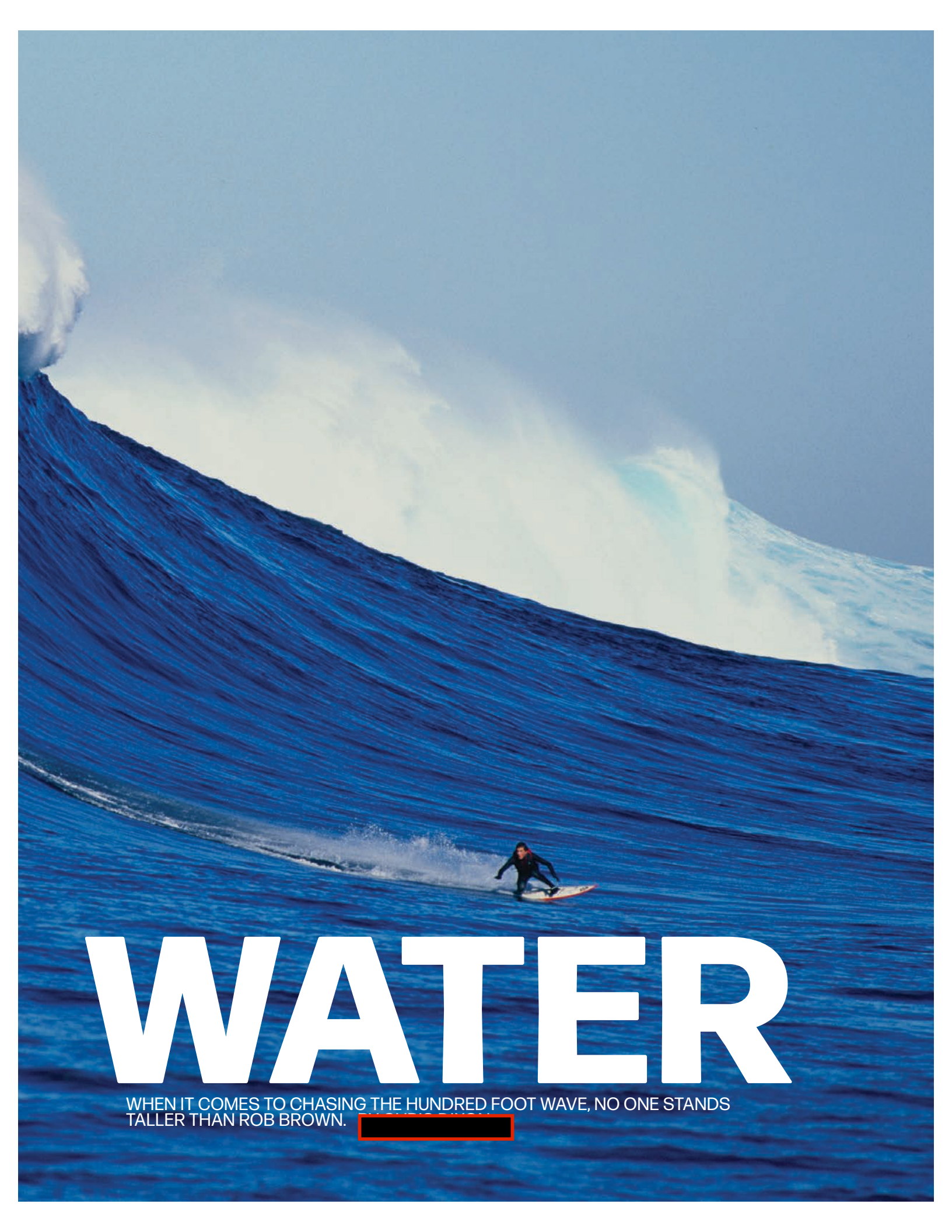




**THROUGH HELL FOR
HIGH**

ROBERT BROWN



WATER

WHEN IT COMES TO CHASING THE HUNDRED FOOT WAVE, NO ONE STANDS TALLER THAN ROB BROWN.



Back at Cortes in January, Rob Brown shoots from the flybridge roof of Boardroom for the filming of 100 Foot Wave.



