

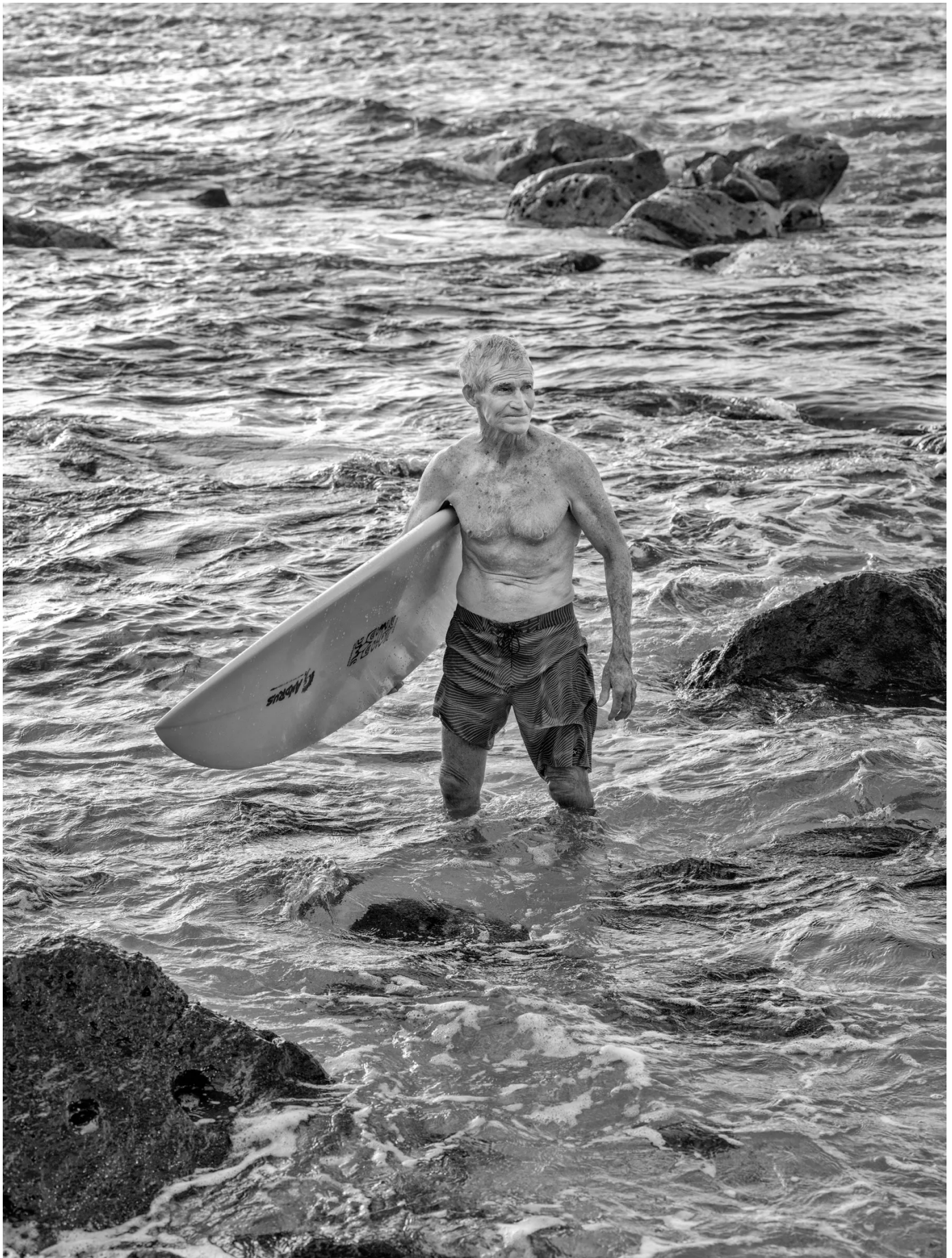
PROFILES

# A SURF LEGEND'S LONG RIDE

*For Jock Sutherland, being hailed as the world's best surfer was just one phase in an unlikely life.*

**By William Finnegan**

June 3, 2024



Sutherland found the surf business “antithetical to being able to enjoy being out in the water.” Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker



Save this story

Jock Sutherland's childhood home, on Oahu's North Shore, was a picturesque ruin when he brought me there. It was built after the attack on Pearl Harbor: a wooden barracks at the water's edge, part of the military's frantic preparations for a second attack. The building had a soft V shape, as if embracing the ocean, with a line of louvred windows opening onto a basic deck. Waves pounded the rocky point below. Sutherland's mother, Audrey, bought the house in 1961, for fifteen thousand dollars, and lived there for nearly sixty years.

I thought the place looked salvageable, but Sutherland said no. "Dry rot. Rust. The walls are racked. It's a teardown."

He sounded so unsentimental.

"Anyway, look at the neighborhood."

He gave me an eyebrow signal that I had to interpret. We couldn't actually see the neighbors. We were in the yard, surrounded by coconut palms, lush vegetation, an ancient unpainted stake fence. I decided I knew what he meant: mansions were slowly filling every lot along this part of the coast. In fact, Jock and his siblings had already sold this place to wealthy mainlanders. But the new owners seemed to be in no hurry to build, so Jock was still taking care of the yard, and using it to park his van while he surfed nearby.

“Looks fun out there,” he said, peering at waves breaking on a reef off the point. It did look fun. We paddled out through a gantlet of blue-gray lava rocks. I tried to mimic Sutherland’s every move—he had been navigating this tiny, swirling channel since the nineteen-fifties—but still managed to slice my foot. Out in the channel, he took my foot in his hands, studying the cut from various angles. “That’s not from a rock. You kicked an ‘*opihī*’—a limpet. “We can clean it later. I’ve got some good stuff.”

There were a dozen people out, and every one of them greeted Jock as he paddled past: little shakas and fist bumps with old regulars. This spot, where the waves range greatly in quality and intensity, is known as Jocko’s. The eponymous local had arrived.

