



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

JIMMY CHIN, 34