

Greg Long

Big-wave surfing's rising star

BY BARRY STRINGFELLOW ■ PHOTOGRAPH BY AL MACKINNON

At 27, Greg Long, of San Clemente, is one of the emerging stars of big-wave surfing. In 2008, he won the Mavericks Surf Contest at Half Moon Bay, California. Then, in 2009, he triumphed in the sport's most prestigious event, the Quicksilver in Memory of Eddie Aikau big-wave contest at Waimea, Hawai'i, thus becoming the first surfer ever to win both events. He's also won the Red Bull Big Wave Africa (at age 19), the Billabong Pico Alto Invitational in Peru, and five Billabong XXL Global Big Wave Awards, including the Billabong Ride of the Year award for a 2008 ride at Dungeons, off the coast of South Africa.

You could say that Long was destined to be a big-wave surfer. He was named after Greg Noll, the surfing legend who's credited as being the first person to brave the mountainous waves of Waimea Bay, in 1957. Unlike his namesake, who has the larger-than-life personality you'd expect from a pioneering daredevil, Long emanates the quiet calm of a Zen master, even when recalling the near-death experiences that are a given in his profession.

What's your biggest wave to date?

Long: My biggest paddle-in wave was measured to be about 53 feet on the face. My biggest documented tow-in wave, at Dungeons in South Africa, was measured at 65 feet. I rode waves at Cortes Bank [near San Diego] in 2008 that were about 75–80 feet but weren't documented.

How do you train to surf eight-story waves?

Long: I try to surf every day, no matter what the conditions. I can always find a challenge, whether it's two feet or 60 feet. I also do yoga at least once a day. It helps with flexibility, strength, balance, and the mental side—being able to control my mind. When I wiped

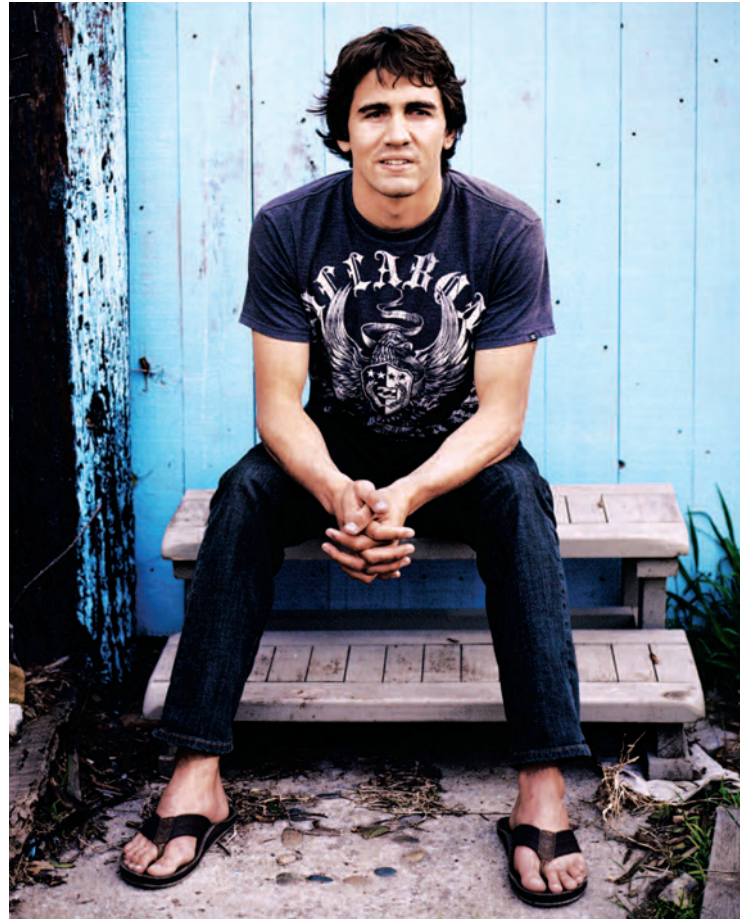
out at Mavericks, there was a moment of panic when I blew out my eardrum, but I went into relaxation mode.

There's a YouTube video of your Mavericks spill. It looked pretty hairy.

Long: I almost convinced my mom to come out and watch that day. I'm glad she didn't. It's the closest I've ever come to drowning. When I blew out my eardrum, I couldn't tell which end was up. I was hitting the bottom repeatedly, in water 25 feet deep. Eventually, I had to climb my leash to find my way to the surface.

How long can you hold your breath?

Long: In a pool, about five minutes.



Besides the burst eardrum at Mavericks, have you had any other injuries?

Long: I've been pretty lucky. Just an MCL [medial collateral ligament] injury and meniscus tears in each of my knees. A couple broken ankles. A few concussions. Countless fin cuts and stitches. A torn hamstring. I tore my Achilles in South America and had to get home on my own, with my board, limping through airports. That wasn't fun.

Have you surfed the Arctic?

Long: I went to northern Newfoundland last year.

I was kidding.

Long: I spent two weeks up there. Amazing waves.

Any wildlife encounters that stick out in your mind?

Long: In 2005 in Hawai'i, a tiger shark sunk its teeth into my board. Last year on the west coast of Africa, a great white zeroed in on me. It was huge. Luckily a wave came and I spun around and caught it. It was probably just checking me out. They're such incredible predators. If they really want you, you'll never see them coming.

Why do you surf big waves?

Long: There's a huge adrenaline rush that comes from challenging the ocean when it's the most alive. There's nothing like it. I also get to hang out with my friends and travel the world with them. **W**