Jock paddled west, angling away from the pack. A few minutes later, when a set of big waves appeared, he was far outside, the only surfer in position. He caught the first wave, paddling hard, jumping up with a fierce expression. There were shouts of encouragement, tribal ululations. I thought I saw, as I paddled over the shoulder, Jock’s lip curling in a wicked grin.

Sutherland surfs unusually well for a man of seventy-five. Surfing well at his age is unusual, full stop. But he has spent his whole life, nearly, in this wave-rich corner of Oahu. He’s wiry, long-armed, spry, disturbingly lean—five-ten, one-thirty-five—and he still carries, across his upper back, a serious rack of paddling muscles. He works as a roofer, running a small company, and gets in the water whenever possible. His hair is short and gray, his skin sun-punished and deeply lined. But his glance is sharp, and

his default expression is a level, knowing, impish gaze. You need to watch the eyebrows.

Although Jock didn't know it, he and I went way back. I'm a few years younger, and also started surfing as a kid. But my family lived in Los Angeles, where the surf craze of the early sixties—call it the “Gidget” boom—was being manufactured. Jock was out here, on the North Shore of Oahu. Surfing has a cultish aspect, and many of its pilgrimage sites are in this small corner of Hawaii. When I took my vows, surfing had a sacred text, too—a magazine called *Surfer*, which outsiders inevitably called “the Bible of the sport.”

Sutherland grew up on Oahu and began surfing, sixty-odd years ago, at spots that he could paddle to or walk to with a board on his head.

Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

The magazine was created by John Severson, a California surfer and filmmaker who wanted to counter the “Gidget” version with something closer to the real thing. One of his inspired gimmicks was the Reader Poll, which debuted in 1963 and produced an annual list of the world's best surfers. For my friends and me, the *Surfer* poll established a righteous pantheon. I can still name the top twenty from that first year, possibly in order.

In the mid-sixties, a flashy young haole (Hawaiian for “white person”) named Jock Sutherland made his move on surfing's main stage—known simply as the North Shore—riding enormous waves with rare, almost playful aplomb. He was, unlike most surfers, a switch-foot, able to ride equally well leading with his left foot or his right. As a goofy-foot (right

foot forward), he rode the Banzai Pipeline, the world's most famous, most photogenic, and, at that time, most dangerous wave. Images of Jock in stylish high gear at huge Pipeline, one hand delicately grazing the water's surface, hung in the bedrooms of surf rats everywhere. He rose swiftly through the *Surfer* poll, and in 1969 was No. 1—the consensus best surfer in the world.

When I mentioned this achievement, faux casually, Jock gave me the fish eye. “That whole thing was rigged,” he said. “Severson decided who would win. I had a part in a film he was releasing.”

We were eating home-cooked Asian-style mixed vegetables at his place, a modest upstairs apartment in the hills above the North Shore. I should not have been shocked, but I was. Hadn't I faithfully voted, after long deliberations, in each Reader Poll? Hadn't I worshipped the surfing of young Jock? Of course, I didn't know anything about him beyond a few great film clips and some classic stills.

His place was jammed with books, magazines, cookware, and tools, but there was no shelf of trophies or mementos—just a faded poster in a hallway from the 1967 Duke Kahanamoku Invitational, a major surf contest that Jock won. He had recently been elected to something called the Hawaii Waterman Hall of Fame, which throws a big banquet in Honolulu. Evidence of the award was nowhere to be seen.

A surfer as famous as he was could have made enough money for an easy retirement, I thought, but Sutherland hadn't cashed in. Surfing was never, to his mind, a job. Even when he was at the apex of the surfing world, he was unimpressed, stubborn. There was no pro tour in those days. “You

could work for a board manufacturer, maybe have your own signature-model board,” he told me. “But that meant sell, sell, sell. That was . . . *crass*. I mean, the banality. It was antithetical to being able to enjoy being out in the water.”

Jock built a different sort of life on his home coast. He’s seemingly everybody’s favorite roofer, a part-time farmer, a revered elder with garrulous tendencies. I’ve heard him called “the mayor of the North Shore.” My old starstruck view of him was pure projection. In truth, he was, from an early age, leading a strange, half-wild, quite complicated existence.

When Jock was twelve, his mother sent him to stay with a man known as the Hermit of Kalalau, on the island of Kauai. The hermit lived in a cave on the Nāpali Coast—a roadless wilderness where sea cliffs rise as high as four thousand feet. “That was actually his summer cave, down by the beach,” Jock told me. “He had a winter cave up the valley.”

The hermit’s name was Dr. Bernard Wheatley. “I was the object of his displeasure,” Jock recalled. “Being a kid, I was unaware of the imperatives of his existence. There was a good little bodysurfing wave out front, but he didn’t want me to swim out there. He was responsible for me. I started whining, and I ended up bodysurfing it.”

Jock enjoyed himself in Kalalau. “It was like a summer camp, but for more serious stuff than laying around playing cards,” he said. “We did a lot of foraging.” They also did some hunting—Jock had brought along the family .22. Dr. Wheatley warmed to him, slightly: “He tolerated me. I was curious. I had potential.”

Jock suspected that his mother wanted him to spend time with a father figure. His father, John Lauren Sutherland, was a Coast Guard officer who had left the family when Jock was ten. How did his mother know Dr. Wheatley? Well, he was her type of person. She had a job with the Army, doing education counselling, and was raising four kids alone, but she frequented the wilder coasts of Hawaii and had an exceptionally wide circle of friends.

Audrey Sutherland was a one-off. She grew up in California, went to U.C.L.A. at sixteen for international relations, worked as a riveter in the Second World War. She became a long-distance swimmer, married a sailor, worked in commercial fishing, and moved to Oahu in 1952. There she did substitute teaching, taught swimming, got her Army job. Her kids, growing up in the decommissioned barracks at the ocean's edge, were all water babies. After their father left, they scrounged. "When you're poor," Jock told me, "you learn how to find food on the reefs, hunt, pick wild fruit, trade with your neighbors. We set out lobster traps. Spearfishing, night diving. Got a lot of fruit from the hills."