Come hell or high water, Rob Brown was staying put. By 3:15 p.m. on Friday, January 13th, the salt-seasoned captain had spent over eight hours standing 20 feet above a heaving ocean on the flybridge roof of a Hatteras sportfisher called *Boardroom*. Strapped to the vintage 65-footer's radar mount railing with a harness while calling audibles through the hatch to fellow captain Todd Mansur, Brown clutched neither steering wheel nor fishing rod, but an expensive Canon camera. The water's surface was butter smooth, but the tower swooned 30 feet in every direction, under the influence of a mighty swell. The 64-year-old Brown stayed planted, ignoring the calls of logic, motion-sickness, sunburn and his bladder—even when offered a relief bottle. After all, it's not every day—or even every decade—that you get to film surfers plummeting down the faces of seven-story tall, potential world-record waves at California's infamous Cortes Bank. Since 2001, Brown had captured three world records atop this treacherous seamount—a record in and of itself.

BILL SHARP / 100 FOOT WAVE

The risk of missing a fourth meant putting every discomfort aside.

"I just hate missing photos," he said clutching the rail with a weary chuckle. "I can remember the Reef event at Todos Santos, Mexico in 1998. I got a great shot of Taylor Knox dropping in on this giant wave. I would have gotten one more, but I wasn't paying attention. I was on a cellphone with my wife. Taylor drops in. I go 'click, click, click,' then 'rreeeeee,' the camera rewinds—out of film. I remember it like it was yesterday. It still just bums me out. That's why I'm still up here—with my legs aching, my brain falling out and my spleen hanging."

For Brown, January 13th, marked an unprecedented 14th mission filming surfers as they charged down the stupefying waves that break 100 miles out to sea, atop Cortes Bank's six-foot-deep Bishop Rock. This time was different though. For the first time, Brown wasn't tasked with filming while also driving his boat and dodging waves that ranged between three and ten-stories tall. For this mission, he had been pulled out of semi-retirement and recruited by longtime



colleague and partner in surf, Bill Sharp, a Cortes pioneer himself and a producer for HBO's Emmy Award Winning series *100 Foot Wave*. At Brown's urging, Sharp had hired Mansur, a crack captain, fellow surfer and Southern California fishing guru. Through the flybridge hatch, Brown reckoned he could holler down enough direction to keep *Boardroom* afloat, while also keeping the boat lined up for a perfect shot. "Back it up Todd!" he shouted as a glacier-blue fifty-foot swell lurched up onto the Bishop Rock. Hawaiian surf legend Garrett McNamara plunged down it. "Beautiful, beautiful."

It would be difficult to overstate the understated Robert Lee Brown's place in the world of big wave surfing, nor his unique position in that realm as a pioneering mariner. A gregarious, self-deprecating, competitive and wise-cracking adrenaline junkie, Brown's also spent chunks of his four-decade career shooting NASCAR, Formula One, speedboat racing and the America's Cup. His secret aquatic formula came in splicing his obsession with boats with his love for adventure. Along that sightline, he created an unmatched portfolio filming

from the decks and flybridges of an evolving array of home-rigged skiffs, center console V-hulls and eventually, center console power catamarans. He's witnessed many of surfing's most iconic moments firsthand, from the death of big wave Jedi Mark Foo to terrifying calving glacier tsunamis surfed by Garrett McNamara to the Cortes Bank world record waves of Mike Parsons, Shawn Dollar and perhaps on this January day, a brave French surfer girl named Justine Dupont. Brown's images have made him at least partially responsible for the careers of some of the best wave riders on earth. But feeding his own need for the extreme and the boats that made his career possible has not always come easily. Hell, it's nearly bankrupted him.

When Brown was a kid, Dana Point, California was an uncrowded Shangri-la. He grew up across the street from Doheny Beach. Nestled right up alongside the breakwater built to create Dana Point's massive harbor, it's one of the spots named in the Beach Boys' anthem *Surfer's USA*. Brown spent his youth gliding across waves on Hobie Cats and surfboards with his brothers. In middle school, he started experi-





menting with his older brother's Pentax SLR. When he drowned the camera in the surf, the \$300 repair, "which seemed like \$25,000 at the time," was funded by work as a busboy at Dana Point's Castaways restaurant. "Where my mom worked," Brown added. "Where everybody worked."

Brown had little money, but he lived in the literal shadow of *Surfer* and *Surfing*, the two biggest surf magazines in existence. *Surfing's* photo editor was a cranky, driven perfectionist and sailor named Larry Moore, whose blazing red hair and temper earned the nickname, "Flame." On crisp, offshore wind mornings, Flame could be found snapping the local surfers—including Brown and rivals like pro surfer Mike Parsons—at Salt Creek Beach.

