WINGNUT

WORDS AND PHOTOS: MOONWALKER

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THE BIGGEST KID OF ALL

ROBERT JAMES WEAVER, or Wingnut as he's affectionately known, rose to prominence via the box office blockbuster *Endless Summer II* – a rollicking adventure from surfing's grand storyteller Bruce Brown. Since its release in '94, the hoopla surrounding the *Endless Summer* sequel has waned, but Wingnut's profile on the surf scene certainly hasn't.

Wingy's a busy boy. From photo trips to charity events to marketing and management, he has a finger in every pie. While this assures his longevity in the surf marketplace, the continued class of his surfing maintains his cred and negates any calls of over-kill. On the world stage, he's arguably the closest thing in longboarding to a household name and as far as public perceptions go, Wingnut, at 43-years-young, remains the poster boy for his generation.

(above) All surfers are big kids . . . meet the prime example.
(main pic) Wingy reckons you surf better at 40 than you do at 20 . . .

Born in the land of VW's, Claudia Schiffer, and a crumbled wall, to a mother who managed a Berlin hotel and a father who was a petroleum engineer, he moved with the family to Newport Beach in Southern California when he was five. That soon led to his first surfing experience.

"I stood up on a board for the first time when our neighbour, a firefighter, took me surfing," says Wingnut. "I was 16 or 17, so I was kinda late starting. Until then I was a bodyboarder and a bodysurfer, but when I started to surf I borrowed an old 9'6" Dave Sweet from my wrestling coach." (Wingnut in body hugging lycra, grappling with other men is horrendous to visualise - best not to ask for photographic proof. I mean, who'd make something like that up?)

"And being at Newport, the main spot is Blackies, and there were only a handful of guys surfing longboards, literally five or six. I didn't realise at the time exactly how good they were or who they were, but they turned out to be some of the top guys from the '60s. I'm talking around 1981 here when you'd have been hard pressed to find 25 longboarders in California. But those few guys who surfed the pier were really, really good at it. I didn't make a conscious decision not to ride shortboards but it was a conscious decision to ride the board I had until I'd mastered what these guys were doing." Determination and dedication are two traits that are especially prevalent throughout Wingnut's life.

"I was waiting tables at Ruby's (a restaurant chain often found on the end of California's iconic piers) till I graduated high school, then went to Orange Coast College and just surfed. I'd compete too but there was just no chance of any sponsorship

for longboarders back then. Nobody really cared, it got to the stage where I got a free wetsuit, and that was so cool! But that was about it. As longboarding grew though, a club scene started happening,"

The Longboard Club Scene

"We formed Blackies Classic Longboard Association which was one of the first clubs, along with Santa Cruz and Oceanside. So we'd just go to the club events and that was pretty much the re-birth of longboarding in California. I had that by the tail . . . and then there was Joel [Tudor] down in Cardiff, the Paskowitz family and me.

"There were only like a dozen people under 20 riding longboards then. But the club comps in California got big pretty quick. The Malibu and Oceanside events were the biggest, and soon hundreds of people were showing up. I mean there was some pretty big power to these events, and back then there weren't even age groups, you got in and did battle with everybody else.

"It was pretty neat, because you had the likes of Joel competing against David Nuuhiwa and Donald Takayama. Joel wasn't much more than a tiny kid while Donald and David were 40 and still in their prime. I think you're a better surfer at 40 than you are at 20, and that's not based just on personal experience. You've spent so much time in the water, you know so much more about the sport, and if you stay in shape you can still be pretty lethal."

Hawaii

"After graduating college I came up here to Santa Cruz to go to university, did a semester but was kinda disillusioned and was thinking of moving back to Newport again and just wait tables and surf. But my girlfriend (Janice, now his wife – they've been together 20 years) said, 'If you're going to wait tables and surf why don't you do that in Hawaii?' I was like 'Hawaii? That's a great idea!'

"So I got a friend over there, Ed Hardy, to post over the Sunday Classifieds (before the time of internet – yes it did exist) and I saw it was the same to rent a house there as here and that jobs were plentiful. So Janice and I headed off to live in the tropics. We had a great time for two years, but eventually moved back to the mainland and I got started again at university with two years to finish. I graduated in June, married Janice in October and Bruce Brown called me in January. And I haven't worked a day since!" (laughter)

Wingnut

(opposite page, top) Wingnut at Blackie's, Newport Pier, in 1989. If you're wondering why "Wingnut", it's no biggie, someone inexplicably called him that over the PA at an early comp in Malibu. He won and it stuck. PHOTO: SHARON ANN MARSHALL (bottom) Full control, delicate touch.
(above) A clean drive at one of the many classic waves in the chilly waters of his hometown Santa Cruz.
(right) Always the shy, retiring type . . . not! 1991 at 26th Avenue, Santa Cruz. PHOTO: SHARON ANN MARSHALL