Audrey drew up a list of things that every child should be able to do by age sixteen and stuck it on the wall. It read, in part:

- Clean a fish and dress a chicken
- Write a business letter
- Splice or put a fixture on an electric cord
- Operate a sewing machine and mend your own clothes
- Handle a boat safely and competently



—Save someone drowning using available equipment

—Read at a tenth grade level

—Listen to an adult talk with interest and empathy

—Dance with any age

This list changed with the times, adding computers and contraception, and nobody really kept score, but everybody got the idea.

Audrey had what she called a “wildcat need” to take wilderness trips alone. She used her short vacations from her Army job to explore backcountry Hawaii—climbing volcanoes, swimming remote coasts, living off the land. She swam the northeast shore of Molokai, perhaps the wildest coast in the islands, from east to west, pulling her supplies behind her on a line. That took a week. She hiked into narrow, once inhabited valleys, got into terrible scrapes on cliffs and landings, nearly lost her life on more than one occasion. In 1978, she published a book about her Molokai expeditions called, after Louisa May Alcott, “Paddling My Own Canoe.”

Audrey had a theory about relations with her kids: “They decided letting me be crazy gave them more freedom.” But sometimes she took one of them along for what Jock called “our mountain education.” The Sutherlands didn’t have a TV when Jock was young, and Audrey was proud to raise readers. The kids went to high school in Waialua, an old sugar-mill town a few miles down the coast. A retired county lifeguard who worked with Jock’s younger brother told me, “All those Sutherlands were really fucking smarty-pants. They read way more books than anybody else.”

Once, Jock and I went inside their old house and wandered its creaky-floored rooms. The house was emptied out, but he described every piece of furniture in the main room as it had been. He put his hands out in one spot, where shelves had held the family’s shell collection. He named shell after shell, in English and Hawaiian and Latin, as if he were looking at them, murmuring and moving from one shelf to the next.

Jock’s father introduced him to surfing—on an old balsa board, as he recalls. He began to surf at spots he could paddle to, or walk to with a board on his head—and surfboards then weighed nearly as much as he did. Just to the west was Laniakea, just to the east Chun’s Reef. Both are well-known breaks, and yet, surfing them with Jock, you learn that every peak and chunk of reef has a hyperlocalized name: “That’s Piddlies, and that thing over there is Chuckleheads.”

The North Shore has a concentration of spots that, in the wintertime, break bigger and better than any other known coast, and in the fifties a trickle of doughty Californians began making the pilgrimage, testing

their skill and nerve alongside a small crew of locals. A few big-wave surfers became household names—at least in the households where I hung out. Board-makers started shaping specialized boards, known as “guns,” for riding huge waves.

But the first time Jock surfed Waimea Bay, which was then considered the largest rideable wave in the world, he did so on the same battered board he rode at Piddlies. He was fifteen. “It was pretty consequential, riding a board that wasn’t all that fast,” he recalled, quietly. His talent drew attention, and older guys started giving him lifts to more distant spots, like Sunset Beach, a complex big-wave reef break farther east. A local board shaper, Dick Brewer, befriended Jock. “He was kind of a proxy father,” Jock said. The relationship had its transactional side. Brewer gave Jock boards that let him surf faster, harder, more freely, and people saw the Brewer sticker under his feet.

One pro surfer describes Sutherland as “always vibrant, always buzzing.” Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

Last year, he took second in his division at a surf contest at Haleiwa. Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

Although there was no pro tour yet, there were contests. Jock won the Hawaiian State Championships three years in a row, and in 1966 placed second in the World Championships, in San Diego. These events were all held in small waves—not his specialty—but he was wicked fast, technically solid, and unpredictable. He switched stance, which is

something you rarely see in contests. In unchallenging waves, he did silly but difficult things like taking off fin first. He seemed to be out there having fun, and yet he usually won. When he won the 1967 Duke Kahanamoku Invitational, it was the biggest deal in competitive surfing, at least in Hawaii, and it was held at Sunset, in serious waves. Jock, who was still in his teens, got no prize money.

But it was not in contests that he made his name. It was at Pipeline, which sits roughly halfway between Waimea and Sunset Beach. A few surfers rode Pipeline well, notably Butch Van Artsdalen, a hellion from La Jolla. But most people were afraid of it. When Pipe is working, it breaks with stupendous force in shallow water, producing one of the world's most beautiful, deadly tubes. Jock and his buddies started riding it on small days. "I made one or two out of ten," he said.

He kept at it, refining his approach. He started making the takeoffs, and seeing how to avoid the heavy lip, by quickly finding a rideable line and "pulling in"—crouching close to the face and letting the barrel envelop him. Then, with perfect positioning and a bit of luck, he would be thrown into the clear by the explosive force of the lip's impact. Jock seemed to have more time as he rode than anybody else did. Dropping in to the heaviest waves, he would fade and stall, casually timing his bottom turn to set up the deepest possible barrel. He would disappear into the roaring darkness, then reappear, usually, going very fast, with that little grin.

**P**ipeline is the Formula 1 of surfing. To ride it well requires a combination of fast-twitch reactions, steady nerves, and board-riding skills so precise that only a few surfers in the world possess them. Jock

once rode big Pipe at a level not seen before. Today's Pipe rippers charge far harder.

Not long ago, I sat on the beach and watched Jock surf alone at 'Ehukai, the beach park that includes Pipeline, on a small day when random soft blue peaks and walls were running east across the sandbars. There was nobody else out. He seemed to be always on a wave, milking it down the beach, lanky and graceful on a nine-foot board, expertly reading the vagaries of each swell, pulling out just before the shore break, then paddling back out at an accelerated pace and gliding into another one. It was a master class in making the most of small, disorganized surf, and in aging elegantly as a surfer.

