Local Legend: Jack O’Neill

By Waves Staff on September 14, 2015 in Featured, History, Local Loop

Captain Jack

Jack O’Neill, the inventor of the surfing wetsuit, a sailor, wave-rider, and former hot-air balooner, is 92 years old. His life’s work tells a tale of the evolution of surfing, while his memories tell the story of a man with a life well lived.

By Joel Hersch
During the last week of March 1964, a 9.2 earthquake shook Alaska to its core, causing a massive tsunami to travel across the North Pacific. One of the biggest swells to ever hit the West Coast rose up out of the sea, sending 25-foot blue-water giants rolling across Third Reef and Steamer Lane, where just a few brave Santa Cruz surfers paddled out for the inside lineup. The waves were so ferocious that the entire San Francisco Bay was shut down—tanker ships were directed back out to sea—while closeout sets pummeled the Santa Cruz harbor entrance at the jetty.
The breeze was light that day, underscoring the power of the swell, and 41-year-old Jack O’Neill—still seven years away from the surf injury that would leave him with the iconic black patch over his left eye—was sailing his Pacific Catamaran, or “P-Cat,” just off of Lighthouse Point, making a line into position for an inconceivable takeoff on one of the mountains of water piling high on the far outside.

Manning the tiller while his loyal sailing companion Dave Wally operated the mainsheet, Jack felt the two stern ends of the 19-foot catamaran lift and the rush of water over its hulls as they caught the massive wave and began careening down its face, the two men holding on for their lives.

Jack recalled the adventure one recent morning over cups of tea at his East Cliff Drive home. From his seat on the living room sofa, he has an up-close view of the 50 or so surfers enjoying a 4- to 5-foot swell rolling in just below at Pleasure Point.

The icon who changed the way people experience the ocean—first by inventing and fine-tuning the neoprene surfing wetsuit during 1950s and later by helping usher in foam-core surfboards—is now 92 years old. And as he ages, his legacy of shaping the surf industry, as well as the culture that envelops it, seems to stretch on forever, permeating almost every aspect of the sport’s mainland history. Now, as I leisurely observe Jack in his beachfront dwelling—barefoot and wearing black sweat pants and an old black, long-sleeve O’Neill T-shirt—it’s clear that every part of his life has in one way or another been tied to his love for the sea.

Jack, one could argue, is a true waterman—a term that is thrown around too loosely today, says Brian Kilpatrick, the O’Neill company’s vice president of marketing communications.

“Jack is sort of this icon, a maverick, definitely an innovator, but I don’t think a whole lot of people know that Jack was diving, sailing, surfing, body surfing—doing anything and everything related to the ocean—a long time before that moniker was ever given to anyone,” Kilpatrick says. “He was the ultimate
waterman. He breathes salt water. His life is about being in the ocean and protecting the ocean. He’s part of the ocean.”

Keeping an eye on the waves breaking just beyond his living room, Jack continues the story of how he navigated his vessel into those tsunami waves in 1964. “We could see that wave up over the top of the mast, and the P-Cat has an 18-foot mast,” he says. “You need to have that wind coming out of the Northwest, from the outside, and get the wind in the sail, and that’ll get you on the big waves at Third Reef. And as you come into the lee of the cliff, you lose that wind, but you generate your own wind from surfing the wave.”

Jack and Wally swept down the face of that wave, which he estimates stood about 25 feet high, and pulled hard on the tiller to steer the boat to the right in an attempt to surf the wall of water. But the rudders were no match for the tsunami’s surge—both of them, crafted from 14 layers of fiberglass, snapped off like twigs.

Jack and son Pat O’Neill give 1977 surfing world champion Shaun Tomson (center) a tour of the Monterey Bay.

Jack’s oldest son, Pat O’Neill—one of Santa Cruz’s early surfing heavyweights
at Steamer Lane and CEO of the O’Neill company for the past 30 years—was watching his dad from the cliff at Lighthouse Point.

“He dropped in at Third Reef ... and there was green water about eight feet over the top of that mast,” Pat says. “He had to be going 25, maybe 30, miles per hour down the face of that wave.”

As Pat watched the P-Cat lose control at the base of the wave, he recalls a photographer next to him missing all the action as he reloaded the film on his 16-millimeter camera. The boat spun out but popped through the back of the white water, still intact, and Jack and Wally emerged unscathed.

“He was lucky,” Pat says. “It was the biggest swell I’ve ever seen at the Lane, before or after.”

In a moment of ingenuity, Jack and Wally filled the stern compartments of the P-Cat with seawater, causing the rear of the boat to sink deeper, pushing the remains of the rudders downward and giving Jack the ability to steer the boat back to port. It wasn’t the first time Jack took a sailboat surfing. In fact, he was already known for trying to pull into big swell at Steamer Lane.

“That boat was fantastic out in big surf,” Jack says with a touch of nostalgia. “I thought that [surfing sailboats on waves] was actually going to be popular.”

**The Big Chief**

Like most activities related to the ocean, sailing has been a lifelong passion for Jack, one which he imparted to his family early on. In 1974, not long after his first wife passed away, Jack moved with three of his children onto a 60-foot, full-gaff-rigged schooner named the Marie Celine, for a years-long journey to Mexico and back. Pat and sister Cathi O’Neill stayed behind to run the company. As author and close family friend Drew Kampion documented in his biography of Jack, It’s Always Summer on the Inside, that sail south was both about healing from their loss and expanding their horizons.