"Flame was a legend, a psycho," said Brown. "Highly competitive, highly secretive. But a great helper to young photographers. He'd give you advice, but put it out in low doses, like a crack addict kind of thing. You'd get a little dose of how to do it, then some positive feedback if you were doing good."

Flame published Brown's first photos when he was 18, "and all of

a sudden, I wanted to be a sports photographer," said Brown. "I just couldn't stand the idea of being either a portrait photographer or wedding photographer. But I also didn't want to be just a surf photographer because I knew that was pretty seasonal."

Two of Brown's three brothers raced Hobie Cat sailboats. So, he started photographing the races and showed them to the local editors of *Hobie Hotline* magazine. "They had a budget and they took me to Corpus Christi Texas for nationals and all over the place," he said. "Suddenly I'm doing their covers."

And a lot of surfing. "He just wanted to be the best guy shooting telephoto," said Bill Sharp, a former *Surfing* editor. "He didn't do sensitive portraits—wasn't super artistic, but he was just an assassin with the Canon 800."

The Hobie gig led to Brown's first powerboat, a demo 13-foot Hobie power skiff. With it, Brown targeted a Flame-discovered, Hawaiian-scale wave that broke in front of Isla de Todos Santos, Mexico, a tiny crag five miles offshore from Ensenada. Like many of the world's best big surfing waves, there was a deep channel that helped focus swells on the shallow





Crackerbox crash in turn one during a race at the San Diego Bay Fair.

reef. From that channel, Brown reckoned he could idle in relative safety, aiming his Canon right down the throat of Todos' monster tubes. "He was the first guy to really take that seriously," said Sharp. "The idea of shooting off a boat. You have to remember, back then, you shot surfing off of a Hodgeman (canvas) raft or a Morey Doyle (soft) surfboard—with maybe a 135 or a 200mm lens, dodging sets of waves. That's what Flame did. But Rob, I can't think of anyone who before him, just said, 'Hey, I can shoot from this boat. I'm gonna be dry and I can use a longer lens and not have to use a water housing, and have a great adventure.'"

But that involved surging swells and a questionably protected Mexican harbor—in the dark.

"It was always madcap adventure," said Sharp. "The beautiful harbor where the Coral Hotel is today hadn't been built. There was an assortment of ultra-sketchy launch ramps where there's various fish processing plants. I remember going down once at super low tide. The ramp just, sort of plunged down into this steep, slimy pit and getting into it was the most dangerous thing. I was covered with moss and

slime. It was full scale *Qualified Captain* stuff."

Heading out, the crew wouldn't know if Todos' microclimate would switch winds to howling onshores, smother them in fog, or just how big the waves would be. They navigated without GPS, Loran or a depth finder. "You just kind of, take a compass heading and wait till you hear waves break," Sharp said.

Positioning to film the surfers became Brown's specialty. Drifting too close to the impact zone was to risk death. Too far off, and you'd be out of range, or the visual angle to the wave would be wrong. Throttle, steering, focusing and shooting was a four-handed operation that Brown somehow managed with two hands. "It's a very controlled dance," Brown said without a hint of irony. "It's not risk taking at all—if you know what you're doing, you're in the right place ... and you know the ocean really well ... and you've been there a lot."

There was endless mayhem. Once Mike Parsons and Brad Gerlach were lost in a sudden fog on their jet ski. Brown had to motor back out amidst the huge swells to find them. There was the tsunami warning triggered by a Chilean earthquake. Brown phoned his good friend, the late meteorologist Sean Collins. "I had my boat tied up at the marina," he said. "Basically, Sean said, 'Head out to deeper water.' It was pouring rain. About two feet of visibility. I didn't want some freaking freighter or giant wave to come in and mow us down. It was so spooky."

"I think I drove him crazy more than anyone harassing him to go out," said Parsons. "There were a lot of times when he was reluctant. We would just drag him out of a trade show and make him get home and figure out a way to convince the surf companies to pay him because we're going to score. And we did—90 percent of the time."

Todos Santos, and another treacherous discovery up in Half Moon Bay called Mavericks, also led Brown into an arms race towards bigger and more capable boats. The skiff begat Wahoo center consoles—an 18, followed by a 21. Brown was scrupulous in maintenance. One failed start and it could be all over.

