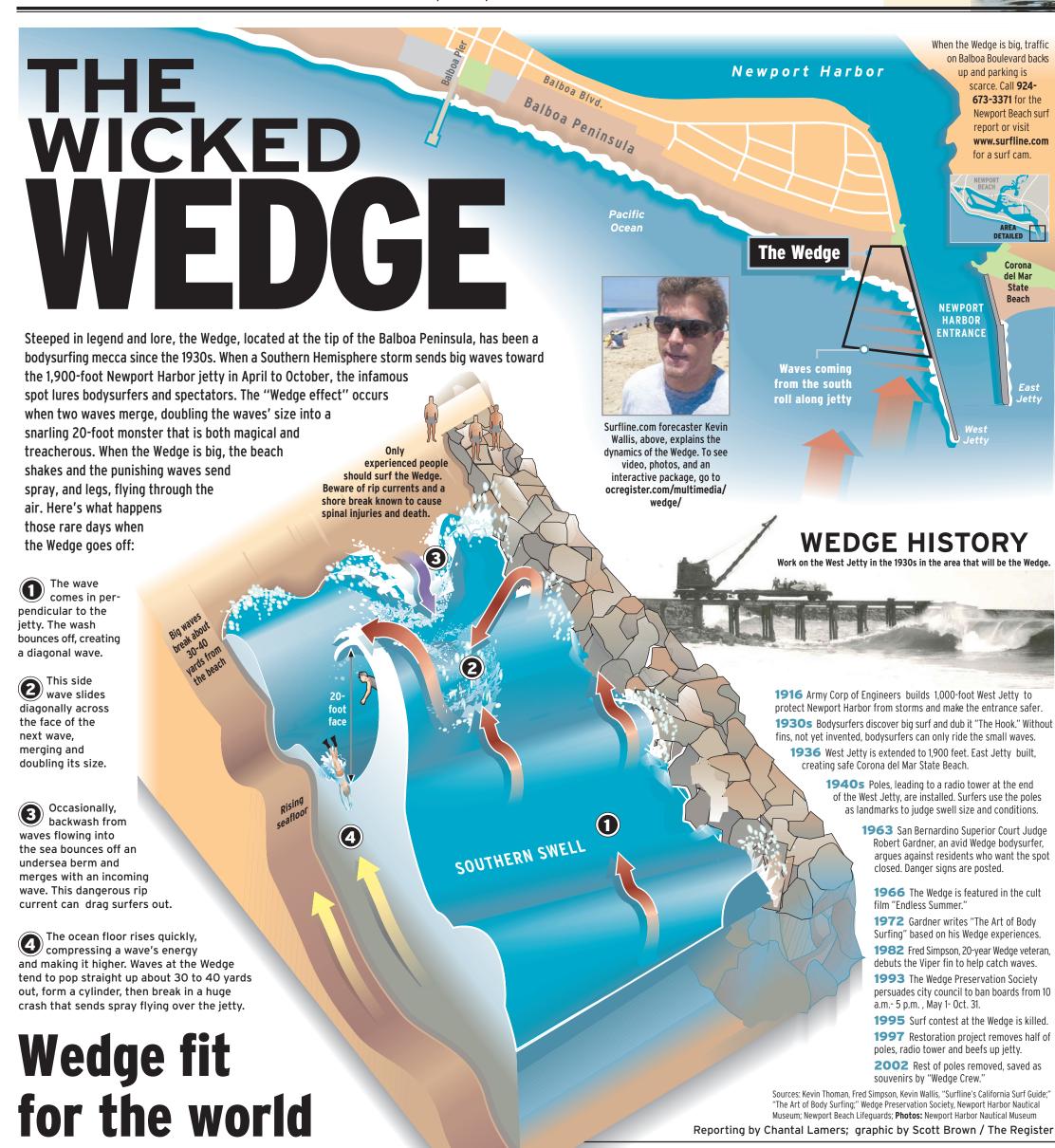
oc outdoors

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SPORTS 10

WEDNESDAY, JULY 19, 2006 | THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER



here's something about being in a wave, rather than

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-



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

steep 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 gi-

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.

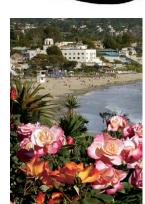
"Most of our buddies don't ride any more. What are you going to do? You gotta enjoy the moment and just keep going as long as you can, I guess."

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.



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