

A New Man

Dirty oil came spurting out of the drain hole and began to puddle on the garage floor. Sonny-boy Noaloa cursed loudly and re-positioned the drain pan. He wiggled out from underneath the truck with oil on his shirt and a pissed-off look on his face. Heath Larson was standing at the work bench repairing the footstraps on a high-speed surfboard. He glanced over his shoulder and quickly guessed what happened.

“You’ll find some clean-up stuff over there in the corner. And don’t forget to put the plug back in before you start putting in the new oil. And when you’re done with the truck, we’ll get started on the jet skis.”

“Yes, sir. Anything you say, sir. Right away, sir.”

Larson was caught offguard by the tone in his voice. For the past three weeks they had been making real progress turning the bad boy surf star into a sober-minded waterman. Now that the January rains were pouring down, the training had shifted to Larson’s garage where the focus was on the machines that were a part of riding big waves. It was a completely different kind of surfing that had to be understood from the ground up, but the look on Noaloa’s face told Larson it was going to be a longer climb for the former pro champ than he’d first imagined.

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An hour after the victory at Pipeline, they had both been in the same airport conference room where the decision had been made to change Noaloa’s m.o. ten days previously. Roberto Mercante was sitting at the table, and Bruddah was standing near a window looking out at a view of Diamond Head. Mercante’s flight was leaving in twenty minutes, and his wife was smiling on the video conference screen. Thanks to the intervention, marketing didn’t have to trash the “When It Counts” campaign and scramble a new sales angle before the upcoming trade shows. Heath, Bruddah and her husband had pulled it off, and things were looking up. She thanked them all before getting to the point.

“Sonny-boy, I won’t see you until Surf Expo in Florida, but I want you to know how proud I am of you. And I’ve got great news. You won’t be on the pro tour next year. As of right now, I want you to start preparing to become a true surfing legend as a big wave rider.”

Noaloa didn’t know what to say. For him, surfing had been all about competition, starting with his mom driving him to contests up and down the east coast of Florida every weekend.

"Yeah, but, uh, I like surf da contes', and if I drop offa da tour, what I do? And what kine talk people make?"

"Let 'em talk all they want," said Roberto Mercante, following his wife's lead, "That will only work in our favor. I can see our press release right now: No Tour for Noaloa - He's Got More Important Things to Do!"

"That's pretty good, Roberto. Have the P.R. and marketing people get started on it right away. Heath, can I count on you to continue your excellent work with Sonny-boy?"

"Uh, well, that's not in my contract, Cheryl," said a surprised Larson.

Corlund sensed she had to put out a fire. "Well, that's easily solved. Why don't we up your numbers by half, retroactive to the beginning of December, plus a performance bonus on a per wave basis at our new reef?"

"Well, that sounds good, Cheryl, I guess," he said with genuine hesitation, stalling for time, feeling like an outside set was coming and he was in the wrong place. Before either of them could say anything, Noaloa jumped in.

"Eh, I goin surf dat place too! What I get? I mo bettah talk my agent."

"He's not working for you anymore, Sonny-boy. I bought your contract from him. But don't worry. You can have the same deal as Heath, and now you'll keep the 10% you used to pay that guy."

"Yeah, but - - -"

"But what, Sonny-boy?" said the CEO, now no longer smiling, "Call it a well-deserved Christmas present. Haven't we always taken good care of you?"

Corlund took Noaloa's silence as acquiescence.

"Good. Roberto, go over to the fax machine and make sure it's on," said Corlund, "Now Sonny-boy, you're going to stay with Heath on Maui, and Heath, you're going to get him ready to be your partner when you surf the reef."

Now Larson had to speak up. It was one thing to bulldoze a business deal. Telling him who to trust his life with was something else.

"Cheryl, I already have a partner. It takes a long time to set up a tow-in team."

"Roberto tells me we've got until May before the reef starts breaking, and I don't need you guys at full strength out there until August. Heath," she softened her tone, "I'm sure you can do it with Sonny-boy training full time. And of course we'll cover all your expenses."

Mercante walked back to the table with the two contracts.

"Here's the deal, guys," he said, "Take it or leave it."

Corlund winced at her husband's words. Sometimes people snapped when they heard that cliché at the bargaining table. When it came to Heath Larson, she was right. He made no effort to read the contract. He knew exactly what Corlund was doing. For the first time in his association with Wavelife, he was ready to walk away from the table. The thought gave him a distinct sense of freedom and his heart sang for a second. He got up and indeed left the table.

Corlund and Mercante were speechless. Sonny-boy, too, was surprised, but he couldn't ignore the idea of making more money.

