

## Days of Excess

*Zarautz, 1989.* On his way home after an all-night bender, and a fully clothed bodysurf with Barton Lynch, Aussie Rod 'the Box' Kerr discovered he was due to surf in the first heat that morning...against American arch-Christian, Richie Collins. Remembers Box, 'I got back down to the water's edge absolutely paralytic, couldn't even see.' After every wave, the tour prince of partying would pause in the shoredump to retch and vomit before paddling back out. Even so, Box annihilated Collins, who had a shocker. That afternoon, the enraged Christian woke Box and demanded the two share a bottle of Scotch. Later, a drunken Richie 'was swinging off the rafters' and applying headlocks to Box, who claimed Richie mutated into 'a deadset maniac,' adding, 'He got a lot of respect off the boys for that.' It was the ultimate apocryphal triumph of Aussie excess over conservative Seppo dedication. Hell, it was the '80s!

*The Coke Classic Presentation night, 1991.* Resplendent in dinner suit, with my trusty tape recorder and half a dozen optimistic condoms in my pockets, I was determined to both expose the seedy underbelly of pro surfing and get pissed on the free beers. For that year was the fag end of the Greed Decade and I wanted in on the action. The Top 44 was more than half-filled with Aussie surfers, a few of whom, like Box and his ring-in Hawaiian mate John 'Shmoo' Shimooka, set the tone of the whole tour: PARTY HARD! The previous several years had been the most decadent in pro surfing history, with party feats almost more highly revered than surfing skills. In those days, the freak on tour was Dave Macaulay: a brilliant top five surfer, especially in small waves, but also a married Christian with kiddies and no tattoos (no wonder Quiksilver culled him from their books!). Few could focus on the new day breaking through...

That night I interviewed Box, Shmoo and Matt 'Branno' Branson in detail, and several other surfers more briefly, scoring some amazing quotes before I was kicked out with a drunken ex-world champion, who screamed at the bouncers, 'Don't you know who I AM?' My sealed section article that followed in *Australia's Surfing Life* established a new journalistic low. Quoth Branno, 'My first year on tour I hung out with Box, Greeny, Pagey and Lawro...I was only 18, but after you hang out with those guys for a year, you feel like you're 50!' Confessed Sunny Garcia, 'In 1989 I bought a brand new car. On the same day, I smashed it – a \$26,000 car. Too much cocaine. (But) I haven't done coke for three or four years. I'm having a kid any day now!' Shmoo fondly recalled the fun he used to have in Hossegor with the legendary DJ Roland: 'There'd be guys in the nude, swimming on the dance floor, guys ripping chick's skirts off...I've got photos of me passed out, in the nude in the DJ's club, while the nightclub is still going off. Rod is pissing on me and Roland is spewing right next to me.'

Stories of extreme excess flowed: of all-night orgies with three 16-year-old groupies in Florida, complete with high-fives throughout, film camera whirring and 'everyone blowing left, right and centre'; of Japanese groupies being fucked with plastic McDonalds burger boxes; of one pro surfer pissing on his groupie in Brazil, only to have another pro surfer burst from a cupboard and squirt jizm all over her back; of inebriated idiots falling face-first into mountains of white powder...

*One year later.* The three main surfers I featured in my 'Sex, Drugs & Rock'n'Roll' article were all culled from the Top 44. Perhaps the trio were victims of a harsh, never-repeated system in which only the Top 16 automatically requalified (the system became a fairer 28 the following year). Perhaps they simply partied too hard. Or perhaps, as was suggested to me, the three were victims of an ASP conspiracy. The theory went: after my article came out, an embarrassed ASP, keen to clean its grubby image, did everything possible to get rid of such disreputable characters. Some pros, like Barton Lynch, held a grudge against me over this for years. Though I didn't hide my tape recorder, as some suggested, I was a young gun dickhead keen to make a name, happy to go for cheap controversy, to exploit trust, to write with the same degree of excess. When I heard later that I'd made Box's mum cry, I realised how far I'd gone over the line. When I was then sent on a surf trip with Box and Branno, I feared the pair would lynch me. But they both laughed at the water under the bridge, proving bigger

men than I. All I could do was apologise to them, and to anyone I've hurt with my sensational words. I've learned, I hope.

