A full-page photograph of a diver underwater. The diver is wearing a blue and white wetsuit, a blue and white diving mask, and a blue and white diving cap. They are holding a spearfishing spear in their right hand. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through from the surface, creating a shimmering effect. The diver is looking towards the camera.

A lapsed spearfisher aims
to regain his predatory prowess.
How hard can it be?

ON POINT

STORY BY **HUNTER HASKINS** | PHOTOS BY **LENNY KAHOLO**

Consider Poseidon, the Greek god of the seas, creator of storms, sinker or saver of ships. When he's depicted in art, does he carry a fishing pole? No. A net? No. He carries a trident, the Hellenic equivalent of a Hawaiian three-prong. He's armed with a fish spear, the essential tool of the spearfisherman. Poseidon was a spearo.

I, too, was a spearo. The elemental thrill of confronting my fishy quarry face to face while maintaining the Zen-like calm needed to maximize my time underwater consumed me. One breath, one drop, one shot. No accidental bycatch. No target blindness. Just me and a seafood dinner, *mano a fisho*. I believe spearfishing is the purest form of fishing. It's certainly one of the oldest, dating back to the days of cavemen stabbing prehistoric fish with sharp sticks.

Early Hawaiians practiced spearfishing at a spectacular level, using hardwood spears ranging from about six feet to medieval pike length. The tips were made from bone, either dog or human, though when Western ships began to appear, iron-tipped spears began to appear, too. From



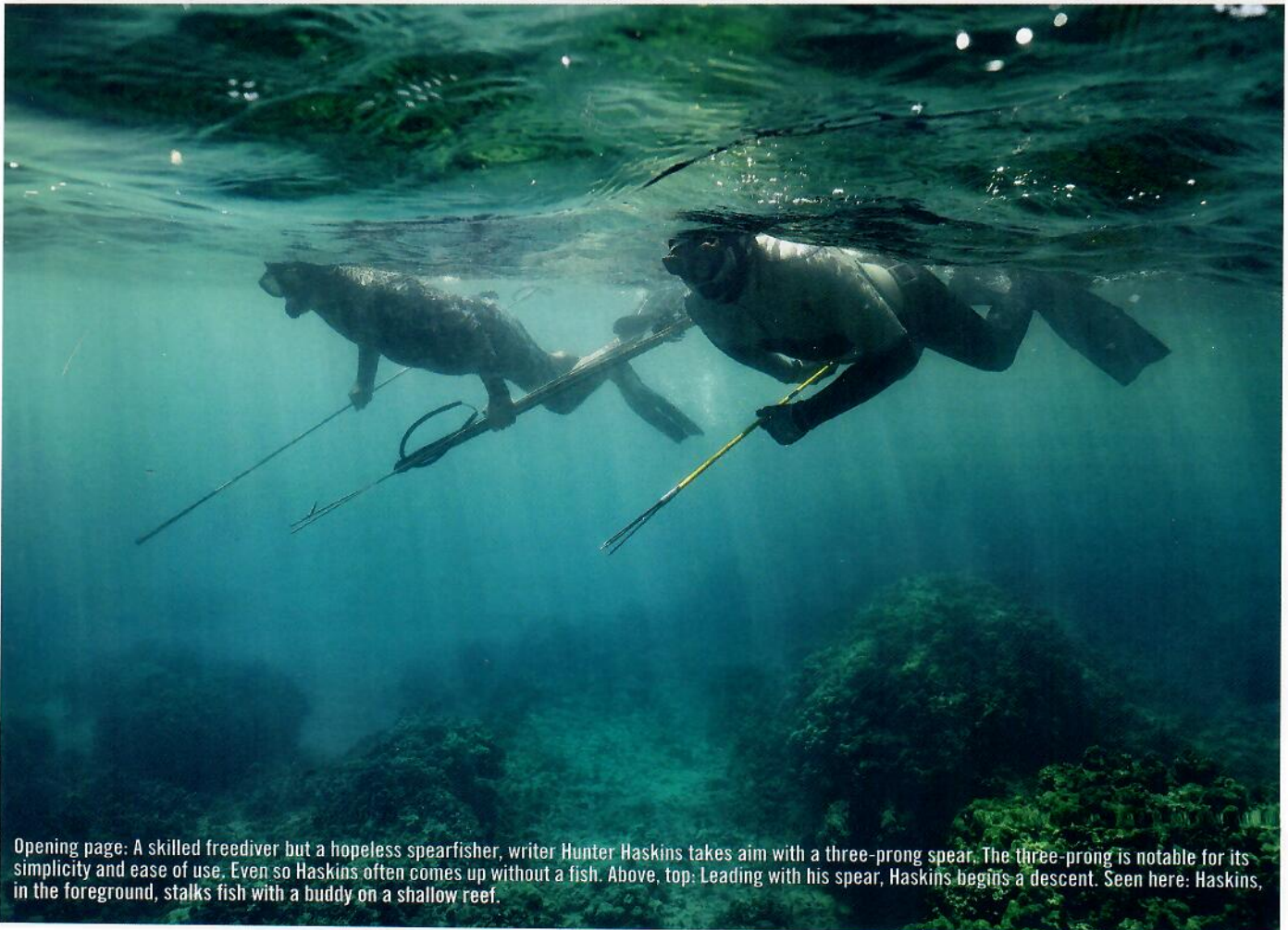
rocky shores, Hawaiian spearfishers could pluck fish right out of the water without even getting wet. At night they worked the reefs by the light of torches burning kukui nut oil. They also speared in deep water, without the benefit of mask, fins or camouflage wetsuits.

