

Outside: Monster Surfers Mavericks 2005 has become an event at sea.

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While the sun rises like a fried egg over the green, lumpy mountains to the east, a crew of media prepare for a full day at sea. The writers and photographers are going out to cover this year's Mavericks' Surf Contest on the **Huli Cat**, a 53-foot long sportfishing boat docked in Half Moon Bay's harbor. On the deck, San Francisco Chronicle staff writer Paul McHugh seems to be excited about spending eight hours adrift on the boat during crushing swells. "I can't wait to see them write on the canvas," he says. "It should be some great art."



Outside of the door of the men's bathroom, a couple of journalists are nervous about today's journey. They swap remedies for seasickness as the boat's captain instructs everyone to sign a manifest resting on a desk inside the cabin. One of them talks about how a good many of the journalists covering the event a year before spent the whole day puking over the side of a boat into the rushing water. As the Huli Cat pulls out of the harbor, a photographer from a San Mateo paper confides to her colleague that she will probably be vomiting in a short while. On the way out to the monstrous surf break, a buoy marking the channel rings like a bell signaling the beginning of a boxing match.

Located a half mile off Pillar Point, Mavericks is one of the most famous big-wave surf spots in the world. Besides monster waves that can top 30 feet and a water temperature that hovers in the icy mid-50s, the spot's legend has grown due in part to a shark attack in 2000 and the crushing death of legendary big wave rider Mark Foo in 1994.

Starting in 1999, the Mavericks Surf Contest has assembled some of the most renowned big wave surfers in the world, including Ken Bradshaw, Kelly Slater and three-time contest winner Darryl "Flea" Vitrosko. The contest took a few years off and returned last year.

This year, the event was scheduled for any time big enough waves break during a four-month period from the first of December to the last of March. Contestants had only 24 hours notice about the event.



Veteran surfer Brock Little opens up the contest by catching the first two waves during the competition's first round. This is followed by a long break in the waves, after which Mike Brumet does a late takeoff into a mountainous wave and drives left. The maneuver gets hoots of approval from the crowd.

The Mavericks Surf Contest has become a hugely popular event—last year's competition drew 15,000 spectators and 75 credentialed members of the media. There are people everywhere trying to catch a glimpse of the action. Out in the ocean, about 30 to 50 feet from the break, a large crowd is forming. Behind a fleet of officials on jet skis,

there are spectators on boats, spectators on surfboards, spectators on jet skis, spectators in sea kayaks and a couple spectators floating in a small yellow inflatable raft with a cooler of beer.

On land, under an upturned Navy radar telescope on the cliff that looks like a spinning top, there are so many spectators on the point that they look like the hairs of a dog bristling with anger. Overhead, can-opener-shaped helicopters fly overhead. Some are filming the competition, while others are Coast Guard personnel making sure the proceedings are progressing without incident. In the press boat, scores of cameras extend over the side of the vessel like animal snouts, hoping to catch any piece of the action.

In the long wait between sets, Huli Cat deckhand Jim Ricker tells the media crowded on the bow about past adventures out on the sportfishing boat. He shows a few scars he received while helping to pull in some giant squid on a recent fishing excursion. Ricker also talks about how a surfer hired the Huli Cat and its crew for his wedding ceremony at sea, bobbing next to the infamous surf break. But, when the sets come in, Ricker is focused on the competition. As a line of waves distort the horizon, Ricker starts shouting: "It's Big Wednesday!"

In the third heat, San Clemente surfer Greg Long takes off on a 20-foot wave. As he drops in, the wave starts to increase in size like a flame doused in gasoline. The maneuver draws a perfect score from the judges, who grade the waves from a nearby fishing boat called Riptide. Ricker watches the action and shakes his head. "This is a good place to fish when it ain't like this," he says.



In the final round of the competition, the contestants are backside surfer Shane Desmond, longtime Mavericks surfer Matt Ambrose, 21-year-old Greg Long, Santa Cruz lifeguard Zach Wormhoudt, 20-year-old Anthony Tashnick (another Santa Cruz surfer), and Russell Smith, who was held under for two waves during last year's contest.

As the airhorn blows, signaling the start of the finals, everyone is silent. Earlier in the day, on the media boat, McHugh seemed to have a comment for everything. When one contestant backed off a monster wave, McHugh noted: "Discretion is the better part of valor." At other times, he had less serious quips. "Say the name of that boat real fast," he demanded while nodding towards a boat called "Queen of Hearts." Now, as Smith drops into the first wave of the finals, McHugh watches the action silently.

On the next wave, Long takes off on a smaller curl. Despite the impressive drop, the wave quickly fizzles into a garland of whitewater.

After a couple of 20-foot waves are caught by Desmond and Green, a loudspeaker from the Riptide announces there are only 15 minutes left. Ambrose catches one and squats down after the drop, using his legs as shock absorbers to counteract the sharp plunge in altitude.

Ten minutes left, the loudspeaker says. Tashnick takes off on an over-20-foot high monster. At first, his arms flutter around as he gets his balance. After he makes the drop, the inside section bowls him over. Before the five-minute warning, a set of large waves rolls in. Unfortunately, none of the contestants are in the right position. Some have to paddle frantically to make it over the massive mounds of water.

At the five-minute warning, a girl spectator bobbing on a surfboard rubs her hands together to keep warm. Overhead, a helicopter flies in reverse like a segment on a home movie that is being rewound. One last set bulges on the horizon. As it grows nearer, it becomes obvious that the final set will only be fair-sized. After a short ride from Desmond, Tashnick and another surfer take off on the crest of a wave. A few seconds later, Tashnick is the only surfer left on the wave.

That last ride—on the last meaty wave of the day—becomes an apt parting visual of the contest, as Tashnick is later named the winner of the 2005 Mavericks Surf Contest.