



Laird Hamilton going big in Indonesia; far left, the author starts out smaller.

Ride Like a Giant

LEARNING THE ROPES OF TOW-IN SURFING
BY THAYER WALKER



I TEND TO HEED DIRECTIONS best when they're screamed. So when big-wave champion Garrett McNamara gunned his personal watercraft (PWC) toward my face at 30 miles per hour and bellowed, "A 20-foot wave is going to crash on your head! Grab the sled—quick!" I did as I was told. Never mind that I was actually bobbing safely in warm, two-foot Indonesian surf.

So goes training for tow-in surfing. It was our fifth relatively flat day of a 12-day live-aboard surf mission through the Mentawais, an archipelago of 70-odd islands full of legendary breaks, about 120 miles west of Sumatra. The beverage brand SoBe had chartered a 65-foot luxury yacht for team riders McNamara, 40, Kealii Mamala,

29, and the three pubescent wunderkind Florence brothers—John John, Nathan, and Ivan. After some luck and scheming, I convinced SoBe to allow me—an average surfer who paddles to shore when the waves crest above double-overhead—to come along, so McNamara and Mamala could teach me how to catch a monster.

Popularized in Hawaii during the nineties, tow-in surfing gets riders onto waves too big and fast to paddle into. It's now practiced around the world, but it will never be an everyman endeavor—it's too difficult and dangerous. McNamara and Mamala are two of the discipline's most accomplished stars. In 2006 they won tow-in contests in Hawaii and Oregon, catching waves with 40-foot faces, and last year McNamara won the Billabong XXL Overall Performance Award. To prepare himself for the giant drops—and massive wipeouts—he follows an agonizing fitness routine that includes everything from jogging underwater while weighted down by rocks to pedaling a unicycle on a trampoline. His ultimate ambition is to ride a 100-footer, surfing's holy grail.

I had a more modest goal: to catch the wave of my life. My training began in flat water, where I slid into the foot straps and learned to ride behind the PWC, wakeboard style. "Watch the rope," McNamara warned. "If it wraps around your neck, it can pop your head off!"

A few days later, Mamala taught me how to short-rope, a quick-escape move in which a floating surfer pops up by grabbing a knot in the tow rope instead of waiting for the handle to float by. The guys let me drive the PWC, though my affinity for the throttle made this a rare privilege. When we weren't surfing, I'd do push-ups and shoulder dips while holding my breath. (Me: "How many?" McNamara: "As many as you can, until you're about to black out.")

McNamara also abused me

with the occasional pop quiz. During one flat-water practice session, he suddenly turned the PWC tightly, yanking the tow rope taut and slingshotting me out of the foot straps. I hit the water rib cage first.

"What the hell was that?" I gasped when McNamara came puttering around.

"The whip," he chuckled. "You OK?"

"I think I broke a rib," I whimpered. "How fast was I going?"

"With the centrifugal force, probably 50," he replied jubilantly. "I can whip you as fast as I want." Turns out I would need to handle this kind of speed if I actually wanted to drop in on serious big waves. And, as the weather fax would soon indicate, they were finally coming our way. The forecast was calling for consistent 20-footers on our last day. "I packed an extra pair of balls in my bag," McNamara cackled. "You can use them if you need to."

I wish I'd had the chance. Unfortunately, the surf only rose to eight feet. Still, as our boat anchored on an empty left reef break, we fired up the PWC. While the Florence brothers sucked up surf on the inside like little blond vortexes, McNamara drove me up the reef and whipped me into wave after wave. I must have caught eight in 30 minutes, and the rides were three times longer than they would have been had I paddled. Sure, I was cheating in a way—but I was also training.

"We have to practice for when it gets big," McNamara said at session's end. "When Mother Nature makes the call, we have to be ready."

I flew back to Northern California the next day and waited for the phone to ring.

● K38 Rescue offers three-day tow-in training courses throughout the continental U.S. and Hawaii for \$450. k38rescue.com



Photographer Jimmy Chin looking for a better place to shoot

HOW I GOT THERE

JIMMY CHIN, 34
Adventure Photographer

AFTER COLLEGE, I BUMMED AROUND Yosemite and lived out of my car. I was climbing El Cap with my climbing mentor, Brady Robinson, who taught me how to shoot his camera. We slept on the summit, and in the morning I took his camera and snapped a shot of him sleeping. He submitted his film for a Mountain Hardwear catalog, and mine was the only one that sold. I felt bad about it, but they gave me \$500. I couldn't believe you could get paid that much for a picture. Five months later, I was on assignment for The North Face with Conrad Anker. I wasn't thinking about making a living; I was thinking about supporting a lifestyle. My best moment? Shooting Kit and Rob DesLauriers above the Hillary Step on Everest in October 2006. It was one of those unexpected shots. I remember framing them on their skis at 28,800 feet and thinking, I've never seen this shot before. It ran as a full page in *Outside's* January 2007 issue. I see a lot of material, so I'm always stoked to get a chance to capture an image that I've never seen. —AS TOLD TO GRAYSON SCHAFFER

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