Endless Summer II

"It was January 16th at 1.15 in the afternoon. That's the day I remember that things really changed! I picked up the phone and he says, 'Is Wingnut there? This is Bruce Brown'. I was like 'uh-huh', I thought it was a joke, I mean I use a fake name all the time when I call people because what secretary is going to let a call through from someone named Wingnut. So I'm like, 'Who is it, c'mon' but Bruce's voice is really recognisable. He starts talking about how he's thinking of doing a sequel to *Endless Summer* and 'we're at the early stages' . . . and I'm listening just realising 'Holy Shit! This IS Bruce Brown!' I'm like 'Wow! This is cool'. He was interested in meeting me and said I could be one of the two guys, saying they were gong to use a longboarder and a shortboarder and how he'd heard a few good things about me, but he goes, 'I don't want to go around the world with an asshole'. It was literally a ten-minute phone call and he invited me to stop in at his place the next time I was in Southern California.

"So I drive down to meet him. I know now that it takes three and a half hours to get from my place to his. Back then I didn't. Bruce said to come by at 10am, we'll go surf The Ranch and chill out. So I left Santa Cruz super early, bee-lined it down there, and ended up arriving about 7am.

"Bruce's place is in a canyon and his is the only house there. It's this long low ranch with these French doors, no real front door. So I'm on the front step, pounding these doors and he's sitting on his sofa looking at me, cigarette in hand, early morning bed hair, coffee in his other hand and he gets up and says rather dryly, 'You're early'. Of course I'm vibrating about a foot off the ground jabbering like an excited kid, 'I didn't want to be late, I didn't know how far it was' and so on. I ran off at the mouth for about five minutes while he was trying to suck the enamel off his teeth. I made a great first impression! (laughter) But we went surfing for the afternoon, had some pretty good conversations, and next day he called me and told me I had the job".

Filming Around The World.

"Pat O'Connell (the shortboarder for the film) and I were under contract for two years, production took 18 months. We'd go somewhere for a month then come back sort of thing. It wasn't all filmed in one hit. We tried to do it as surgically as we could, in the sense that we went for the best season at all the spots. We were in Australia for a month and we still got basically skunked. We got better waves than are in the film but nothing of the quality that Australia's known for. What could we say other than surf trips are surf trips . . . sometimes you get skunked.

"We'd be in Africa for a month, Costa Rica two weeks, then end up back home waiting to go to the next place. It seemed totally unreal that it was actually happening at that point. I mean, I got to do what every surfer in the world wants to do. Surf Cloudbreak, G-Land, Jefferys Bay, Indonesia by the way. I decided with Janice, OK, pick a spot in the world you want to go and I could pay the airfare. She wanted to go to Indo as she wasn't likely to have the chance again. So the nutcracker scene was actually shot on the beach in Kuta."

Filming in OZ

"The neatest thing about Australia is that Nat wasn't a jerk, ha, ha! No, that's not fair, Nat ran everything for us in Oz, as you'd expect of him. And he was so deferential to Bruce, and I don't think you could say that Nat's been deferential to anyone. But Nat was great! He would really set up opportunities, line up a bunch of stuff for us to do, then bring it to the group to vote, and make sure Bruce was happy with it and then run and organise everything. He was really the best host we had anywhere.

"OK, here's a perfect Nat story; we're going down the Nymboida River up behind Grafton, doing the river-rafting thing and there's been no rain so the river's running really, really low. So the camera guys, who are all Imax film-makers, they're mountain climbers and really tricky guys, are up ahead of us with Nat and the river guide and they're looking at the series of rapids before we get there. Pat, Beau and I are way up the river just waiting, Nat comes back and says 'Alright! We're going to go, you just need to paddle to the left real hard'. Now, the guides are disowning us saying we're on our own and it's a really bad idea, there's not enough water. But Nat's like 'We can do it!' And aside from getting seriously smashed around on rocks, we did!" (laughter)

The Crocodile Hunter

"The late Steve Irwin did all the crocodile stuff for us at Australia Zoo. There was a female crocodile protecting a nest and he had this giant chain link fence around the area. Steve says, 'She's as dangerous as she's ever going to be, even when we drive the tractor past she tries to attack it.' But I'm looking in the enclosure and there's just this muddy puddle that you swear a dog couldn't fit into. And there's a tiny bit of a hump in the middle of it. 'They feel the vibrations' he said and started pointing, 'Now watch, I'm going to start walking and when I put my foot there, she's going to come out of there and I'm gonna' go that way.' We're just like, 'yeah whatever, this guy's full of it'. So he puts his foot exactly on the spot he pointed to and starts running, didn't even look back. And this croc, that's 16 feet long, I mean huge, explodes out of this puddle and comes after him like a bullet. We all just went, 'Holy Shit!' So he comes back to us and goes, 'OK, it's simple, just keep the surfboard between you and the croc so if you don't move quick enough she'll get the board and not your leg.' And I'm looking at him thinking, 'You're out of your mind'. Steve Irwin was slim then, he fitted in my trunks great. So that's my boardshorts in the film, but there's no way I was going in there."