Surfing with Jock can be less serene. If he decides you need instruction, it can be like surfing with a drill sergeant. "Breathe, Bill!" he barks at me, out at Chun's Reef. I am breathing. I've been doing this a long time, too. We're in not very good waves, and he's full of advice. "Shake out your arms. Keep moving around." He follows his own instructions, shaking out his arms. He introduces me to a local kid on a longboard. As the kid paddles up the reef, Jock says, sotto voce, "Excellent water photographer. Excellent longboarder, too." The kid catches a wave up the line and immediately affirms that assessment.

Jock knows everybody on the North Shore, but he seems to keep special track of good photographers, like the old cover-shot surfer he is. A set comes through, and we need to scramble out. Jock, as always, gets a head start, and catches the first wave. Afterward, he paddles back out and asks me, shyly, if he looked dorky jumping up regular-foot (that's left foot

forward, not his more natural stance), and I assure him that he looked smooth. He nods happily—never too late for vanity.

Later, he insists that I take off in front of him. It's a small wave, not much wall, and I'm not sure what we're doing riding it together. He yells, "Come back!" He's gesturing at me to ride toward him, which I do, though it makes no sense. He keeps gesturing. Now we're on a collision course. "More!" He cuts back to give me more room. I keep heading toward him, against my better judgment. Our boards are now inches apart. The wave is a dribbler. "O.K.!" he yells, steering away and pointing at the wave beyond me. I turn and see that this small, weak wave has hit a shallow shelf of coral, far closer to shore than people normally surf at Chun's. The wave stands up, chest high, turns smooth as pearl, and I find myself flying through a lovely section, the sun infusing the lip with a gray-green glow. Jock, now far behind, is giving me a thumbs-up.

He's even bossy about how to end a session. I'll throw my board in a car and maybe put on dry clothes and head off. In Jock's world, you find the hose under the bushes behind the old house, then wash the salt off not only your body but your board. (That's new.) You wrap the leash just so

around the fins or, better, remove it from the board entirely, coil it carefully, and then *dry* the board with a towel. (Also new.) Then, if necessary, you rub the bottom of the board with a foam-filled nylon sock called a Pickle. (A Pickle?) Then you slip the board gently into an immaculate bag, and slip all that gently into the van.

There's more. As you wrap a beach towel around your waist to change, be careful to keep your feet free of dirt. There's a designated little rug to stand on, and a rag to clean your feet. And, speaking of feet, cross the yard only at certain angles, because some patches of the grass have sharp little stickers. Wet trunks and rash guards go in a special bucket.

I resist all this rigmarole the first few times we surf together. Jock shakes his head in pity and disapproval. Then, one day, I decide to do everything his way, just for the hell of it. Rinse the board, dry the board. Wet trunks in the bucket. The rituals are oddly soothing. It's the upside of O.C.D.—everything in its place. These boards will last forever the way we're treating them.

“Now you're gettin' it, Bill.”

**A**s one of the world's best-known surfers, Jock was always in the mags, but he laughs at the idea that he was ever in a media spotlight. “There was no spotlight,” he says. “It was a few people. A few photographers, a monthly magazine in California, usually getting everything wrong.”

Still, he gave interviewers their money's worth, sometimes more. Asked by *Surfer* about his approach, he soliloquized: "You case out the surroundings as fully as possible, find as many variables as you can and their differentiating planes. So, for example, you're working with two main mediums—sea and air. First, you understand the air variables, the wind and the clouds and the sun, recognize them as part of the territory, and apply them. Then you recognize the water variables, such as consistency of swell, number of people in the lineup, the different types of reformations occurring."

Air variables? Was he putting us on? He seemed both geeky-earnest and tongue-in-cheek. Asked about the interior of a large Pipeline barrel that he had successfully navigated, he said, "Spacious for sure. Just like the Pope's living room. Even with all the bric-a-brac, paintings and big overstuffed chairs and sofas."

This quote lodged in the collective surf memory, becoming a fancy metaphor for a deep barrel. At the 2012 U.S. Open, *Surfer* called its bar-restaurant the Pope's Living Room. But Jock told me that he actually never said it. "The Pope doesn't even have a living room," he said. "That's gauche, maudlin, inaccurate—and uncomplimentary to the Pope." The journalist who did that interview insists that Jock did say it. And, for that matter, the Pope does have a living room. But it was 1969, for Christ's sake. People were smoking a lot of spliffs, on both ends of the interview couch.

The wave of recreational drugs that flooded American youth culture in the late sixties was a tsunami among surfers. Cannabis and psychedelics—LSD, mescaline—seemed designed to make you surf better. Jock took



this inspiration to the limit. “I was pretty wild,” he says today. “I worried that I set a bad example.”

Pipeline is one of the world’s most beautiful, deadly waves. When Sutherland started there, he made “one or two out of ten,” he says. After refining his approach, he rode it at a level never before seen. Photograph by Art Brewer

In the sixties, Sutherland’s friends called him the Extraterrestrial. “He could beat anyone at chess or Scrabble,” one said. “He could smoke more hash than anyone, take more acid, and still go out there and surf better than anyone.” Photograph by Art Brewer

Outlandish stories swirled around Jock, who was sometimes called the Sunshine Superman, for a popular variety of LSD known as Orange Sunshine. On the North Shore, he and his pals liked to start their acid trips in the mountains of the Ko‘olau Range, which runs down the east side of Oahu. They knew the mountain streams, and where to find the old work camps from the sugarcane plantations, which had been abandoned as Hawaii’s sugar industry shrank. The workers had kept fabulous gardens, which were now full of wild fruit and vegetables. At some point, Jock’s troupe would head for the coast, to rinse off the day’s psychic grime in the surf.

Psychedelics weren’t harmless—we all came to know many acid casualties. But they had, as many contemporary researchers know, the power of revelation, the potential to expand self-awareness. Jeff Hakman, the other young haole phenom of the period, told an interviewer that the best surfing experience of his life had been enhanced by LSD, and shared with Sutherland. “We used to call him the Extraterrestrial because he

was so good at everything,” Hakman said. “He could beat anyone at chess or Scrabble; he could smoke more hash than anyone, take more acid, and still go out there and surf better than anyone.” You never knew what Jock would do on a wave, except that it was likely to be something you had never seen before, like side-slipping in the barrel at Sunset or switching stance at big Waimea. It was no surprise to anyone that he took the top spot in the 1969 *Surfer* Reader Poll.

