

Rough Waves, Tougher Beaches

By MATT HIGGINS JAN. 22, 2009

Photo



Kala Alexander, the Wolfpak's enforcer and most notorious member, in May 2008. Credit Marco Garcia for *The New York Times*

SUNSET BEACH, Hawaii — They are known as the Wolfpak or simply “the boys.” They use fear and their fists to command respect in the surf along the North Shore of Oahu, a seven-mile stretch of some of the world’s most renowned waves. At the celebrated Banzai Pipeline, they determine which waves go to whom, and punish those who breach their code of respect for local residents and the waves.

The Wolfpak’s members have tried to soften their image with charitable works, but they have learned that a hard-earned reputation can be hard to shake.

The Pipeline is “like any surf spot,” said Randy Rarick, executive director of the Vans Triple Crown of Surfing, which includes the Pipeline Masters.

“You have locals, and you have locals who enforce the unwritten rules,” Rarick said. “And sometimes that leads to violence, sort of shady characters dictating. It’s kind of like Mafia control in the surf.”

This persists even as wealth has poured into the North Shore through the vacation-home market.

“The intimidation was and still is a big part of the North Shore experience,” said Shaun Tomson, the world surfing champion in 1977 and the producer of a documentary about the seminal professional surfing scene on the North Shore, “Bustin’ Down the Door,” released on DVD this month. “That’s just the way it is. You go there as a surfer knowing that that’s part of the experience.”

The Wolfpak’s loosely affiliated membership comes mostly from the neighboring island of Kauai. It includes professional surfers like the three-time world champion Andy Irons, 30, and his brother, Bruce, 29, a talented free surfer.

The most notorious member is the group’s enforcer, Kala Alexander, a professional surfer with muscular tattooed arms and “Wolfpak” inked across his knuckles. In 2007, Alexander starred in “The 808,” a reality television series about the Wolfpak and the North Shore, and appeared in the films “Blue Crush” and “Forgetting Sarah Marshall.” But he has also gained fame for YouTube videos that show him pummeling surfers on the sand several years ago.

“The code is to respect other people,” Alexander, 39, said. “People come over here and don’t respect other people. You’re going to run into problems if you do that.”

That is what happened to Chris Ward, a 30-year-old professional from San Clemente, Calif., and runner-up to Kelly Slater last month at the Pipeline Masters. In November, Australian publications reported that Ward cut off a local surfer while riding a wave at Pipeline. He was banished to the beach, where a Wolfpak member smacked him in the head. Without providing details, Ward confirmed that the incident happened.

“It’s been like that for four decades,” said Peter Townend, who in 1976 won the first world championship of surfing on the North Shore. In 1978, he said, he was punched out at a surf break called Off the Wall. In that year he required a police escort to compete in the Pipeline Masters because of threats against him.

During the 2007 Pipeline Masters, a fracas in the water spilled onto the beach as Sunny Garcia of Hawaii chased his opening-round opponent, Neco Padaratz of Brazil. Padaratz fled, followed by Garcia and some locals. The police eventually escorted Padaratz from the contest site.

Such incidents create debate about localism, a brand of territorialism that has been practiced at surf breaks around the world for decades. Yet the North Shore remains a focal point because its breaks are a proving ground for professional aspirants who arrive each winter along with the massive swells out of the North Pacific.

“It’s really the center of the surfing universe,” Tomson said. “It’s like Mount Everest for surfers everywhere. And Pipeline is really the wave one needs to come to terms with as a surfer in order to be considered a great surfer.”

As surfing has become increasingly popular, some say fear of violent reprisal ensures order and safety at congested and perilous surf spots like Pipeline.

“It’s a dangerous environment, and without a self-governing control pattern it would just be chaos out there,” Rarick said.

At Pipeline, large, punishing waves break over a shallow-water reef. With a small takeoff zone comes a small window of time to make critical decisions and dozens of surfers vying for the same waves. Pipeline is considered one of the world’s most dangerous surf spots.

No official figures exist on fatalities. But a 2008 book, “The Pipeline: Deep Inside the World’s Most Respected Wave,” asserted that more than 30 people had died there since it was first surfed in 1961.