Surf Camps for Kids

"After the film was released in '94, I spent a year doing promo, then spent five years creating the O'Neill Surf Academy in Europe, which was the first of the free surf schools and travelling camps. The idea I had was just to hang out at the beach all day, no contest, just simply have fun. We'd bring 50 kids a day for free and give them surf lessons in the morning, do a BBQ lunch, get them in the water again and send them home with a free t-shirt. It was a huge success. We did a week each in England, Holland, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal and then over to Italy. That was five years of great fun!"

Multiple Sclerosis

"In '97 after my son Cameron was born, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (a degenerative disease of the central nervous system). It was radical because before the diagnosis I'm having the full fall downs and

got to all of 'em. And to top it off, surfing with Shaun Tomson, Tom Curren and Nat (Young) wasn't too bad either."

Tales True from Endless Summer II.

"We actually shot the final farewell scene between Pat and I during the first week of filming, in case one of us was killed during the making of it. That wasn't very comforting!

"And that plane crash in Costa Rica is totally real. Then at the beginning of that segment in the lion park in South Africa, that guy who says, 'Whatever you do, don't get out of the car'? Well, the lions killed and ate him a year later. And sixth months prior to his death his son was mauled.

"I'd only been married for a few months, but Bruce didn't really play on the fact, except for, 'Kind of a shitty husband to ditch your wife for a trip around the world!' Supposedly there were parallels to the original *Endless Summer,* so we didn't really want to go into that too much . . . but that's why there's the scene with Janice where we say our goodbyes then she knees me in the balls. That was filmed in

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(below sequence) His style tips the hat to tradition, doesn't mean you can't throw in a trick or two.

trying to figure out what's going wrong. At the same time I had to leave for Europe for two months at the camps and Cameron was just two months old. Between the CAT scans, spinal taps and MRIs we narrowed it down and knew what I had the day before I left. I spent the two months in Europe trying to figure out how to handle it, which is why I'm suggesting the Heineken cure for MS. I never got on any drugs as the steroid treatment for the first two weeks is intravenous, so I couldn't be home to deal with it.

"My neurologist told me to go to Europe anyway as they figured my MS started a couple of months before, but we just couldn't track the symptoms. A typical period for a symptom is six months so I was already halfway through, so we just let the natural cycle of this first episode run its course. Obviously steroid-based drugs are really bad for you and being 30 at the time, I was looking at my joints being disintegrated by the time I'm 50. Steroids go after your knees, hips and elbows.

"So I decide on another course of action. Instead of the drugs I'm concentrating on the positive aspects of Vitamin D for MS. Sunlight. The number one thing that exacerbates MS is heat, if you're having active episodes the heat makes it worse. But everyone thinks that heat and sun are the same thing. But I live in Santa Cruz! The sun might be out but you're not necessarily going to be warm so I make sure I get a lot of sun. (Wingnut has a strict regime of sitting shirtless in the sun for at least 20 minutes a day). I've gone nine years now without any episodes at all. No symptoms, no drugs, it's all good. And my vitamin D theory has since proven to be scientifically correct, according to a major article published [in a medical journal] recently.

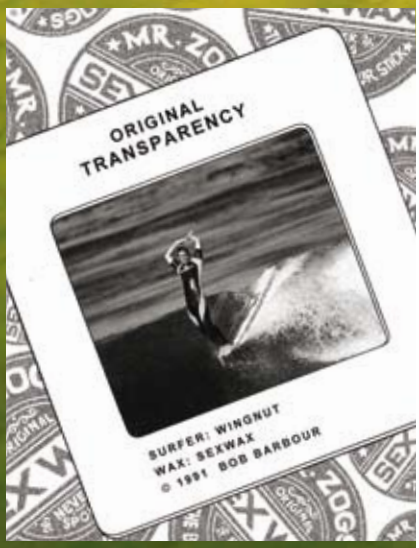
"The first year with MS was gnarly, a lot of dizzy spells. I'd go to stand up on my board and just fall down. Then maybe I'd be OK for two or three turns and the spell would hit again. It was in the cerebral cortex, the balance centre, and if it was being worked while out on a bouncing ocean my episodes were pretty flash. But if I were to sit in a chair on land I'd go for an hour and wouldn't have anything happen. I was thinking 'am I ever going to be able to go surfing with my son and share all the things I want with him?' Ten years later, it's all pretty good! I mean I still fall down sometimes when I surf, but it's operator error, not the MS!"

Longevity In The Longboard Market.