But, before the magazine could hold its awards banquet, Jock executed his most radical move yet. Without telling anyone, not even his mother, he went down to the local recruiting station and joined the Army. This was around the height of the Vietnam War, when half a million American troops were there. Jock started basic training at Fort Ord, California, in January, 1970. *Surfer* cancelled the banquet, and did not offer another Reader Poll for the next nine years.

**I**n interviews over the decades, Jock has given various explanations for why he signed up. In the nineteen-nineties, he mentioned an ideological divide that had cleaved surfing. “The pro-contest guys were anti-drug and I was, *ahhh*, shall we say, pro-choice,” he told the surf historian Matt Warshaw. “Meanwhile all the anti-contest guys were on my back, telling me to get off my contest kick and just surf. Except I liked contests! So I was sick of all the tension.”

There was also a local cultural imperative, he said. “This might be a difference between us here in Hawaii and you guys in Southern California, but there was a challenge aspect to the war. I was a local boy,

bred in the country, pretty tough, and I just thought I could handle Nam. I wanted to see how I'd stack up.”

When I pressed him on it, he said, “The military is a big deal here. My parents both worked for the military. My dad served in World War Two and in Korea. A lot of my classmates from high school enlisted and went to Vietnam.” Jock knew that lots of his “Caucasian friends,” as he put it, thought his spontaneous enlistment was crazy. Many surfers he knew were busy dodging the draft. “But some people in the community gave me credit for enlisting,” he told me. “It was an honorable thing to do till Vietnam.”

Nearly everybody in his basic-training unit was from Hawaii. He was in training as a field wire repairman, one of the more dangerous Army jobs. Many field wire repairmen were going to Vietnam and not coming back. At Fort Ord, Jock finally began to have doubts about the war. Maybe he didn't really care to find out how he would stack up. Maybe he just had second thoughts. (When we talked about it, he referred me to Christopher Hitchens's book on Henry Kissinger: “It's about the vicious idiocy of our élites.”) A sergeant recognized him from the surf magazines, and, Jock said, “he pulled some strings and got me rerouted to clerk typist. He probably saved my life.” Jock learned to type, used his off-duty hours to surf around Monterey, and was honorably discharged at the end of 1971.

In his absence, surfing's pecking order had changed. Not long before he signed up, Dru Harrison, one of the top California surfers from his age cohort, had written in a surf mag, “Hey Jock, why don't you lay off for a

year and let the rest of the world catch up?” Then, “Hey Jock, make that two years.” Harrison got his wish.

While Jock was at basic, another Oahu surfer, Gerry Lopez, stepped into his role at Pipeline, with a feline, unadorned style that perfectly fit the wave. When Jock came back, the two surfed Pipe together. “He had not lost a step,” Lopez told a reporter.

By then, Lopez had co-founded a surfboard company, Lightning Bolt. Surfing’s popularity was booming globally, and Lightning Bolt, cleverly marketed, boomed with it. There were surfers out hustling sponsorships, not just from board-makers but from apparel companies, and eventually even doing beer commercials. But Jock, fresh out of the Army, felt that he needed a regular job. “Surfing didn’t offer much,” he told me, and shrugged. He worked in a surf shop in Honolulu, then became an apprentice roofer. “The money was good, especially after I got in the union,” he said.

The next few years were both happy and sad. Jock fell in love with Frances Cunningham, whom he describes as “gracious, tall, willowy, Lithuanian Irish.” Frannie came from a prosperous suburb in East Honolulu. It was 1972, and she was taking a long walk on the wild side. She and Jock got married in a shotgun wedding, as he called it, soon had two sons, and then found themselves living in an old quonset hut on a gravel road in the cane fields of Haleiwa, the main town on the North Shore. “We grew taro and *basu*—that’s lotus root,” Jock told me. “There was an irrigation ditch and huge cane rats. We’d hear these big traps go bang at night and then twenty seconds of heavy rat thrashing.”

Frannie spent most of her time marooned in this romantic idyll with the babies. Jock was working full time, including roofing jobs on outer islands, and, inevitably, when the waves were good, he was surfing. “I spent less time than I should have with my family,” he told me. At some point, Frannie packed up the kids and moved back to her parents’ comfortable house in town. She and Jock separated in 1976. It was amicable, and the boys, Matt and Gavin, surfed with their dad. Today, Gavin often works with Jock as a roofer.

“It looks like I was a little parsimonious with the caulk here,” Jock says, peering up under the edge of a roof vent. We’re on a steeply sloped roof—dimensional shingles, asphalt and fibreglass—in a little subdivision behind Sunset Point. The house belongs to Mike Takahashi, a surfer and a retired salesman. Jock put the roof on six years ago, with two skylights. Skylights are infamously difficult to seal, but that’s what the client wanted. Now Mike has seen water coursing down the shingles, then missing the rain gutter. Jock says that’s just water wicking back from the overhang. But now he’s studying the skylights. He’s wearing open-heeled sandals—what people in Hawaii call slippahs—but he seems as sure-footed as a spider, twenty-five feet off the ground. I stay where I am, with a death grip on a good edge, and try to follow his calculations about where rainwater might seep. He checks the seals on the skylights.

“Electrolysis,” he says. “This copper step flashing is corroding because it’s touching the aluminum top frame. I’ll put a piece of stainless steel in there, or some other inert material. Maybe some silicone caulking.”

Takahashi seems to trust Jock's expertise. On our way down, he mutters to me, "He's the best."

"I'll come back Tuesday with the right tools," Jock says.

Another day, another roof. This one's in Pupukea Heights, a one-story house surrounded by a big yard with a pair of old hardwood trees—a lychee and a dragon's-eye, under which goats are grazing. The house belongs to Mark Healey, a big-wave surfer. Healey, like Jock a North Shore homeboy, is a pro surfer in the new entrepreneurial mode. He makes little or no money from competing, but he works as a stuntman in film, has a YouTube channel and assorted sponsors, and offers high-priced courses in diving, spearfishing, bow-hunting, and big-wave survival.

