

FITNESS WARRIOR



Ian Walsh

RIDING MOUNTAINS OF MOVING WATER

Discover the euphoria of big-wave surfing.

BY CHRISTINE YU

Bianca Valenti, paddling out in the early morning light in Puerto Escondido, Mexico, last year, hoped to score one really special wave. But the California-based pro big-wave surfer was not quite sure how giant the waves would be.

When a peak popped up, Valenti (@bianca_valenti), 31, was in the perfect spot. She spun around, started paddling hard and slid into the wave. Valenti wanted to be *barreled*—in which a surfer rides under the curling lip of a wave inside a tunnel of water—and when she looked up, she realized that the wave was gigantic, estimated to be in the 40- to 50-foot range. “It was a buttery smooth ride the whole time,” she says.

Surfing big waves is when Valenti feels most alive. She is among the elite surfers who chase the massive swells that make you feel like you are being powered by a Mack truck.

Big wave surfing can feel euphoric. “In all other aspects of my life, I have 50 different things going on at once. Surfing those waves, my focus is so narrowed and heightened that I end up

losing my sense of hearing because everything is so switched on. You’re reacting and adapting to things so fast,” says Ian Walsh, 36, a pro surfer from Hawaii (@ian.walsh).

Riding the big surf as a pro is not a laid-back day at the beach. Not only do you need to be a high-level athlete to paddle out into the world’s biggest waves, it takes years of experience to stay poised and calm in the most critical conditions.

“I chase big waves around the planet. In order for those days to go well, a lot of preparation happens beforehand in the gym, on the bike, in the pool and surfing in a variety of conditions,” says Walsh. It takes mental conditioning, too.

Prepping for Big Swells

“The first thing we focus on is confidence,” says Samantha Campbell, founder of Deep Relief // Peak Performance (deep2peak.com), a training facility in Maui where athletes like Walsh and another pro surfer, Paige Alms (@paigealms),

Photo by Zak Noyle



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31, train. “Being mentally prepared is having confidence in your body and equipment, and allows you to be committed [in the water]; that allows you to be safer. If you’re hesitant because you don’t feel ready, that can be detrimental,” Alms says.

For example, Walsh has an extensive training program to prep for the big-wave season in which each day is programmed for a specific purpose.

Some of Walsh’s days are dedicated to activation and mobility—turning on all his muscles to make sure they’re firing properly—in an effort to build a nimble body that can absorb the impact that comes with



Bianca Valenti

Photo by Katherine Zacarian

surfing and to reduce the risk of injury. Others are devoted to developing the strength, power, speed and agility needed to paddle and drop into waves and stay low during the ride, and to resist external forces, such as wind and chop, that try to force him

off his board. (Campbell loves moves such as a Hex-bar deadlift and combining box jumps with throwing a medicine ball laterally against a wall.) Walsh also builds his cardio engine with cycling, which he appreciates for its low impact and

The 6 Best Big-Wave Breaks Worldwide



Teahupo’o, Tahiti: The swell marches forward and detonates on the shallow reef, producing thick, picture-perfect, heavy left-hand barrels. (The shallow reef also means it doles out one of the gnarliest wipe-outs, too.) It’s been called the heaviest wave in the world and is on many surfers’ bucket lists.



Pe’ahi, Hawaii: Aka “Jaws”; this pristine, heavy wave lies off the north shore of Maui and is the home break of Ian Walsh and Paige Alms. “The shape, speed, size and consistency of what the wave offers left and right is unique,” says Walsh. When the conditions are right, the best surfers in the world flock to this spot—where waves can reach heights of 60 feet.

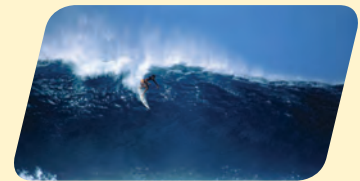


Mavericks, California: Local Jeff Clark famously surfed Mavericks for 15 years before the spot was discovered by everyone else; many people thought that big waves didn’t exist in California, but this one proved them wrong. Heavy and featuring a fast right hand, it breaks about a mile off-shore from Half Moon Bay in Northern California’s chilly (and sharky) waters. The steep drop (where you descend into the wave), thick lip and rocky shore all get your adrenaline pumping.