The great nineteenth-century Hawaiian historian Samuel Kamakau documented how Island spearfishers paddled canoes

or simply swam offshore into deep water, braced themselves on the bottom, then “lunged with the spear and pierced whatever fish they chose.” Some were able to dive to two hundred feet or deeper, Kamakau wrote. “They could swim like fish in the sea.”

Spearfishing is still big in Hawai'i. There are clubs, tournaments and even a magazine—*Hawaii Skin Diver*—dedicated to the sport. Ambitious local spearos have been picked up by national and international sponsors, and superstars like Kimi Werner and Mark Healey have hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram. Every hardware store or box store that sells fishing supplies is also likely to carry spearfishing gear. And there's no end to the gear: the spearguns themselves, the knives, the floats, the camouflage wetsuits, the obligatory decals for your car—it goes on and on.

When I was deeply into all of this, I spent thousands of bucks on gear and training, and I stalked my piscine prizes every chance I got. But things got out of control. Fish madness set in. My buddies and I would get so caught up in chasing fish



Opening page: A skilled freediver but a hopeless spearfisher, writer Hunter Haskins takes aim with a three-prong spear. The three-prong is notable for its simplicity and ease of use. Even so Haskins often comes up without a fish. Above, top: Leading with his spear, Haskins begins a descent. Seen here: Haskins, in the foreground, stalks fish with a buddy on a shallow reef.

we began ignoring the logical safety protocols. We would get separated from each other, or dive too deep for too long. If one of us had suffered a shallow-water blackout—the number one killer of spearfishers—a dead fish would have been a poor substitute for a living friend.

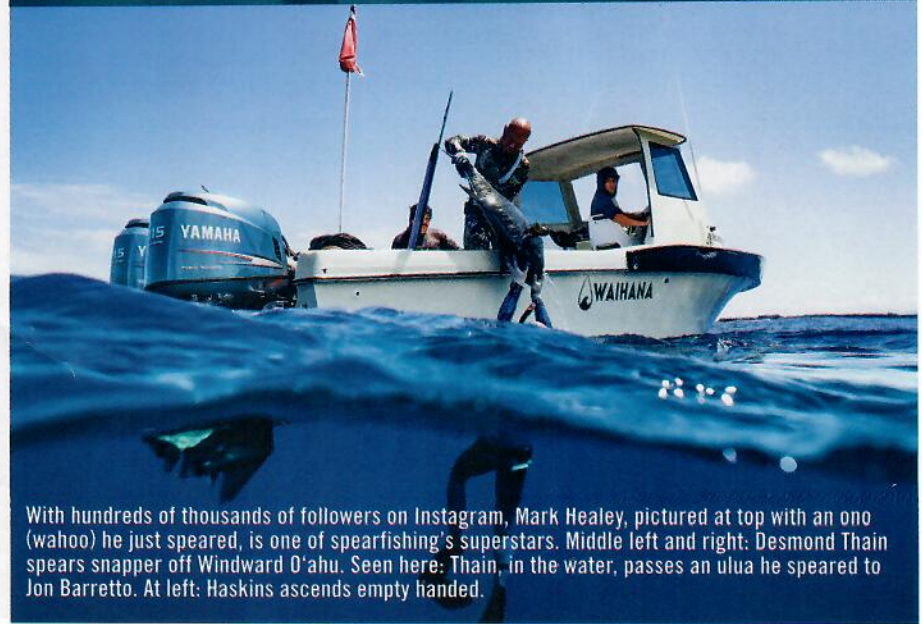
There was also the fact that, despite my enthusiasm for the sport, I basically sucked at it. Every time I missed a shot—



which was usually—I was struck by this loony feeling that Poseidon laughed. And when your perfectly human foibles leave you imagining that an ancient Greek god with complete control over the ocean thinks you're a fool, it's time to make some changes in your life. I vowed to continue freediving, but I sold my spearguns and moved on.