People in surf world who have houses on the North Shore all seem to want Jock for their roofs. He does work for Kelly Slater, the eleven-time world champion, who has a beachfront mansion, west of Laniakea, with roof problems from a coconut tree someone planted in the wrong spot. From Healey's roof, we can see a gallery of others. An old friend of his, Mark Cunningham, brother of Frannie, told me, "If you took a drone shot of the North Shore and marked every roof that Jock built or has fixed, you wouldn't believe it. There's thousands of houses, and he's probably worked on half of them."

There are a few expensive-looking houses in Pupukea Heights, but the money is down on the coast. "Lot of families up here, some retired military," Jock says. Property values and rents have climbed on the North Shore for decades, driving out poor and working-class people. When I

ask Jock about the community he grew up in, he says, “There were a lot more Hawaiians.” There are areas legally designated as Hawaiian Home Lands, where people who have at least fifty per cent Native blood can lease low-value land cheaply and build houses. Oahu has numerous Hawaiian Home Lands. Three of the island’s four coasts have them. The North Shore has none.

The West Side of Oahu has far more Hawaiian residents than the North Shore does. It also has crushing burdens of poverty, crime, and homelessness. That week, Jock had already gone three times to the West Side, a two-hour round trip, to work on the roof of a children’s educational center. This was volunteer work for a group that encourages at-risk youth to get in the ocean.

On Healey’s roof, Jock wants to re-paint the edge to guard against a sooty algae that’s common in Hawaii. He gives me the Latin—*Gloeocapsa magma*—and wonders why more roofing companies don’t use algae block to prevent it. Mark Cunningham told me that he had been haranguing Jock for decades to become a contractor: “Get off the roof, schmooze with the clients, hire a bunch of young guys to do the hard work.” But Jock was stubborn, and he didn’t trust anybody, with the provisional exception of Gavin, to get it right. “I don’t want to be up here when I’m ninety,” he told me, querulously, on Healey’s roof, as if I had argued for that. “It’s dangerous work!”

**T**he North Shore surfing-industrial complex has grown considerably from its modest origins—just as surfing itself has gone from a local obsession in a few coastal enclaves to a global pastime with tens of

millions of practitioners. During the big-wave season on the North Shore, which starts in roughly November, tens of thousands of surfers, photographers, and camp followers descend on the Seven-Mile Miracle, as it has been styled. Every ambitious young surfer needs to get his or her ticket punched, preferably annually, on the North Shore. The first event of the season on the world pro tour is held at Pipeline, the second at Sunset, and other major contests, some with large purses, are also held at Pipe, effectively privatizing the break for weeks at a time, since only contestants are allowed in the water during heats. Several of the beachfront houses at Pipe are occupied by companies, “surf brands” like Volcom and Billabong, that sponsor both contests and pro surfers.

The perceived glamour of high-calibre surfing on spectacular waves has drawn both gawkers and substantial idle wealth from all over, typically investing in second homes and vacation rentals, pricing out the locals. That ramshackle public-housing complex at Velzyland? Now it’s a gated community. Sean Penn bought a place in there. V-Land is a sweet, eccentric wave east of Sunset Point. It was a hotbed of local talent when I was a kid.

When Pipe goes off—big, luminous, sculpted, murderous—filmmakers and photographers line the berm. In the water, on the shoulder of the great wave, a scrum of water cameras forms. Surfers learn to ignore them, riding right over the photographers as they blow out of the barrel and make their coasting victory pullouts. A few top Pipe riders have taken to gripping GoPro cameras between their teeth. They need the content for their YouTube channels, their vlogs, their Instagram stories, their sponsors. Beach-shot footage, drone footage, water footage, and point-of-



view footage, sometimes of the same great ride—it's all money in the bank.

Pipeline has killed surfers—there are nine names on a wooden memorial near the beach, and at least one recent death is not yet up there. The lifeguards have saved countless people, sprinting out of their tower. The first casualty Jock remembers was a Peruvian kid who hit the reef and died. It doesn't need to be big. Malik Joyeux, known for his exploits at Teahupo'o—a mutant Tahitian wave that's perhaps even more dangerous than Pipeline—was killed on an eight-foot day at Pipe. With advanced lifesaving, including Jet Skis, brain damage has become more common than death. But even pros who survive hitting the reef at Pipe head first rarely surf the same way afterward.

Jock broke his femur in the early eighties, not at Pipe but at Jocko's. "It was an eight-foot wave, and I had to go around a friend who was paddling out. Lip landed right on me," he said. "I tried to get back on my board, but my leg just hung there, like a dead eel. My friends had to help me get in." The accident affected his surfing. "I was afraid of the lip for about a year after that." The lip is the most violent part of the wave, and

being afraid of it is a natural reaction—a survival instinct that Jock seemed to have temporarily acquired, until he lost it again.

The real problem for Jock came on land. During his convalescence from the broken leg, he lived next door to a cocaine dealer. Cocaine was cutting a deep swath across surf world. The roster of drug-related casualties is long and includes some of the best in the sport, such as Andy Irons, a three-time world champion from Kauai, who died in 2010 while still on tour. Jock developed a habit, along with half the people he knew. “I started selling bindles,” he told me, ruefully. “I never made money. I didn’t cut my stuff, just eyed up amounts. Then I got busted muling a pound for somebody else. So stupid. That really shocked my mom.”

He was arrested by federal agents while coming off a flight from Los Angeles. He pleaded guilty to possession and did two and a half years, at a minimum-security federal prison in California and another in Oregon. “I did camp maintenance. Played a lot of baseball. A working vacation, basically.” Though he shrugs it off now, jail was the nadir of his life. He didn’t even use the time inside to stay strong. “My first paddle across from Jocko’s to Chun’s after jail wore me out.” He laughs flatly. “I was in a halfway house in town for six months.” His older sister, Noëlle, once asked him why he started dealing coke. His answer, she told me, was so naked and unassuming, it may be a first in the annals of crime: “I wanted people to be happy to see me show up.”

