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Surfing

## After Losing a Friend, Pipeline Surfers Tempt Fate With a Deadly Passion

By JAKE HOWARD

HALEIWA, Hawaii - With wounds on his head still fresh, the 46 staples in his scalp removed just days earlier, Tamayo Perry of Hawaii stood at the water's edge trying to find some semblance of inner tranquillity. It was the first day of the 35th annual Pipeline Masters, the final and most prestigious event on the world championship tour, and the Pacific Ocean had come alive with 15-foot surf.

No stranger to the life-and-death nature of Pipeline, Perry, who sustained a severe head injury when he was struck by another surfer's board on the first sizable northwest swell of Hawaii's winter big-wave season, ranks among the small but elite group of surfers making a name for themselves at the surf break.

For nearly 50 years, Pipeline, which began Dec. 10, has tempted the bravest and boldest surfers on the planet. In that time, it has become known as the world's deadliest wave, legitimizing its moniker on Dec. 2 with the death of the Tahitian-born Malik Joyeux. Renowned for his bravado in sizable surf, Joyeux took off on what for him was a relatively benign 10-footer. Unable to tuck under the cascading lip into the safety of the tube, the sweet spot for Pipeline surfers, he took the brunt of the wave's force on his head.

"I was paddling for the same wave," said Randall Paulson, a friend of Joyeux's and a lifelong Pipeline local. "I pulled back and let him go. I just wanted to see my friend get a good wave. That was the last time I saw him alive."

But what separates Pipeline from the other big waves of the world? Why, if it is so deadly, do surfers continue to challenge it?

"It's timeless," Perry said, "the ultimate man-versus-nature arena."

Every winter, generally from the end of October through the end of March, intense low-pressure systems form in the Gulf of Alaska, sending giant waves to the northern shores of the Hawaiian Islands. Traveling unimpeded for thousands of miles, the powerful open-ocean swells arrive from deep water, detonating on Hawaii's shallow volcanic shelf. It is a demonstration of physics in action as the swells strike the reefs, doubling in size.

While northwest swells are a key ingredient, it takes more than flour to bake a cake. Pipeline's unique reef also plays a vital role. It is shallow - less than four feet below the surface - and can be lethal enough itself. The reef is an amalgamation of flat and jagged coral heads. As open-ocean swells strike the reef, they jack up, throw out and form the cylindrical tube for which Pipeline's name is derived. It is not uncommon for surfers, after sustaining particularly severe wipeouts, to get pushed down into caves and crevasses. If they cannot find their way up, they face the possibility of drowning.

"I just can't believe what I'm seeing out here," said John Davidson, a vacationer from Tucson, watching from the beach. "It really boggles the mind to see this firsthand. There's nothing like it."

The waves break in an area less than the size of a football field. A wipeout at Pipeline can result in the equivalent of the water from three or four Olympic-size swimming pools being dumped on a surfer's head.

"I pray every time I wipe out," Paulson said. "You can't take anything for granted out there."

So why do it? Why risk life and limb for a wave?

For one, a wave at Pipeline, surfing's center stage, can make or break a career.

"When I was 16, I took off on a wave that I had no business going on," Danny Fuller of Kauai said. "It's made all the difference in my life. It launched my professional surfing career."

But it goes much deeper than that. For surfers like Perry, Paulson and Fuller, there is camaraderie in being a Pipeline surfer. They spend the winter in beachfront houses, surfing and finding ways to survive not as individuals, but as a larger cohesive group. There is safety in numbers at Pipeline. When one surfer goes down, having a group of friends to keep an eye out can mean the difference between life and death.

Camaraderie aside, for those willing to pay the ultimate price for surfing's ultimate thrill, it is the tube at Pipeline that is most sacred.

"All I want to do is pull in," Paulson said. "That's why you surf here. Period."

As Perry put his leash on and buckled his helmet (a recent acquisition after the injury), a 15-foot wave steamed across the reef.

Once the Pipeline Masters concluded - Andy Irons won the event - Perry and his friends were sure to be back in the Pipeline surf, tempting fate,

as they always do.