Until I meet Desmond Thain, that is. Des is a semiprofessional spearfisher and an artist specializing in *gyotaku*—slathering the fish he catches in nontoxic paint and printing them on paper. I like his hunter/artist approach and the fact that he eats his art models after immortalizing them. When the opportunity arises to go spearfishing with him to bag some invasive (but perfectly tasty) fish outside of Kāneʻohe bay, I say, “Why not?”

The day Des and I set out in his boat to dive is one of those rare spring days when the sea is almost perfectly glassy. Armed with a borrowed speargun, I slide into the water in my camouflage wetsuit like a commando on a search-and-destroy mission aimed at the non-native/non-endemic Fishzillas plaguing the reef. After cruising over flat expanses of unremarkable underwater terrain, Des and I spot pay dirt in thirty feet of water: shallow craters



With hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram, Mark Healey, pictured at top with an ono (wahoo) he just speared, is one of spearfishing's superstars. Middle left and right: Desmond Thain spears snapper off Windward O'ahu. Seen here: Thain, in the water, passes an ulua he speared to Jon Barretto. At left: Haskins ascends empty handed.

rimmed by undercut mini-cliffs teeming with fish.

Des drops and comes up a minute later with a bluestriped snapper on the tip of his spear, an introduced species that's believed to threaten native Hawaiian species. I drop next and find a hole heavily populated with endemic fish that are not on today's kill list. Des drops again and again, each time to a different nook or cranny, and each time waiting patiently on the seafloor before firing and usually hauling a snapper or invasive roi, a.k.a. peacock grouper, back to the surface.

I try to emulate him, finding a promising hole and then diving. But the fish always seem to see me coming and wisely swim for cover. I aim into their caves and wait. But they outwait me, and time after time I return to the surface empty-handed as the fish emerge from their hidey-holes to taunt me.

Finally, Des waves me down. "Your angle is wrong," he says. "You want to be pointing directly into the cave." I find a better angle on the next cave, but all the fish in the neighborhood seem wise to me by now. Then I spot a lone roi swimming out in the open. I drop, line up the shot and ... *thwack!* Spear hits rock, not roi. Desmond, swimming casually by, holds his thumb and index finger an inch apart as if to say, "Close!"

After a dozen fruitless dives, Des beckons me over and suggests that I dive with him. We settle side by side along a section of undercut cliff that serves as a veritable fish thoroughfare. A snapper appears, almost within range. I track it, track it, track it ... then, *thwack!* A fish is speared. But not by me. Des gets another one and I catch nothing that day.

Despite my less than stellar performance, Des invites me on another dive, this time to Penguin Bank, a shallow spot in the deep blue sea some twenty-five miles south of Hawai'i Kai. Made by the same shield volcano that formed Moloka'i, Maui and Lāna'i, its peak is in about ninety feet of water. It's a haven for pelagic species like mahimahi, as well as for reef fish that just don't like the crowded conditions near shore. Penguin Bank is an amazing place, filled with life (though none of it penguin).

In about a hundred feet of water, Des and his buddy Steve-O throw fish flashers over the side, mobiles of reflective, fish-shaped plastic that glint in the sun, looking like so many distressed and dying fish. The flashers are magnets for predators. Then



Spearfishing gear is commonly sold in Hawai'i wherever fishing gear is available, as well as at specialty shops. Top and center left: Calvin "Pops" Lai founded Kona Coast Spear Fishing, a hub for spearos in Kailua-Kona. Above and center right: Thain immortalizes his catch (in this case, an ulua) using the Japanese fish printing techniques of *gyotaku*. He uses non-toxic ink so the fish can still be eaten.



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On Point

Des and Steve-O begin furiously mincing frozen *saba* (mackerel), and throwing it overboard, creating a slowly sinking column of chum beneath our boat. The idea is to dive inside the chummy cloud and wait for unsuspecting fish to come in for a bite.

Within moments, miniature silvery blimps materialize and start snacking. These are delectable uku, a.k.a. Hawai'i blue-green snapper, our target for the day. Right after they show up, a pair of reef sharks appear and start snacking as well. Des and Steve-O regard the sharks as you would a pup sniffing around at a barbecue for an unattended pork chop. I'm a little more distracted, and I can safely blame the sharks for the three solid shots that I missed. Meanwhile, Des and Steve-O land several uku and a mahimahi.