After a few years of swaying in traditional V-bottom boats, Brown made the mistake of test driving a World Cat 24—a high-performance catamaran with twin Yamaha 150's. Now *this* was something—a stable photo platform that sliced through both short-period chop and long-period groundswells like butter. Brown couldn't afford it, but that didn't matter. "There was a big push for power catamarans with Flame," he said. "He loved boats too. And I was just a boat *fiend*. I still am."

"It was the space race," said Sharp. "Rob wanted the gnarliest equipment. No matter what people had, they were Mercury and he was Apollo. He was spending way over his head just to have the most bitchen' equipment."

On a calm January evening in 2001, Brown motored the World Cat out of Dana Point Harbor with his buddy John Connors as first mate. Reaching Cortes before dawn, they met the *Pacific Quest*, a 40-year-old fishing vessel that had ferried out Mike Parsons and a crew of surfers. The breaking waves were so big, they lit up on *Pacific Quest's* radar.

Brown's depth finder didn't work and sunrise revealed waves like nothing anyone had ever seen. They not only towered above the Bishop Rock, but refracted off its flanks and bounced back out to sea, creating nauseating conditions and breathtaking peaks in unpredictable spots. When the surfers began towing into the waves behind jet-skis, Brown maneuvered to what he thought was deep enough water. "I had a small tower on my T-top but I didn't have a driving station on top, so I couldn't go up there," he said. "I was shooting from the bottom level. So just seeing anything coming is really difficult."

Suddenly a seven-story-tall wave loomed dead ahead. Brown slammed the throttles forward. The catamaran nosed into the wave's





At the Detroit World Cup, Brown captured Thunderboat letting it all hang out.

face, sliding backwards as the propellers struggled to gain footing. Connors held on for dear life. As the wave feathered, Brown had a moment to think *I'm looking straight up—at the ocean*. The cat sailed into the air; its 24 feet fully clear of the water. Miraculously, it flopped down forward on the wave's backside. "God," said Brown. "It was terrifying."

Minutes later, Brown gaped as Mike Parsons let go of the towrope on a monster. "The size and the sound," he said. "It was just such a leap over anything I'd ever seen. I was sitting there, going click, click, click. Watching the counter go down frame by frame, telling myself 'Relax. Mike is gonna die right here and right now, but you're gonna do your job.'"

Parsons was obscured by a foreground wave, and for a few agonizing moments, everyone thought he had been obliterated. But he somehow remained planted. He rode a half-mile, kicking out alongside Brown's boat. "I remember telling him, 'That's it,'" Brown said. "That's the pinnacle of your career right there. Don't push it. I mean, I don't want you to die. I don't want to take your body home." It was unbelievable."

Of course, they didn't leave until sunset. Brown's photo took the cover of *Surfing* magazine. Parsons' wave also anchored Dana Brown's seminal surf film *Step Into Liquid* and was declared a new 66-foot Guinness World Record. But Parsons—and Brown—were just getting started.

The experience convinced Brown he needed an even more specialized boat—a Pro Sports 26 driven by twin 225 Yamahas. He added a tuna tower for visibility and welded together an aluminum stern platform for winching up a jet ski. Photo work flowed in not only from surf magazines, but movies and a myriad of boating titles: *Boating*,

Trailer Boats, *Speedboat*, *Powerboat*, *Sailing*, *Sail*, *Speed on the Water* and Brown seems to recall, a shot or two in [REDACTED]

"Really, I'm kind of a gearhead who wants to stay alive," he added. "All these race boats I go photograph and beautiful helicopters and all the money that was around it—I couldn't relate to it. I just wasn't rich. So, I couldn't figure it out. How these people get this much dough? They spend \$2 million on a boat that goes 900 miles an hour and makes so much noise. I had to kind of keep my chip on my shoulder quiet because I didn't want to lose the work. I was really in awe that I got to work for them and to shoot boats and be around boating in that fashion. But it wasn't for me. It just wasn't my style. I would, you know, see all the flames on the boats and stuff, and think that is the dumbest thing I've ever seen in my life. But I'd look at a straight white gel coated Parker. *Yahoo, that's beautiful.*"

It was an expensive profession too, but the adventure, the family fun—playing on the water with his two daughters, stepson and step-daughter, and his wife of now 24 years, Molly—just made Brown work harder. "The love of boating," he said. "I mean that's absolutely number one. We'd also go to Lake Havasu and tube—just do all kinds of fun stuff. My family got to be raised behind some amazing boats."