Anyway, the first culling was almost immediate. Partying on after the Coke presentation at a Kings Cross night club, Branno was viciously stabbed in the stomach and neck and almost died. Branno – a brave if closeted homosexual in a sea of rowdy heterosexuality, is today a chef with his own band. Also failing to requalify, Box became a lifeguard at his home suburb of Bronte, while Shmoo was relegated to the 'QS ranks. Even surfers I mentioned only briefly were struck down. Robbie Page was busted with a few tabs of acid in 1992 and spent 66 days in a Japanese prison, half in solitary. Nicky Wood was similarly nailed for possession of marijuana on the Gold Coast. Though not gaoled, his sponsors brushed him, and he has never been a serious threat since. Even the sole Euro contender of the day, the ever-partying Carwyn Williams, ended up mangled in a car crash, told he would never surf again. Out also went Gary Green, Ross Clarke-Jones and young Slater rival, Shane Herring, perhaps the greatest of them all, another victim of party-hard mates, the so-called 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' where egalitarian Aussies lop down the tallest poppies, so no-one is better than anyone else. Seppos Curren and Gerr simply bailed, while Occy ballooned like a lounge-bound puffer fish. He and Shmoo were the only ones who pulled off successful comebacks – Shmoo by settling down, renouncing his wicked ways and launching into a serious physical fitness program with the earlier reformed Sunny Garcia; Occy via a remarkable trail few believed navigable.

Luke Egan best summed up the mood of ambivalence after the culling year: 'Box liked everyone to hang together, and be tight-knit, so he's a real loss. He probably went too far with the partying, but that's Box. He was spewing that he didn't requalify, but his couple of years on the tour will be the most insane to talk about of anyone.' For better or worse, the Excess Era was over.

### **The New Social Order**

The other great harbinger of change in the early '90s was the arrival of the (mostly American) New School. Slater, Machado, Dorian, Knox, Williams and co. were all healthy, anti-drug and very small drinkers at best. In the same way that Shaun Tomson had been so opposed to the great Aussie drugged larrikin Michael Petersen in the mid '70s, so too was Slater in particular critical of any form of bodily abuse amongst pro surfers. The bar was raised.

The year Slater won G-land, fresh and frank with me in the jungle, he pondered his own childhood: 'Drinking...it quite possibly cost my dad his marriage and a lot of time with his kids, which is...probably a sad thing for him.' Slats agreed his father's alcoholism affected his own outlook on life, especially in regard to the tradition of surfers as anti-establishment party animals, what he termed the 'Aussie bong on' mentality. Slats explained, 'I've heard a lot of guys go, "Oh I'm an Australian, I've gotta get on the piss tonight." That's just an excuse. Whether you want to break out of your shell, peer pressure, just drinking your sorrows away, or forget about something for awhile, there's a problem there.' Not that Slats condemned without trying, for he also admitted to having thrown up twice in his life. 'I felt really shitty about it. I never want to do that again. I've never even smoked a joint. I could stand back and criticise it, but it's not really my place because I don't know about it enough. I've just seen the effects of it, and it's not good.' But as with everything else Slater did in the '90s, even his social actions set an agenda for the rest of the New School, which the remainder of the world would either have to struggle to match, or else be put to the spear like the last of the Neanderthals. The bar was raised.

*Zarautz, 1995.* At the first meeting of underground Aussie support group, LMB (Lick My Balls), I sat down next to tour correspondent Sarge – voted the worst influence on tour by Pagey only a few years earlier – just as he sparked up a joint and passed it...in the other direction! I cursed, figuring the spliff would be sucked to ash by the time it passed through five sets of hands. Instead, I gawked as 20 young pro surfers handed the joint swiftly around the circle as if it were a reeking, ticking bomb (though admittedly, the more drug-inclined young Aussie pros were quite possibly lost in the foyer and not at the meeting at all). How times had changed. These days, even Sarge is a clean-living Christian guy.

*Australia, 2003.* I'm not sure how I feel about the evolution of pro surfing in the last decade. It's good that surfing's role models are no longer booze-fueled misogynists, but it's also a little sad that so many of the sport's unique and crazed individuals have moved on (the last being, perhaps, the recently retired Hoyo). Maybe surfers in the '80s only went so crazy because they were compelled to ride such shitty waves. Certainly, Dave Macaulay would be more at home on tour these days. The Top 44 is a mobile creche; a big night out for 21st Century pros is a tight five-four score in a backgammon tournament, followed by a few racy emails and a bodywax. The path to the top is clear: clean-living health backed up with a stable relationship, preferably married like all the recent world champs – Sunny to Raina; Occy to Bea and Slats to, well, his own inordinate, undeniable talent. One should drink only in moderation and only when the contest is over. While drugs...do not exist on the pro tour any more (or is that any less?). As for groupies – well, thankfully, one little baby wasn't tossed out with the reeking bathwater...

Maybe the ASP has become a modern day morality play. Maybe these days, ultra-straight pro surfing is even more removed from the average Surfing Joe or Joelene. Or maybe it's all a big rolling cycle, and the days of yore may lurch to life once more. Parko, Fanning, Morrison and co represent the greatest Gold Coast/Aussie surf push since MP, PT, Bugs and Drouyn strutted Kirra and Burleigh. And these guys know how to party.

— *DC Green*