Then the tiger shark appears. We all give him our undivided attention until he leaves, allowing us to fish on ... until he reappears—and this time with a female friend. They're both really curious about what these heavily armed camouflaged sea apes are doing at Penguin Bank. I pull rear guard duty as Des and Steve-O calmly throw the bait, flashers, guns and themselves back into the boat. The female makes a pass so close that I have to tuck in my speargun so she doesn't bump it. As she passes I get a good look at her mauled dorsal fin, probably a tough-love souvenir of her recent mating. Before she turns around and comes back to frighten me further, I am on the boat, without a fish but also without becoming the next star of *Shark Week*. I consider it a win.

We hightail it out of there at top speed, traveling a long way before we throw the flashers and *saba* back into the water, and do the same thing all over again. I still don't shoot a damn thing, but this time I have no sharky distractions to blame.

I consult with Des to figure out where I'm going wrong. Is the camo pattern on my wetsuit the problem? I ask half seriously. That's not it, he assures me. Would buying that thousand-dollar speargun I've been lusting after help? Only if I plan to use it *a lot*, he says. Des is a patient mentor, but he has no magic bullet of wisdom for me. He does, however, invite me on another dive, this time with his friend Mark.

Mark turns out to be the legendary waterman Mark Healey, the pro surfer/stuntman/spearo extraordinaire who calls the North Shore home, which is where we meet him. His wife is about to give birth, so he's a bit distracted. But he's eager for

the shore dive we have planned. "This will be a blue-collar dive," he says, meaning no high-speed boat or crates of frozen chum to attract trophy predators—just three guys in fins towing a bright red dive float.

We park my truck at Sunset Beach, our end point, then return in another car to our starting point at Ke Iki beach, two miles upcurrent. The surf is about head high, the wind is up and the full moon is generating a wicked current, so conditions are not ideal. But Mark and Des are undaunted, and I follow along. Drifting with the current, the reef speeds by. It's a mostly flat pavement of corals and sponges sliced by deep channels running perpendicular to shore. These channels, sometimes twenty feet deep, are where the action is.

In the freediving classes I've taken, I was trained to take calm, rhythmic breaths to slow my heart rate before diving down to enjoy the reef. In this freight-train current, the potential target areas come up so quickly that I have time for only a few quick gasps of air before kicking madly to bottom. The fish are all hunkered down against the current in crevasses, so they're easy to find. On this dive I have traded my loaner speargun for a good old-fashioned three-prong pole spear. Drifting swiftly past a crevasse, I line up my inexpensive department store weapon and let go on a table boss. *Score!*

It's not a big fish—just small enough to fit into a gallon-size freezer bag—but it's a big breakthrough for me. On my way to the surface, as I'm braining the fish with my dive knife, I feel as if a curse has been lifted. A few moments later I'm grabbing some gulps of air, then kicking frenetically to the bottom before surfacing with another table boss. There will be fish tacos tonight!

At our post-dive lunch, Mark and Des try to help me understand the importance of finding "momentum" and "flow" while spearfishing. "You just have to find the flow," says Des. But all I can think of is the old saw that golf is a good walk ruined. That's kind of how I feel about spearfishing—it's the Zen bliss of freediving ruined by mortal and psychological battles with fish.

Don't get me wrong: I like eating fish. I'm just no good at killing them. And I don't really have the drive anymore to put in the ten thousand hours needed to get better. But I'm still proud of my two table bosses. And if Poseidon is laughing at my puny little fish tacos, that's fine. I think they're delicious. **HH**

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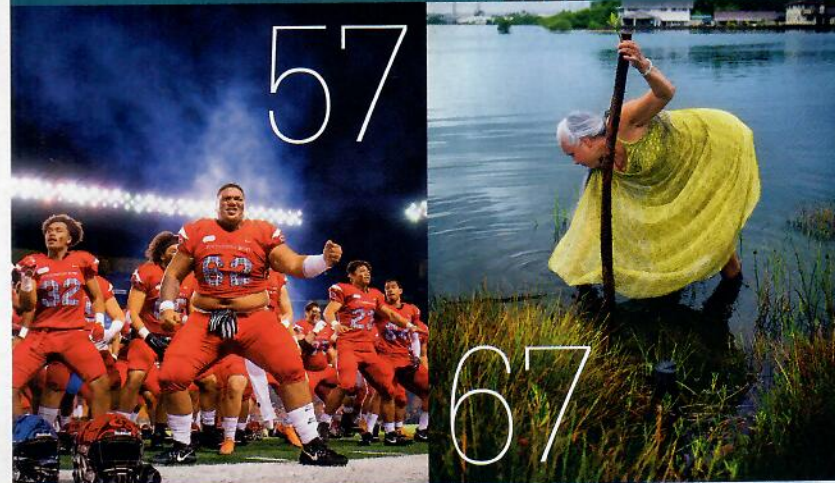
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October / November 2019
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