In 2005, Brown filmed the attempt of big wave surfers Garrett McNamara and Keali'i Mamala to catch waves created by ice slabs exploding off Childs Glacier in Alaska. They succeeded. "I just love Rob," said McNamara. "And that glacier mission—it was probably the craziest thing I ever did. The most dangerous. The closest to death I've ever been. And Rob was right there. Those things can fly all the way across the river and land on a cameraman."

I ask the 55-year-old McNamara if his obsession for waves matched Brown's for photos. "Nobody's ever put it that way," he said. "But



Aboard his beloved Twin-Vee 36, Brown launched the most dangerous boating mission in surfing history.

FRANK OLIJARTE

yeah. I think, you know, we've got a similar type of energy. We were probably Berserkers back in the day. We weren't Vikings. We were Berserkers. I've been so obsessed with whatever wave I'm assessing, and it's the same with Rob. Breaking it down to the hour, to the minute, when the biggest wave of the day is going to come in."

"He had the same obsession as the surfers," said Sharp. "But it became a very symbiotic relationship, right? Because he would take the best possible photos of those guys, and provide the most comfortable ride. So it became this thing—to get picked for Rob's boat was like the NFL draft. Everyone wanted to be on it."

In 2006, Brown stumbled onto a 36-foot Twin Vee power cat at a San Diego boat show. This was his \$200,000 dream boat. "I just needed something fast and stable because we were going to do strike missions and we needed to be at Cortes in three hours," he said. "It just drove right through boat wakes and stuff. And Catamarans have notorious downwind spin outs. The Twin Vee didn't do any of that. So I ordered it."

He christened her *Bob*.

Bob would be Brown's first boat with a proper pilothouse. The twin 300 Mercury Verados would propel her to 43 knots. He added platforms for camera crews filming for Tommy Bahama, The Jonas Brothers, HBO's *Dexter* and commercials for Nissan, GE and "a Nikon commercial with Ashton Kutcher, where a guy lights a yacht on fire cooking."

But *Bob* was also an expensive pain in the ass.

"The 36 was at least 11 foot 10 inches wide," Brown said. "I would tow that through Los Angeles up to Mavericks 15 times at least. Blew a tire on the trailer every time. I just couldn't afford new tires."

Brown was sponsored by Mercury as part of their High-Profile

Captains program. "I still don't see how it made any financial sense," said Sharp. "But that didn't matter. The boats kept getting bigger and more stable and higher. To the point where I think, eventually the highway patrol or Caltrans just said, 'Stop it, Rob.' And of course, he'd have to have a bigger vehicle to pull it. That's the traditional sort of boat guy. The toys just keep getting bigger. He was just globally renowned for that."

On New Year's Day, 2008, a pair ocean-spanning lows developed south of Alaska. The storm—among the strongest on record—would sweep clear from Walla Walla to Ensenada, causing massive flooding and killing 14. Directly on its heels spun another tempest, just as powerful.

At first, it appeared there would be no break between the first and second storms, so surfing was looking unlikely. But as the second arm of the pinwheeling low took aim at the west coast, Mike Parsons, Greg Long and Brown noticed a strange anomaly on the charts—a windless afternoon window just as the record swell 23-foot, 19 second interval swell rolled up Cortes' mile-deep slope. With the Bank's strange bathymetry, such a swell could theoretically be magnified to create a surfable wave 100 feet high.

Brown, Parsons, Long, Brad Gerlach, and Grant "Twiggy" Baker left Dana Point Harbor in a spitting gale at the tail of the first storm. *Bob* could carry only one jet ski, so Parsons and Long took turns pounding out on the other ski at 40 knots while *Bob* went fully airborne ferrying the other. Off San Clemente Island, the team stopped for a ski refuel. "We're never gonna make it," Brown told Long. "I don't wanna hear it RB," a delirious Long replied. Rounding San Clemente Island, the open ocean swells grew even bigger, but the winds indeed relaxed. An hour and a half later, the team was astonished to





Garrett McNamara and Keali'i Mamala with Brown for a tsunami surf mission at Child's Glacier in Alaska. "It was probably the craziest thing I ever did," said McNamara.

find waves breaking in 100 feet of water all along the bank, across 15 miles of empty ocean. Atop the Bishop Rock's shallows stretched a seemingly endless caldera of class five whitewater. The surfers motored off on their skis, leaving Brown and his seasick videographer Matt Wybenga to figure out how to get in close enough to shoot. So much energy was wrapping onto the Bishop Rock that a great dome of water had been piled up onto its plateau. The sea level was simply *higher* up ahead and the ocean was pouring off Bishop Rock like a waterfall. Brown told Wybenga to hold before plowing straight into it like a jetboat on the Colorado River.