**T**here’s a patch of sand in front of Audrey’s old house, fronted by gray rocks with seawater sloshing through them. In the afternoon, with the sun beating on the sand, the little beach fills with sea turtles, who

crawl ashore to warm themselves. The Hawaiian green sea turtle, known as *honu*, is among the largest in the world. It's an endangered species, illegal even to touch without a permit. On the beach, they're easy to mistake for rocks. I think so, anyway. Jock doesn't have that problem.

"Aw, no, look at that guy," he said one day, as we were crossing the sand. "That tumor is huge." He indicated a sleeping turtle with, now that he mentioned it, a bulging growth on the side of his throat. "I'll tell the research people about him. Maybe they can do something."

The research people, who were from the University of Hawaii, came often. They counted, measured, photographed the turtles, took readings. Jock pointed out to them that the turtles liked this spot partly because of a freshwater spring that flowed from under some rocks. He led them to the rocks in question. We all drank water from cupped hands—cold and fresh, sure enough, even with seawater all around. The researchers took photos and notes. Jock waggled his eyebrows.

*Honu* have become a tourist attraction. They live in numbers along the North Shore—which now reportedly pulls almost half of Oahu's six million annual visitors up to its beaches and its single two-lane highway. Some of the visitors come to see big-wave surfing, but more reliably they come to see and photograph turtles. The best-known turtle-viewing spot is Laniakea, and local government has failed to adequately accommodate the hordes of vehicles, which often means bumper-to-bumper traffic for miles. The tourists, or at least their cars, provoke local ire.

On another afternoon, an Asian family came staggering along the shore toward Audrey's old place. It was rough walking, over big sharp rocks. The patch of sand was a much needed break for the hikers, and on it they found their elusive goal—turtles. They took photos. Jock went down to say hi. They spoke no English, so he tried a few Asian languages on them. They turned out to be Korean tourists, and they seemed gobsmacked when he welcomed them: "*Annyeong-haseyo.*" He took them through the yard to the road, sparing them the hard hike back. "You should be able to say a few basic things in all major languages," he told me after they left. He had most of the big Asian and European languages covered.

Jock's version of the North Shore lies underneath, or behind, the front-lit surfing spectacle that photo-bombs the place each winter. Some longtimers find ways to hang on, usually by moving up into the hills above Waimea, where Jock lives. Some of these folks find profit streams in the mobs of well-heeled visitors—selling T-shirts, running food trucks, teaching surfing at a gentle wave near Haleiwa, renting houses and rooms through Airbnb.

After Sutherland got out of the Army, he began working as a roofer. Now, in addition to running a small roofing company, he's a part-time farmer and a revered local elder, sometimes called "the mayor of the North Shore." Photograph by Katy Grannan for The New Yorker

Jock doesn't have much interest in the carriage trade. Small farms and working ranches survive on the North Shore, and, as the old pineapple and sugarcane plantations farther inland have closed, more arable land has become available to local farmers. Jock has a share in a mango orchard. He and his partners sell mangoes to Foodland, a supermarket on

the North Shore. Much of the produce that doesn't go to Foodland goes into Jock's van for personal distribution.

The van is a dark-blue Honda Odyssey, jammed to the ceiling with surfboards, buckets, an ice chest, a first-aid kit, and tools he uses in his roofing business. The tools include hammers, pry bars, scratch awls, many sizes of nails, two machetes, a whetstone, and industrial-sized tubes of caulking and sealant. There are cedar shingles, rolls of tarpaper, squares of asphalt. But the items that grab the eye are white buckets filled with gleaming mangoes, guava fruit, fresh-picked avocados. The ice chest next to the fruit is typically full of smoked fish, fresh fish, smoked pork, poke, and homemade avocado delicacies. This spread is why people call Jock's van the Rolling North Shore Farmers' Market.

None of it is for sale. He seems to give most of it away—to old friends, new friends, strangers, frenemies, lifeguards, roofing clients. The rest he trades with other people in a sprawling network. “There are a lot of fishermen, farmers, and hunters out here,” he says. This is obvious from the constant texts and calls Jock gets while on his rounds. “You're coming in with aku? You bet I'll take some, bradah. How's the wind out there?” I've found it hard to pay for things when I'm with Jock on the North Shore. After a long meal at a popular restaurant called Haleiwa Joe's, and at least twenty conversations with people passing our table, I couldn't get the cashier to take my money. “*Ohana* discount,” he said. *Ohana* means “family.”

**A** solid north swell hits the North Shore. It's way out of season, nearly May. Jock and I check Pipe. The crowd is so thick that the surfers

look, from down the beach, like ants stuck on a glue trap, an undulant mass. It's dead glassy, no wind, and very ominous-looking. The water is gray, almost brown, and the swell seems bunched up for its size. Ten-foot waves come through, and nobody in the crowd even tries to take off. The waves detonate on the reef, most with no corner, no shoulder, confirming the wisdom of the crowd's prudence. The bunched-up swell makes a two-wave hold-down look all too possible. "Not user-friendly," Jock says.

We drive to Sunset. The wave there breaks on a long set of reefs far from shore, and it is handling this swell beautifully. Two-story peaks stand against the sky, and then a long clean wall roars toward the channel. Dozens of people are watching from the highway, but there are only a few surfers out. My heart hammers. This is obviously the spot. I start changing. Jock does not.

"You're not going out?"

Jock looks miserable. "No, I'm going to run some errands. I feel emotionally wounded." He had a difficult conversation that morning, apparently, with Pia Stern, his longtime girlfriend. Pia, who lives in San Diego, is a painter and an art teacher. She and Jock met in the nineties, when she was teaching at the University of Hawaii. They have never lived together. They fly back and forth when they can. "We're very attached, very close, but I don't have a name for it," Pia told me.