"Heath, bra! We can do dis! We gonna do sometin' nobody evah dream of! Brah, we goin blow minds!"

But Larson didn't hear a word as he walked over to talk with Bruddah who had been listening to every word and understood the situation perfectly.

"Heath, I know you hates dis shit," he said quietly, "Dey tryin' to buy you wid a lotta bucks, brah. But mebbe we change dis kid forevah and make him one da kine role model for other kids on da islands."

"You sure about that, Bruddah?"

"Yeah, brah, we gotta chance and we gotta go for it. What we gonna do, let da Tui and GroundZero turn alla da kids into thugs?"

"Ok, Bruddah, you're driving, as usual."

"Dat's ok brah, we pull dis off and he gonna be da model citizen!"

Bruddah grinned, and Larson saw a look in his eye that couldn't be denied. He turned and walked back to the table. It was one thing to be cornered by a CEO. That he could walk away from simply on principle. But Bruddah's words hit home all the way to his surfer's soul.

"Yeah, Sonny-boy, we can do it," he said, "But Cheryl, Bruddah is in on this or else I'm out."

"Yes, well, uh, of course! Roberto, work out the details, ok? And so can I get your signature, Heath? Sonny-boy?"

The two surfers signed the contracts, and a relieved Cheryl Corlund smiled again.

"Great! Mala kalamaka, and happy new year! Gotta go, guys! Bye!"

The video screen turned blue. Cheryl Corlund leaned back in her chair and smiled at June Wilson and Bill Massara. With signed contracts in hand from Larson and Noaloa, she could now get back to the work in front of her.

"Ok, let's see the financials we'll be taking to New York," she said.

In Hawai'i, her husband also had work to do, but before he could get started, Bruddah had the first word.

"Hey Roberto, betta tell you wife its Mele Kalikamaka, ok, brah?"

The day after Christmas, Larson and Noaloa went back to the training regimen that had cleaned up the former world champ. They started every day at dawn with a jog through the mountains at dawn and a light breakfast before a morning workout of stretching, yoga and low-impact free weights. After lunch was a different story. With Bruddah as their drill sergeant, they would redline all afternoon with surf-centric exercises Larson had developed over the years using sand for resistance work. They finished every afternoon doing swim sprints with Bruddah pushing them to exhaustion.

"Here come da shark, boys! I one hungry mako today!" he'd yell, and if he caught either of them, he'd grab a foot and drag the laggard under water. For all his strength, Larson got caught every once in a while, and though he

got some slack in the beginning, Noaloa was soon swimming almost as fast as he could paddle a surfboard.

But they never surfed. Noaloa didn't need to become a better surfer - he needed to prepare for an entirely different way to ride waves from another realm. On New Year's Eve they watched the ball come down in Times Square on the small black & white TV in the kitchen and raised a toast of spring water to the new year. The former world champ was looking forward to tomorrow so much he was glad to go to bed. The sooner he fell asleep, the sooner it would be day one of a new year as a new man.

When Noaloa jumped out of bed an hour before dawn he found a note on the kitchen table. Within minutes he was running down to the coast, and as the sun touched the horizon he found Bruddah sitting on a cliff overlooking an ocean full of waves. Below them, in the water all alone, was Heath Larson riding perfect waves at one of the best surf spots in the world, Honolua Bay.

The Bay was often the most crowded surf spot in the entire Hawaiian island chain, but the surf had been good for days and the surf reports had called for the swell to drop. So most of the surfers on Maui had indulged in the usual over-the-top New Year's revelry, not knowing that the surf report had got it all wrong, leaving Larson to reap the fruits of self-discipline by shredding the ten footers as if he was surfing chest-high Malibu. Noaloa had rarely seen Hawaiian waves surfed with such casual power and style. And he had never seen what Heath Larson did after one particularly stand out wave: he simply sat and watched a set go by without trying to catch even one wave.

The sight of empty perfect waves was too much for the young surfer.

"Say Bruddah, we out deah! Git da kine tubes 'fo da crowd come, yeah?"

Bruddah's response put him back in his place.

"Nah, let da guy surf alone. Let some da waves go by wit nobodys on dem. We just sit and watch, brah. Good fo' da soul."

Noaloa knew better than to say another word, but it took a while for him to swallow and digest his frustration. He and Bruddah exchanged some small talk about Larson's technique on a few waves, but it wasn't until the wind changed directions and clouds began to form on the horizon that Bruddah changed the subject as other surfers began to show up and Larson caught his last ride.