The surfers took turns slingshotting one another into mountainous waves, and dry heaving from adrenaline overdoses. Brown marveled while Wybenga hurled. Some unridden waves out beyond the surfers were surely 100 feet high. Way out, Brown saw a tiny speck he suspected was Parsons release the ski rope. "I just remember concentrating so hard and thinking, 'Oh shit, this is a *bomb*,'" Parsons said.

With a pregnant wife back home, Parsons was traveling faster than he ever had on a surfboard—probably 75 mph. Suddenly though, his acceleration ceased. Boiling water vapor built up behind his fins and they cavitated like a boat propeller. As he was sucked up backwards into the wave's maw, Brown clicked away. When the wave cascaded,

Parsons began talking to himself: "You can't fall. You can't die."

Then, when Parsons was completely engulfed by whitewater, the cavitation suddenly ceased. The effect was akin to flooring a Tesla. He was free.

Brown captured the lonely ride. At the Billabong XXL Awards, the Oscars of the surfing world, a panel of judges would award Parsons his second world record—77 feet. Brown collected fat paychecks and his photos went viral. Hell, one anchored a story I wrote about the mission in the *New York Times*. Another ended up on the cover of my book [REDACTED]

"That was like, you know, summiting Everest in the gnarliest storm that's ever swept the Himalayas—blindfolded, without oxygen and no ropes," said Sharp. "It'll never happen again, because it was so insane. It's amazing that any of them made it back. It really is."

"For whatever reason with me and Rob, it's like, we had this psychic connection," said Parsons. "He literally shot every good ride of my life that day at Cortes. It was crazy how he got that image. It could have otherwise been Greg or Twiggy—but their rides were hidden behind other waves. I don't know, fate or luck or personalities or whatever. Without Rob Brown, I wouldn't have gotten all the things I did. He's just one of my best friends. And the funniest dude—ever."





The 2008 mission also coincided with the global financial crisis. The photographic landscape was changing too. Jetski-mounted filmers, more sophisticated digital cameras, drones and the decline of print hammered Brown's revenue. There were still some great jobs. *Bob* would be the only press boat to run alongside competitors in the 2013 San Francisco America's Cup. Brown would also work as a water coordinator for the 2012 Gerard Butler film *Chasing Mavericks*. There were still occasional missions to Todos and Cortes, but earning a living with *Bob* was damned stressful. Brown had long possessed considerable carpentry skills. With plenty of rich folks living around Dana Point, he reluctantly decided to shift his focus to high-end woodworking.

"I sold the boat to a real nice guy in Oceanside and put the money into our house," he said. "I was boatless for four or five years, and was depressed about it. But I just had to write it off. I just said, I'll never have a boat like that again. The Twin Vee. It wasn't plush, but it was incredible. What a machine."

Back in Dana Point the day after the Cortes mission, Brown and I are still buzzing about some of the most remarkable rides either of us have ever seen. Brown couldn't ultimately stay away from boats, of course, and his driveway now holds a shiny and well-sorted 2008 Pro-Line 29-foot monohull with twin Mercury 300 Verados. He

found her last year in Florida, trailered her back to California with Molly—behind a brand-new Chevy 2500—and named her *Big Lar* after Molly's late father, Larry. Brown is slowly bringing her up to spec for Cortes Bank, but he's not sure if she'll ever make it out there. He doesn't mind though. "We entered the Dana Point Christmas parade with it and got second place the other day—500 bucks. We go up to Newport to lunch in it from here in the summer. We help with life-guard stuff or crewing events. So, it's just a different style. I don't have to be a photographer. And it's just a pleasure."

We scroll through his photos and ponder whether Justine Dupont's wave might end up being the fourth Cortes Bank world record that Brown has caught on camera. He still can't get over the fact that he was back out there, working with a film crew and Captain Mansur aboard *Boardroom*. "I have always ogled that boat walking by you know?" he says. "I've only been fishing once in my life on a sportfisher like that. I've worked on a lot of them, but I've never taken a fishing trip or just, a trip on one. So, to get to go in and lay down, and have food and a bathroom and be able to brush my teeth, and just everything about it was luxury—was amazing."

"If that trip to Cortes was the end of my career, it's okay. I ended it in a great way." □