Photo



Conditions can be dangerous at Sunset Beach. At left, a wipeout out during a competition at the Pipeline, which draws surfers from around the world. Credit Left, Pierre Tostee/APS, via Getty Images; Marco Garcia

“It’s a very intense crowd,” said Slater, 36, of Cocoa Beach, Fla. “It’s as intense as anywhere in the world because there are serious consequences if

you drop in on somebody and they got hurt, or if you wipe out and hurt yourself.”

The Wolfpak formed a decade ago when Alexander moved to the North Shore and joined his childhood friend Kai Garcia, a former professional surfer and jujitsu champion known as Kaiborg for his fearsome superhuman reputation. Alexander had recently been released from prison after serving time for assault.

“It was crowded when I came here,” Alexander said about Pipeline. “A lot of people in the water, not much respect. Where I grew up on Kauai, you respect everybody in the water, especially your elders. Don’t step out of line. We just brought that mentality over here.”

At the time there was a void in the Pipeline lineup as those who regulated the waves during the 1990s, like Derek Ho, Johnny Boy Gomes and Marvin Foster, had grown older and moved on. And there was a template for a group like the Wolfpak.

With outsiders and the burgeoning professional contest circuit shunting them from their favorite surf spots, some Hawaiian surfers banded together in 1976 to form the Hui O He’e Nalu, or Club of Wave Sliders.

“That was one of the reasons the Hui O He’e Nalu was formed, to regulate the surf breaks,” said Bryan Amona, a founding member. “Not to be walked all over.”

In 1975, a brash group of surfers from South Africa and Australia swept the North Shore contests and monopolized news media coverage. The Australians even boasted of their superiority to their Hawaiian counterparts.

Some Hawaiians, feeling disrespected at home in a sport their ancestors invented, threatened and thrashed the outsiders when they returned the next winter.

“For the Hawaiians, respect is an important concept, particularly when it comes to being in the ocean,” said Isaiah Helekunihi Walker, a professor of history at Brigham Young University, Hawaii, who has written about a Hawaiian renaissance in surfing on the North Shore.

Members of Hui O He’e Nalu, known as Da Hui or the Black Shorts, for their uniform surf trunks, paddled into waves during competitions to protest that the water had been closed to them.

Eddie Rothman, another Da Hui founder, who with other members has parlayed the club’s name and logo into a surf apparel brand, said violence against the outsiders was not coordinated.

“When they came here, there was no cultural resistance,” he said. “They were separate incidents.”

For some, “Bustin’ Down the Door” has stirred up the old animus.

Walker said: “I think this tradition, even though the Hui started it in the ’70s, Hawaiian surfers are still very much at the forefront of this whole kind of consciousness, of seeing themselves as the chiefs in the water maintaining order.”

Da Hui’s membership has mellowed with age, and the group’s agenda has shifted from activism to community events. The Wolfpak has likewise made a bid for increasing respectability with an annual beach cleanup. In December, Alexander visited children in a Honolulu hospital and gave surfing lessons to youngsters with cystic fibrosis. But not everyone is ready to accept the group’s softer side.

In November, an Outside magazine article in which Alexander offered a mea culpa for past misdeeds and expressed hope that peace would prevail at the Pipeline prompted readers to denounce the surfers’ tactics. Last month, when a reporter asked Alexander about the online video showing him punching surfers, he became enraged. Several longtime residents said incidents of violence had diminished.

“Reported surf-related assaults are very rare, according to the commander” responsible for the North Shore, said Michelle Yu, a spokeswoman for the Honolulu Police Department.

Strider Wasilewski, the surf team manager for Quiksilver Americas, who has spent parts of 24 winters on the North Shore, said: “Guys aren’t going crazy beating people in public. It’s just a lot nicer now.”

“You can’t get away with the things you used to get away with” because of the threat of lawsuits, he added. But those who come for waves can still catch a beating, too.

“It’s not as raw,” Rarick said. “It’s not as radical. But the essence of it is still there.”