"Look like da Kona winds come. Gonna rain real good. I tink mebbe we change da training, Sonny-boy. You in great shape. Now it time we gonna train you fo' da jetskis."

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Riding big waves once required only two things: a big, fast board and a lot of guts. Then board design reached a limit at the intersection of paddling speed vs. performance on the wave itself. The bigger the wave, the faster it moved through the ocean, but bigger boards that paddled fast enough could not be made with the necessary maneuverability to surf the waves successfully.

The solution was smaller, highly maneuverable boards that didn't paddle at all but were towed behind jetskis that went faster than the waves. Now catching the wave was no problem, but that was just the beginning.

After several years of development by a small group of veteran big wave riders in Hawai'i, the 'tow-in' technique changed big wave surfing forever in three important aspects. First and foremost was the fact tow-in surfers could not go surfing alone. They needed a jetski, and the jetski needed a driver whose role was crucial not only for catching the waves, but also rescuing the riders when they fell. Second was the jetski itself. They had to be maintained, and surfers had to become gearheads. Finally, to accommodate the excessive speeds and torque found in waves forty to sixty feet high, the boards became like waterskis, with footstraps and extra weight, and could not be paddled at all.

And thus was broken a basic thread tying all surfers together going back to the days of the Duke when surfing was simply a man, a board, and a wave.

For many, the loss was a small price to pay for the adrenalin and exhilaration now orders of magnitude greater than anything previously experienced by surfers. Tow-in surfing became the subject of dozens of articles in the mainstream media, and the fact that surfing was once called the sport of kings became ancient history in a new world powered by jetskis.

The Duke was dead, and a new king was crowned: Heath Larson. Yet in some ways, Kahanamoku's spirit lived on in Larson's soul. Although he was on the cover of Outside and National Geographic, he refused to be a part of the surf magazine popularity polls or participate in their annual "biggest wave" photo contests. Once he was offered a script for a TV commercial that had him comparing big waves to Mount Everest. He turned it down. He knew there was no comparison. No one ever claimed victory over the highest mountain on earth after first using a helicopter to get close to the summit the way a jet ski was used to get a surfer on a big wave.

Heath Larson had no illusions about his dependency on a machine or, to a much larger extent, his tow-in partner. Mechanical aptitude could be learned, but trust was something else again. He had worked with several jetski drivers who knew the machines and the tow-in techniques backwards and forwards. But it wasn't until he met Bruddah, a Hawaiian whose integrity went back generations, that he finally was able to find the kind of bonded friendship that allowed him to reach the pinnacle of a sport-within-a-sport with its life-and-death challenges.

Now he and Bruddah were facing a new challenge that had nothing to do with nature and everything to do with human nature.

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"Why I gotta do all dis? I no like work on cars – why we no jus take da car dealah and have dem fix?"

Larson let the words hang in the air while another downpour hit the metal roof over their heads. And it took almost a minute for him to make sure he was calm and centered before he spoke.

“Because you’re contract with Wavelife averages out to fifty bucks an hour, and the poor guys who change oil for a living make about ten. Who do you think is going to do a better job?”

“Wavelife pay me fo’ surf. I nevah was paid fo dis kine surfing.”

“That was last year’s surfing. This year you’re going to have to be more than just a guy who can win surfing contests.”

“What you talkin’, brah? I beat da bes’ surfahs in da world, and mo’ dan one time ! It was fuckin’ hard ! Brah, I deserve to win!”

Noaloa was digging in. Larson was ready for the confrontation.

“Listen Sonny-boy, maybe you have forgotten, or maybe you don’t even know, I grew up on the North Shore. If I had wanted to turn surfing into a dog-eat-dog job, I would have probably won the tour just like you.

“But I didn’t want to surf shitty waves or psyche out opponents or get into the judges’ heads. Waves are a God-given gift, and to use them to make myself number one out of a pack of competitors just didn’t make sense to me.”

“What you stay doin’ now? You use jetskis to be da bes’ evah in big waves! What da difference? We both da best surfers in da world!”

“Are we? Is it about the fame, or the feeling? What about the seven year old kid who gets his first wave all the way to the beach? Or the mom who somehow gets a wave all to herself at Malibu? Do we feel any better than them, or are we just more famous?”

“Think about it, Sonny-boy. Just who is the best surfer in the world? Is it some paid pro getting air for the hundredth time because the magazines need a cover shot, or it is some poor guy with four kids and a mortgage who gets the wave of his life at some empty beach nobody’s ever heard of? Believe me, Sonny-boy, being on top in surfing is not about judges and sponsors. It’s not about getting your picture taken in the tube a split second before the wave eats you alive and breaks your board. Just ask any of those old guys in their eighties at Waikiki or San Onofre.”

