run all the way through but it is a long, long wait.

Kelly in deep

And then there was Kelly. The talk was that he was checking out. A month before the event the surf media was all in a froth – I heard the reverb all the way back in California from Chile; Dingo Morrison had taken out Kelly with a maxed out effort in Arica, at the Ripcurl Search Pro, laying down a perfect 10 and Kelly was done – 8 world Titles, 33 wins and \$1.5 million in prizemoney – he had decided to check out. But he told me at J-Bay that it was all B.S. but you can sense he is wrestling with a decision. I don't know how long Kelly is going to go on – I don't think even he knows. But it looks like he'll go until the stoke runs out and after seeing him surf at J-Bay it looks like it's going to keep running for a while.

He has a special connection with J-Bay, unlike anyone I have ever seen. There is some deeper relationship there, hidden beneath the surfing you see on the surface. He has an intuition about him, a connectedness to the environment, an enlightenment; a rare understanding of how he fits into the natural order of life and it shines through him brightly.



He told me about dolphins guiding him to where he needed to be: –

“The first day I was ever here I saw dolphins, I saw a shark, whales, flamingos, all within just a few minutes of being here. So that really struck me. It just seemed like a place that was so alive. So much happening, so much going on with the wildlife and then, when you go out, you’re just a part of that. I mean the closest I’ve ever been to whales has been here. There’ve been a lot of waves with dolphins too. In fact, in that final I had with Andy the other year in 2005 when I won, before my last wave, there were dolphins going back out. And I was so tired; I was so out of my mind, with just about two minutes left in the final. I was so tired, and I’d almost given up, just because physically I didn’t have much strength left, and I said, “Well, I’ll just follow these dolphins.” And I paddled right behind the dolphins all the way back out. And it was something pretty magical and it was the last thought I had before I got that wave (that won it for me with 32 seconds left.)

That’s when you wonder what that deeper connection is to nature and stuff, because I literally just said “I’ll just follow these dolphins.” I was thinking in my head, “they’ll take me to the right place.”

At 35, Kelly still looks to be in his prime, redefining what is possible in sport. On the long walls of Jeffery’s his surfing is very radical and progressive, based around swooping turns off the bottom and very tight and late arcs off the top – many times I’d expect him to run out his turn around the falling lip and he would hit it full on, busting the tail free in a controlled power drive, reacting with lightning quick reflexes. He maintains a low center of gravity, crouches low through the turn and then gets the spring and projection as the concave releases from the downward pressure.



It seems there is a trend on the tour to much more upright surfing, a more stiffened lower back but Kelly is all rubber-like flexibility. There are a few simple words that define the essence of great surfing – manoeuvres and techniques have evolved over the last 30 years but the essential dna helix of what constitutes truly great surfing is unchanged – speed, power, rhythm, aggression, style and imagination. Kelly has all this and he has that little extra chromosome of intuition, a knowingness, a prescient reactivity to the ebb and flow of the ocean.

His wave selection is uncanny and he would select many waves that others would pass up only to have the waves double up through the Impossibles section, the fastest, hollowest portion of the ride. He came smoking on down the line towards me on one as I paddled back out, turning forward for maximum speed, the lip inches from his head, running for the light on his concave, the foam ball roiling beneath his feet. He looked calm and unhurried, at the very center of his universe, right where he wanted to be. He smiled, and I smiled back.



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SHAUN TOMSON

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8 THOUGHTS ON “RIDING THE WIND WITH THE KING – SURFING JEFFREYS BAY 2007”



Scott says:

AWESOME Shaun you guys were and continue to be my surfing/lifestyle hero's inspiring me to do good in life and be good to mother Earth.... because the earth is the realist inspiration that all of us have in common and i learned that from you my older brothers Kelly and all who came before me.... and of course my lengthy stay in the Hawaiian Islands which brought it all together with the Aloha Spirit..... Mahalo for being there for me Shaun....Always Aloha Scottie

JULY 15, 2023 AT 9:29 PM

[REPLY](#)



SHAUN TOMSON says:

Thanks for th good vibes Scottie!

JULY 16, 2023 AT 2:44 PM

[REPLY](#)



Johnny Reimer says:

Never forget the first time I saw footage of you pulling through the wall deep inside at back door. Unheard of. Innovating thank you

JULY 18, 2023 AT 9:42 PM

[REPLY](#)



Sophie Goodrich says:

A true gentleman of the sport , his excellence in his writing and talks mirrors his talent in the water ..aloha Rob

JULY 16, 2023 AT 6:58 AM

[REPLY](#)



SHAUN TOMSON says:

Thanks Rob!

JULY 16, 2023 AT 2:45 PM

[REPLY](#)



Craig Hardy says:

Great read, thanks. Welcome to the Central Coast.

APRIL 18, 2024 AT 3:14 AM

[REPLY](#)



Tim says:

Thank you



David Wilson says:

Thank you Shaun for your beautiful creative writing. It puts the audience right there, a beautiful skill mastered over the years no doubt. Thank you for your stories they are all interesting and thrilling to read. Please keep sending them out, the surfing world needs them, to learn about surfing's history. These too will become part of a legacy you will always leave behind with everything else you have done for what we all cherish and love about surfing. I did meet you once, it was 1978-79 at Angourie and it was a big solid 8 ft powerful swell. I saw you jump off the ledge and paddle straight into an insane barrel too deep but still you charged it so hard and got eaten inside that heavy barrel and took the hammerings from the next two, super deep inside weaving the pump you invented at backdoor, it looked amazing and so brave. I had been out for a few hours and was tired so lay on the sand so I could watch you front on from the beach with my two Kiwi mates who had also come in exhausted. The next five waves you caught were all just as deep and big, gutsy barrels but this time you made them all screaming out of the barrel laying down beautiful. full rail, blazing huge cutbacks into a figure 8 and back for the inside barrel. We were cheering and clapping on the beach on every wave you took off on. It was one of the best displays of tube riding I had ever seen, especially at Angourie. I will never forget it. A terrible thing had happened when you came in and walked up the hill to the carpark to your car. Some idiot, bastard had broken into your car and stole your keys, clothes and other stuff. You came down to us three kiwis who were still watching the surf pumping and we were wishing you were still out there. You suddenly appeared beside us and from where we were laying looking up at you, you looked like a giant! I didn't realise you were so Big! (you looked like a rugby player!) You very politely asked us ..."Excuse me guys, have you seen anybody around here with my clothes and things, someone has broken into my car?" We all felt terrible anyone could do this, especially to you and reassured you we would keep a look out for any 'suspicious crooks'. We were only visiting down from Kirra so didn't really know what to do. I knew some of the good locals that made surfboards there so I hoped someone up the top of the hill at the carpark helped you call the police and helped organise to get wherever you were staying. You were looking around the beach but there was no one around but us. I am sorry this happened to you or anyone that's out in the surf and their car gets broken into. I am thinking the only reason you will remember this is because of that cowardly robbery inflicted on you and not so much of the brilliant display of surfing you put on for yourself and us at Angourie. We were blown out that you were even there at this remote but popular

surf spot along the NSW coast of Australia way back then. We all learned to adapt your tube riding style to the best of our ability and did make more tubes at Kirra that we couldnt before! Thank you Shaun for all your surfing skills and positive influences that you have given to the whole of the surfing world and other things that can happen in 'life' good and not so good.I will always look forward to reading your great stories. God bless you wherever you may travel and keep sprinkling your stardust everywhere. Kiaora Shaun ~ Arohanui Aloha ~David

APRIL 20, 2024 AT 2:04 AM

[REPLY](#)

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