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ONLINE BEST BET

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THE WICKED WEDGE

Steeped in legend and lore, the Wedge, located at the tip of the Balboa Peninsula, has been a bodysurfing mecca since the 1930s. When a Southern Hemisphere storm sends big waves toward the 1,900-foot Newport Harbor jetty in April to October, the infamous spot lures bodysurfers and spectators. The "Wedge effect" occurs when two waves merge, doubling the waves' size into a snarling 20-foot monster that is both magical and treacherous. When the Wedge is big, the beach shakes and the punishing waves send spray, and legs, flying through the air. Here's what happens those rare days when the Wedge goes off:

- 1 The wave comes in perpendicular to the jetty. The wash bounces off, creating a diagonal wave.
- 2 This side wave slides diagonally across the face of the next wave, merging and doubling its size.
- 3 Occasionally, backwash from waves flowing into the sea bounces off an undersea berm and merges with an incoming wave. This dangerous rip current can drag surfers out.
- 4 The ocean floor rises quickly, compressing a wave's energy and making it higher. Waves at the Wedge tend to pop straight up about 30 to 40 yards out, form a cylinder, then break in a huge crash that sends spray flying over the jetty.

Wedge fit for the world

There's something about being *in* a wave, rather than on it. It's so much more intense, being swallowed inside a hollow tube. As Kevin "Mel" Thoman describes his more than three decades building a relationship with the Wedge, you know he's nowhere near done with bodysurfing it — even as he reaches 50. "Even if I've been there a million times, my adrenaline gets going," he said, trying to explain his self-proclaimed obsession. "If I know there is a good swell, it's hard to sleep." Welcome to the Wedge, one of the most revered, respected and reck-



LAYLAN CONNELLY
BEACH WATCH

less breaks along our coastline. It's been known to pump up to 25-foot waves. Let's just say, this isn't for the novice. I watched in awe last month when it was going off with some hefty 12-footers. And I wasn't alone — hundreds of other spectators were lured to this bodysurfing and bodyboarding mecca, all of us collectively holding our breath from the sand as 20 or so brave bodysurfers took it on. That was when I decided it was time to dedicate some ink to this world-renowned wave. The waves break just right for bodysurfers and bodyboarders, but the takeoff is generally too fast and

step for surfers (though it's not unheard of). Its uniqueness drew Thoman here from Los Angeles. He just had to be near it. "I didn't know I'd end up addicted to it," Thoman said. "The wave got me there, and the friendships kept me there." Alone, the dynamics of the Wedge make it notable. But it's also the lifestyle that evolved around it that deserves some recognition. The '70s and '80s were the golden age of bodysurfing, when a local group of teens and 20-somethings dubbed the "Wedge Crew" ruled the

area. They'd push each other to be better athletes — but it was also about having fun. Like when they'd all dress up in their Speedos and hand out awards on the sand for such feats as "The Casper Award" (for whitest body). Now in their 50s, many in the Wedge Crew no longer brave the giant waves. But the Wedge still draws a crowd. It's a regular feature in surfing magazines. The New York Times did a spread on it in June 2005, calling it "California's Freakish Wave." And with any good south swell, the media come out to share it with the world. That's something that irks Ron Romanosky, who has been coming here since 1963.

"It's no longer a mystery to the masses. It used to be a sanctuary," he said. I can see his point. Nothing ever stays the same; change is tough. Thoman is working on a documentary that will capture the Wedge as it once was, and he hopes to hit the Newport Beach Film Festival next year. "Most of our buddies don't ride any more. What are you going to do? You gotta enjoy the moment and just keep going as long as you can, I guess." Beach Watch appears each Wednesday on the OC Outdoors page. Contact lconnelly@ocregister.com with questions or tips. Please include your name, phone number and city.

When the Wedge is big, traffic on Balboa Boulevard backs up and parking is scarce. Call 924-673-3371 for the Newport Beach surf report or visit www.surflife.com for a surf cam.

WEDGE HISTORY
Work on the West Jetty in the 1930s in the area that will be the Wedge.

- 1916 Army Corp of Engineers builds 1,000-foot West Jetty to protect Newport Harbor from storms and make the entrance safer.
- 1930s Bodysurfers discover big surf and dub it "The Hook." Without fins, not yet invented, bodysurfers can only ride the small waves.
- 1936 West Jetty is extended to 1,900 feet. East Jetty built, creating safe Corona del Mar State Beach.
- 1940s Poles, leading to a radio tower at the end of the West Jetty, are installed. Surfers use the poles as landmarks to judge swell size and conditions.
- 1963 San Bernardino Superior Court Judge Robert Gardner, an avid Wedge bodysurfer, argues against residents who want the spot closed. Danger signs are posted.
- 1966 The Wedge is featured in the cult film "Endless Summer."
- 1972 Gardner writes "The Art of Body Surfing" based on his Wedge experiences.
- 1982 Fred Simpson, 20-year Wedge veteran, debuts the Viper fin to help catch waves.
- 1993 The Wedge Preservation Society persuades city council to ban boards from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m., May 1 - Oct. 31.
- 1995 Surf contest at the Wedge is killed.
- 1997 Restoration project removes half of poles, radio tower and beefs up jetty.
- 2002 Rest of poles removed, saved as souvenirs by "Wedge Crew."

Sources: Kevin Thoman, Fred Simpson, Kevin Wallis, "Surflife's California Surf Guide;" "The Art of Body Surfing;" Wedge Preservation Society, Newport Harbor Nautical Museum; Newport Beach Lifeguards; Photos: Newport Harbor Nautical Museum

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