



HUNTINGTON BEACH'S PETER TOWNEND AND A TURNED-AROUND TROPHY CAUGHT THE VERY FIRST WAVE OF PROFESSIONAL SURFING

# THE ORIGINAL SURF STAR

BY TERENCE LOOSE

When Huntington Beach's Peter Townend, best known as PT, sees what professional surfing has become in the four decades since he became the sport's first world champion, he is both stoked and amazed. Today, professional surfing's champions are millionaire celebrities, flying first class, staying in beachfront manses and pampered by a dedicated entourage of trainers, coaches and videographers. Surfing is seen as a legitimate and healthy career path. And events are ... well, actual events: the nine-day U.S. Open of Surfing, which PT helped establish in 1994, will bring a 500,000 spectators to Huntington Beach from July 26 to August 2, the prize purse at each of the 11 Championship Tour events is \$525,000.

That's about as different an experience as a wave rider could get from when Australian-born Townend was named champ in 1976. At the end of that year, after scraping his way around the world to compete against 20 or so other surfers in a ragtag assemblage of surfing competitions, Townend was on the North Shore of Oahu, chasing big waves. A few months earlier, Hawaii's Fred Hemmings and Randy Rarick, founders of what would eventually become today's World Surf League, announced they were going to add up the points for the year and declare a world surfing champ. Their goal was to legitimize surfing as a sport, and for that they needed a champion, says Rarick.

"So," says Townend, "Fred called me up one day and told me he had totaled up the points and I was the champ. Could I come to Honolulu so we can take a photo for the paper?" Townend drove to Waikiki's Outrigger Canoe Club, where Hemmings was waiting.

"And he doesn't even have a trophy!" Townend says. Rarick says that's because their dream to start a professional league was just that: a dream. "We wanted to get some promotional value for PT as world champ, but there were no sponsors, so we didn't even have enough money for a trophy," says Rarick.

"So he gets the key to the trophy cabinet and pulls out what looks like an important trophy with something else inscribed on it. He turns it round backwards so you can't see what it says, and that photo appeared the next day in the Honolulu Star-Advertiser. And that's the birth of pro surfing right there!" says Townend with



Townend rides on the north side of Huntington Beach Pier in 1998.

his characteristic explosive laugh that follows approximately 98 percent of his sentences, which all demand exclamation points, by the way.

In the end, for becoming surfing's first world champ, Townend got lunch and had to give the trophy back – it still resides in the Canoe Club's case. His income for that year was \$26,000, mostly from shaping surfboards, not from chasing the "gypsy tour," as it was called, where a win might just pay your way to the next event and second place meant you probably weren't eating protein that day. Townend reckons he spent more money chasing the tour around the globe to win the world title than he made.

"Back then nobody was making any money. But it was the experience of going and laying the groundwork to legitimize professional surfing," says Rarick. "I remember PT saying, 'By 1980 we'll be millionaires.' That was optimistic thinking; it took about 15 years longer than that."

But while Townend was in the minority – no one believed so-called surf bums would ever get paid to ride waves – he was proven right. "Today, on the championship tour, you can go around the world, lose

every single heat in all 11 events, and you'll earn \$99,000 in prize money!" he says.

Of course, anyone who surfs knows that even the most pampered pros of today don't paddle out for the money or the fame. It's all about the stoke, something Townend absolutely, positively exudes to this day whenever he talks about surfing. Which is basically always. Because whether it's his time as a

competitive professional surfer, or his role as a surfing announcer, surfing coach, *Surfing* magazine publisher or surf company consultant, Townend's entire existence has been dominated with riding waves since he can remember.

Townend's ocean life began in the waters off Coolangatta, Queensland, as a young boy in the 1960s. Already part of the "clubbies," the volunteer lifeguarding and waterman clubs, Townend joined the fledgling Kirra Surfriders Club, and for Christmas 1966, he got his first surfboard and started surfing Rainbow Bay every day.

"Because of the consistent waves, the nice weather and the warm water, if you had any kind of athleticism, you got pretty good pretty quick. So within two years, I was in my first Queensland championships," he says.

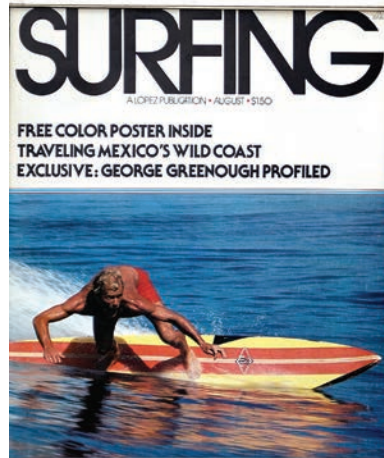
Townend was anything but the stereotypical surf bum of the day, however. He was a good student and his grades earned him a scholarship to architecture school. But he turned it down to try to make a life from surfing – at a time when there was no such thing as a professional surfer.