Jock knows something about long distance. His father, even before leaving the family, spent much of his life at sea. While the kids were small, he worked as a marine construction supervisor in Micronesia.

Noëlle recalls a dashing figure. “He could dance the tango and the merengue,” she says. “He was a charmer, a raconteur. Good tennis player, good golfer. He looked so good in a uniform. He was a man’s man, and a ladies’ man.”

Jock idolized his father. He often brings him up, reminiscing about the time he came and took Jock out of school to surf. That only happened once. Pia thinks that John got a pass partly because he was absent. If young Jock, who was headstrong, had clashes with authority, that usually meant with Audrey—John “was never around to play the bad guy.”

Jock quotes Pia often, and seems in awe of her. But, Pia told me, “I’m uncomfortable when he puts me on a pedestal.” This is a theme with Jock. He speaks of his mother with reverential affection. He keeps a collection of her handwritten journals. But his view of his father has developed an edge. “He treated Mom more like a girlfriend than a wife,” he told me. “He had girlfriends everywhere. Really, he was just another selfish surfer.”

At Sunset, Jock offers me a sleek-looking 8'0" to ride. I can’t believe I’m doing this alone. But I do it—not well. The waves are magnificent. The bigger ones stand up, feathering in a light wind, and concentrate a frightening amount of power at their apex when they break. A pro surfer could shred these waves on a tiny high-performance board—stand-up barrels, g-force turns, roundhouse cutbacks—but in this small crowd the people getting the best waves are on enormous boards, ten feet, maybe eleven feet long. A short, strong woman in a tank top picks off a number

of beauties, riding one of the longest boards I've ever seen. She's got the spot wired.

I miss every wave I paddle for—shrugged off. This board's not big enough for me to catch waves out where the longboarders sit, so I move in closer to shore. I'm preparing for a later takeoff, but when I paddle over a swell I find myself right in front of an eight-foot set that's already breaking. I'm smack in the impact zone. Surprisingly, I enjoy it. I stay above water as long as I can to watch the other surfers' rides—the huge drops, the screaming walls. I bail my board late and get obliterated. Long, sobering hold-downs but still several glorious, gasping visions.

Jock used to own Sunset. He surfed it twice this size with matchless style—taking off behind the peak, back-dooring the tallest part of a huge wave, side-slipping in the barrel. Could he surf it now, in these conditions, on an 8'0"? I'm not sure. He obviously wasn't inspired to try. The beatings are fairly heavy, I can attest. I'm pleased to have survived.

**W**e all slow down, we all age out. It's humbling, or worse, to admit that you can no longer keep up with the young guns at the top breaks, that you need to look for lesser spots—less intense, less competitive, less exciting. I find it difficult, but for a surfer of Jock's stature the down-slide is truly precipitous. He never talks about it. He is so closely focussed on the waves at any given moment, on the possibilities for joy that they present, that the regret-filled long perspective—the differences between these waves and those he tackled in his prime—seems like a foolish distraction.



I heard Dave Rastovich, a superb pro surfer, contrast Jock with the “grumpy old dude who wishes it was yesteryear”—the inevitable guy who grumbles about the days when it wasn’t so crowded and, hell, even the waves were better. Jock was the antithesis, “always vibrant and always buzzing,” he said. I couldn’t argue with that. He still wanted to surf well, and wanted to look good as he surfed, but I have never heard him fret, even in a sidelong way, about his lost relevance in high-performance surfing. He still likes to compete—in the “old guys’ division,” in local North Shore contests. Last year, he took second at Haleiwa.

And he keeps the rabid surfer’s close eye on the weather, studying not just the charts but the skies to the west. He has a lookout spot among the ruins of an old Hawaiian temple near his place, on Pupukea Heights. It’s high above the ocean. You can really see the angle of the swell. “See those clouds out there? That’s Kauai.” Nearly eighty miles of ocean separate Kauai and Oahu. “I don’t know,” he says, looking up. “Wind’s kind of *kapakahi*.” That means crossed up.

Jock, after many false starts, is off to see Pia. To prepare, he goes to see a barber who works out of her house near Sunset. He’s given her a ton of avocados, so it’s a discount haircut. He comes out looking like a boy. Jock, for a world-class athlete, has always had a delicate head and neck, and this haircut makes me want to protect him from the world.

Before he goes, we surf Chun’s one more time, and he gives me a wave-judgment tip that I could not have imagined previously. It’s a rising swell, and the sets are starting to produce a lovely peak right next to the channel. The crowd has moved over there, but Jock instead points toward

the horizon: “Let’s go, Bill.” I see nothing, but I follow. He’s paddling fast, moving way out, away from the crowd. Eventually, a wave appears—easily the biggest of the day, standing up far outside. It’s physically impossible, I believe, that Jock could have known that wave was coming. But he gets there in plenty of time, right to the heart of the peak, and spins. Everybody else in the water is caught inside by at least forty yards. People are shouting in dismay and disbelief. It’s a demonstration of basically incomprehensible mastery.

Then Jock does something truly weird. He jumps up and goes left. Chun’s is a right-hander—the channel is on the west side of the reef. But Jock sets out east, from the main peak across a very long wall. I punch through the lip near the takeoff and turn to watch. The wave runs off for fifty, sixty yards, no sign of Jock, until he finally comes sailing over the shoulder, way down by Piddlies someplace. It is one of the most counterintuitive things I’ve seen in a lifetime of surfing.

Later, going through the rituals of hosing, drying, standing on certain rags, in deep-shadowed twilight beside his childhood home, I ask him how he knew that set was coming.

“Didn’t you see that six-man out there?” He’s talking about an outrigger canoe that was passing Chun’s, maybe half a mile offshore. I certainly never saw it—a tiny distant figure in the afternoon glare of the ocean’s surface. Neither did I see that it disappeared from view for an unusually long time. That meant, to Jock, that there was an unusually large set approaching, still a minute away. “You gotta keep your eyes open, Bill.” ♦

*Published in the print edition of the June 10, 2024, issue, with the headline “The Long Ride.”*

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