Noaloa had never heard anyone say anything like that before, and he didn’t know what to say. But he tried.

“Shoots, Larson, you know who you are and what you do is mo’ pono dan anybody evah do in surfin’. No try bullshit me.”

“Ok, maybe I’m not getting through to you. Let’s look at it this way.”

He walked over to the jet skis and the rack of hybrid surfboards on the wall. For a moment, Heath Larson was framed by equipment like an astronaut standing in front of the space shuttle.

“I guess it boils down to this, Sonny-boy. You’ve never had to depend on anyone out in the water. Everything I’ve done has always depended on Bruddah. When we surf that reef, I am going to have to depend on you and you’ll be depending on me. If either of us thinks of ourselves first, the other guy just might die.”

“Yeah, but how stay surfin’ if need alla dis stuffs, one guy fo’ drive noisy machine fo’ pull inna da wave? An’ why I have depen’ on you fo’ anytin’? I no like be responsible fo’ you, anyway.”

The two surfers just stared at each other. It was a showdown and neither was going to give an inch.

“You guys get da truck ready? I gotta go Town go shoppin’. Moms and Pops comin’ ovah for dinnah. Gonna bring da family, too.”

It was Bruddah, coming in out of the rain with some well-timed and much-needed Hawaiian aloha.

“Yeah, we were almost done. Go ahead and put five quarts in her, Sonny-boy, or was it six? Better check the manual,” said Larson without breaking eye contact with Noaloa.

Sonny-boy averted his glance and saw Bruddah looking at him.

“Shoots, I gonna get um done,” he said, tossing the oily rag towards the trash can. He missed, on purpose.

Heath Larson saw the gesture but let it slide. He went back to his work, but not before catching Noaloa’s eye and then looking at Bruddah.

“Yeah, when you go town, I think we’re close to running outta toilet paper. Better get some. We gotta lot of shit to clean up around here.”

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A week later, the rain had stopped, the skies were blue, and the surf was big enough to begin actual training with the jetski and the tow-boards. On the other side of the island, at a deserted reef far from the cameras, Sonny-boy Noaloa got his first real rush as a tow-in surfer. Heath Larson had positioned him perfectly, and all Sonny-boy had to do was stand there and cruise through the biggest tube of his life. At the end of the ride his euphoria was that of a child who had just experienced something for the first time, something so wonderful that it made him oblivious to the world around him.

Then he heard the jetski and saw Larson coming towards him at full throttle – being chased by a rogue wave twice as big as the one he just rode. And just like a child, the former pro surf-star froze in panic. Larson was frantically signaling for him to be ready for an evacuation pick-up. But like a deer in the headlights, Noaloa couldn’t move. And to make matters worse, his feet were still in the footstraps.

Larson didn’t slow down until the very last second. He saw that Sonny-boy was attached to the board as he pulled up right next to him.

“Leave the board and get on the sled!”

His words were drowned out by the roar of the oncoming wave and Sonny-boy continued to struggle to get his feet out of the straps.

“Grab the sled, NOW!”

Noaloa reached for the handropes of the rescue sled attached to the waverunner and pulled himself up onto the sled.

“Get the board up in the air!”

The white water was now mere few yards away. Noaloa rolled up on to the sled and had the board out of the water.

“Hold on!”

Larson redlined the jetski just before the white water hit them.

The acceleration was so abrupt that Noaloa was thrown sideways. The nose of the board caught in the water, but Noaloa held on, his legs twisting and straining until the straps broke.

Raw ocean power chased them towards the shore lined with large boulders. Larson began to edge to his right, aiming for the break in the reef where the wave would back off for a few seconds before smashing into the cliff.

“Get ready to bail out!”

But Noaloa didn’t hear him over the roar of the wave about engulf them both. He was holding on tight in sheer panic when Larson jammed the ski into a hard turn at the last second to zoom out to the safety of the deep water channel as the wave slammed into the rocks and exploded up against the cliff.

They were safe, but the experience seemed somehow surreal because suddenly the ocean had become completely quiet. The rogue had been the last wave of the set. The entire surf zone, where huge waves had been breaking with tremendous force and where Sonny-boy had been rescued just seconds ago, was now covered with nothing but a layer of soft white foam.

As they drifted to a stop, Larson turned around with fury in his face.

“You trying to get us killed? Didn’t you see my signal? Remember what we did in training? Why didn’t you - - -“

Noaloa wasn’t listening. He was grimacing in pain.

“Hey brah, I tink my knee is fucked.”