“After the passing of my mother, Jack made an unorthodox decision to put us
young ones and Mike [his second oldest son] on a boat and sail away,”
Shawne O’Neill, a former world champion windsurfer, is quoted in the book.
“With our hearts filled with sorrow, and our young minds filled with change,
longing, and anticipation of exotic ports, we set sail on a voyage that would
last a long time.”

“Heading south toward the California-Mexico border, we experienced a
growing sense of freedom as living and surviving on the ocean opened up a
whole new world,” said daughter Bridget O’Neill. “Jack’s philosophy was,
‘Don’t fight life. Rather, work with what life brings you.’”

Pat says that at one time or another, all of the O’Neill children have worked
for the company, which was just one more experience that brought them
closer together. At work, Jack’s kids always called him by the nickname “Big
Chief.”
The family also has many fond memories of Wednesday night sailing races in
Santa Cruz, when Pat recalls how their full-keel, 22-foot, open-cockpit boat
could cut across the kelp beds off of Blacks Point, giving them an extra edge
on the race course.
The Balloon Man
Jack was not only a man of the sea—he developed a love for flying, as well. And he found his way into the sky by way of a hot-air balloon. Around 1965, he says he became one of the first people in the United States to own one. He was buying sails regularly for his boats and learned that “some nut in Southern California had taken spinnaker cloth [very lightweight sail material] and made a balloon out of it. I thought, ‘Wow, what a great idea.’ So I got a hold of that guy and started flying balloons.”
Jack’s initiation into ballooning quickly became intertwined with his passion for boats and the ocean. He began flying his balloon off of Steamer Lane during the summer, when warm winds would blow him out over the sea, and then, as evening set in, the wind would shift into an easterly and bring him back toward dry land—at least in theory. “It never really took me in the right direction,” he says.

By 1968 he was launching balloons off of boats on the Monterey Bay and experimenting with different flight takeoff and landing techniques. At this point in our conversation, Jack and I begin watching home video on his laptop of a crew aboard the O’Neill catamaran when it was new, around 1983, scampering around the deck helping to launch Jack into the sky aboard his single-man hot air balloon. He was the first to pull off that maneuver, as well.

A Legacy of Stewardship

Even with so much adventure, innovation and business success on his resume, Jack says that the work he is most proud of is the O’Neill Sea Odyssey program. The nonprofit provides fourth, fifth and sixth graders with educational sailing experiences on the Monterey Bay aboard the 65-foot O’Neill Sea Odyssey catamaran—the same boat Jack used to launch hot-air balloons off of. The program, which began in 1996, teaches students the values of ocean conservation by getting them out on the water at no charge to their schools.

“I saw the potential hazards of people not taking care of the ocean, and I got the idea that the ocean is alive,” Jack says. “You’ve got to take care of it. I wanted to put that across to the kids. I had the boat, so we worked out a program. It worked out incredibly well.”
To date, O’Neill Sea Odyssey has brought more than 75,000 kids onto the ocean. Jack says that he has a vision for a new program that would offer sea outings for young people transitioning out of juvenile hall.

“Getting kids out on the ocean teaches them respect for it—that’s hard to teach in a classroom,” he says. “A lot of them have never even been on a boat. The ocean can really change lives.”

Pat is also very proud of the opportunities O’Neill Sea Odyssey has provided for so many kids. He sees it as a way to help spread the love for the ocean that he was raised with thanks to his old man. Pat has followed closely in his father’s footsteps, now serving as the head of the O’Neill company. He cut his teeth in the surf industry early on, learning from his dad and on his own in the water. By the time he was a high school sophomore he was working a night crew on 41st Avenue making wetsuits, and went on to work as the West Coast O’Neill sales rep after high school. He is also known for having charged as a top member of the O’Neill Surf team and developing the first surf leash prototype in 1970. Still, the younger O’Neill credits his father as the man whose vision changed everything.
“Don’t forget,” Pat says wryly, “in the land of the blind, the one-eyed Jack is king.”

**A CLASSIC CONTEST:** The O’Neill Coldwater Classic Invitational surf competition will be held Oct. 13 – 17 at Steamer Lane. The longest-running surf contest in Northern California, the CWC had its first year in 1987. Thanks to the event, Steamer Lane has hosted many of the best surfers in the world.

**THROUGH THE YEARS**


1956: Jack creates and markets the first neoprene wetsuit prototype: the beavertail jacket.
1959: Jack moves the Surf Shop next to Cowell Beach in Santa Cruz, where surf culture was proliferating.

1964: Jack organizes the O’Neill surf team, providing the most talented surfers in Santa Cruz with new surfboards, that they would in turn provide feedback on.

1970: After Jack began piloting a hot air balloon over the Monterey Bay, and landing in the water numerous times, he was inspired to design the SuperSuit. The SuperSuit was a wetsuit design that the wearer could inflate by blowing air into it and float in the ocean for extended periods of time. About five years later, the U.S. Navy would acquire the same technology for their free-swimming suit.

1970: Pat O’Neill designs the modern surfboard leash, using bungee cord and a suction cup.

1972: Jack O’Neill loses vision in his left eye while surfing a small swell at the Hook. He was using an early version of the leash, and when he fell off the
wave, it snapped the board back and into his eye.

1996: Jack launches the O’Neill Sea Odyssey program, taking kids out on the catamaran to teach them about ocean conservation.

Article from *Live the lifestyle Volume 2.2 – Aug / Sept 2015, “Local Legend”*. 