"My grandmother didn't talk to me for 10 years!" says Townend. His father and mother were a tad more supportive, even occasionally lending Townend money to get to the next contest. To pay for his dream, Townend shaped surfboards and

wrote a column for his local newspaper: "In the Tube with Peter Townend."

By 1972, Townend was part of arguably the greatest Australian national team ever assembled: five eventual world championships and the inventor of the thruster surfboard design (Simon Anderson). They ventured around the globe to gain respect as true waterman and pursue this crazy dream of becoming pro surfers. They knew to have any shot at either of those things, they needed exposure, and the best place to get that was in the winter waves of Oahu's North Shore.

But with no money, there was no jet-setting. In those days, Townend and the crew came to Hawaii in September and stayed till February. If you had a mattress and a sheet – and a magic board – you were happy.



THE MAKING OF BIG WEDNESDAY



"We didn't have trainers and travel accounts and entourages," Townend says. "If you got hurt, you lied on the couch, drank a few beers and got up the next day and hit the surf again."

And in those years leading up to Townend becoming the first pro surfing world champ, there was danger both in and out of the water. In fact, they have come to be known as the infamous "Bustin' Down the Door" years, because, as books and movies have well documented, the birth of pro surfing was more like a hard Wedge shore pounding than a soft Doheny slide. Townend, Ian Cairns and Wayne "Rabbit" Bartholomew, along with South African Shaun Tomson and his brother Michael, came to Hawaii with fists pumping, claiming they were the best surfers on the planet.

To the Hawaiians, it was a truly offensive attitude, says Rarick. "They rubbed the Hawaiians the wrong way because they were so brash and so aggressive in their attempt to prove that they could be as good, if not better, than the Hawaiians," says Rarick. "The Hawaiians had a more laid-back, let-your-surfing-speak-for-you attitude. Well, these guys were letting their mouths speak for their surfing."

Townend admits they went about it totally wrong. And even though Cairns and Bartholomew were the most flamboyant, Townend cringes when he thinks of his own brashness. There were death threats and beatings and even rumors of a contract being taken out on Townend, Cairns and Bartholomew.

"We clearly felt threatened," says Townend, who needed a police escort to his heat at that year's Pipeline Masters. "I got punched at Off the Wall and had to go hide out in Kauai before the Duke contest one year. It was all eventually resolved and today I'm actually good friends with the guy who punched me."

"The crazy thing is, if they had just let their surfing do the talking, it would have had great things to say," says Rarick. Townend, Bartholomew, Tomson and Mark Richards won the first seven world titles and, more important, proved they could handle the powerful Hawaiian juice. In fact, says Townend, one of the things he's most proud of is being invited to 11 straight Duke Kahanamoku contests, the most prestigious Hawaiian contest of the day, and getting into the final six of those years.

Yet a long pro surfing career on the tour he helped establish was not to be. And oddly, it's in part due to being named the first world champ. Shortly after, Townend got a call from Hollywood to act as the stunt double on the film "Big Wednesday" for Jan-Michael Vincent,



Townend stands with a remake of George Freeth's wooden surfboard at the International Surfing Museum. In 2014, the museum hosted "A Century of Stoke," an exhibit that celebrated 100 years of surfing at Huntington Beach.

whom Townend had become friends with a few years earlier while living in Malibu. The fledgling pro surf tour understandably didn't want their first champ to divide his time. "But the movie paid \$1,000 a week and that was a lot of money, so I took it," says Townend, who ended up doubling for William Katt instead.

In 1977, he moved to Huntington Beach to be with the woman who would soon become his wife and mother to his three kids. In 1979, after only a few more years on the pro surfing tour he helped establish, he became the U.S. national team's coach and executive director and served for 10 years, while serving as Surfing Magazine's publisher and advertising manager. Along the way, he produced a TV show on surfing, became a color commentator on Prime Ticket and ESPN, and established an action sports consulting company, ActiveEmpire, he runs to this day.

He may never have gotten wealthy off surfing, but he's been immortalized in the Surfing Hall of Fame, is respected by today's surfers and surf industry leaders as one of the reasons they are getting wealthy, and, at age 61, still surfs almost daily. He's also pulled off one of the toughest feats in professional sports – a squeaky clean image. "I was really self-promotion conscious. So I had to maintain a clean image. But this was also the days before Internet, social media, cell phones ... I don't know if I could pull that off today," says Townend, adding with his biggest laugh yet, "I did run with Jan-Michael Vincent that year in Malibu!" ■



In 1978, Townend appeared on the Australian version of "This is Your Life," with fellow surfers who paid homage to the sport's first champion.

A few of Townend's magazine covers.