Praia do Norte, Nazaré, Portugal: The wave at Nazaré in Portugal is big. Guinness World Record big. Rodrigo Koxa, current male world record holder, scored an 80-foot wave in November 2017 and Maya Gabeira holds the female record for a 68-foot bomb in January 2018. In December 2018, Tom Butler of England surfed a wave estimated to be

in the 90- to 100-foot range, which, if certified, could take the title.



Waimea Bay, Hawaii: You can’t talk about big-wave surfing without mentioning Waimea Bay on the north shore of Oahu. It has set the standard for the sport and is home to The Eddie Aikau Big Wave Invitational (theeddieaikau.com), one of the most prestigious surf contests held in honor of Aikau, a legendary Hawaiian waterman. Waves consistently reach 20+ feet and up to 60 feet.



Shipstern Bluff, Australia: This isolated spot in Tasmania definitely isn’t for the faint of heart. Some have described the thick slab wave as a powerful mutant, thanks to the multiple steps that form in the face of the wave. And it looks like the ocean is folding over on itself before crashing into a pile of boulders.

Staying Safe While Surfing Big Waves

Following the tragic death of big-wave surfer Sion Milosky at Mavericks in 2011, a small group of surfers gathered on the North Shore of Oahu to address the sport's lack of risk management and safety protocols. From that initial meeting, the group formed the Big Wave Risk Assessment Group (BWRAG, bwrags.com)... and the big-wave safety movement was born.

"Surfing is the easy part. Surviving is the hard part," says Brian Keaulana, BWRAG chief master instructor. If a surfer goes down, there's a small window of time—minutes—to stabilize them and start performing CPR. And when you're miles off shore with no lifeguards or medical facilities nearby, a critical situation can quickly turn life-threatening.

BWRAG training is designed to minimize potential hazards and maximize surfers' own safety and the safety of those with whom they share the lineup, the area where most of the waves are starting to break and where most surfers are positioned. BWRAG hosts comprehensive training summits on Oahu as well as in Australia, California, Europe and Brazil. In addition to information on ocean risk management, surfers learn skills like first-responder training and rescues, surf spot analysis, CPR/AED training and apnea or breath-hold training, and go through case analyses.

Whether you're riding big waves or small, rolling peelers, this sport can be dangerous, so all surfers would benefit from learning the basics of ocean safety. Study your break. "Understand the reef, bottom [what's on the sea floor] and depth [of the water], and you pretty much understand why the wave is breaking that way," says Keaulana. Look at your environment before paddling out and identify potential hazards. Take a first aid and CPR class and practice your skills.

"The art of safety and life-saving is like a martial art. You have to practice. Keep training," urges Keaulana.

high effectiveness, along with high-altitude hiking and running.

Stability and balance work are other important training components too: They develop the neural pathways between the brain and the feet to hone the body's awareness of its

position in space. Being able to know where you are means that "if you're air-dropping into a wave, you don't need to look to see where your feet are in relation to the board and wave. Your brain has built those connections," says Campbell.

Breathing and Recovering

A key skill for big-wave surfers is holding one's breath, says Campbell. They practice this maneuver for longer and longer periods of time in order to stay calm and prepare for long hold-downs—and that torturous feeling of struggling for air. Surfers start by working on static breath-holds—lying down on the floor and holding their breath under the supervision of a trained instructor—and move on to dynamic sessions where they incorporate breath-holds into rock running or HIIT (high-intensity interval training) sessions to mimic what it feels like to hold your breath after falling from a giant wave.

Finally, recovery is a key piece of the training puzzle. "The recovery days are just as important as the days you're pushing hard," says Alms. Whether it's a complete day of rest or active recovery, it's a chance for the brain and body to relax and consolidate the gains achieved in the gym.

"Big waves are where I feel the most alive and in tune with Mother Nature. It's something I love to do," says Alms. "Knowing what I can do in the gym gives me the confidence. It puts me in a better mindset to push myself knowing that I've done the groundwork." **DL**