"I was very lucky because of *Endless Summer II*, and I was considered more of a traveller than a competitor. That was during the fledgling years of the pro longboard tour, and every time I tried to go to an event I'd have to leave for filming or promos. I started getting invited on photo trips with pro shortboard guys, I had enough visibility and O'Neill was my sponsor . . . I went to Iceland with *Surfer* magazine and I had these trips I would go on every year that got covered."

Tips For Getting Sponsored

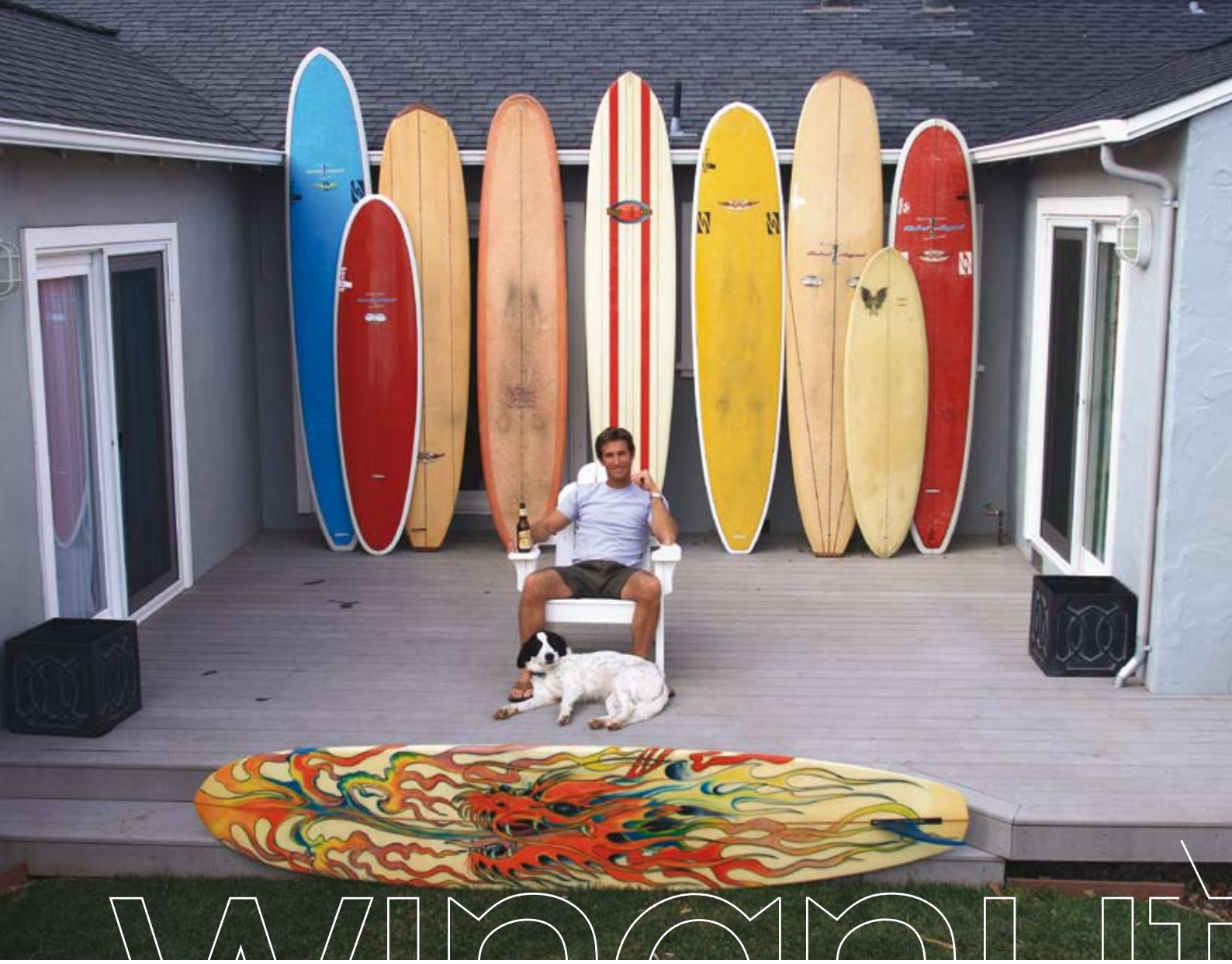
"It's a matter of establishing relationships between photographers and writers, and that's what the kids don't necessarily understand. Not that I want to give up the secret here, ha, ha, but if you want to be getting recognition you should be carrying



tripods, and show up on time [to photo shoots].

"The way I look at it, no one pays you to go surfing, you're going to go surfing no matter what, it's something you love to do. If people are paying you it's to help them sell their product and you have to figure out how to help them sell it. Whether it's being available for demos, photos, in-store promos, whatever it is . . . you've got to do something to earn your money. You might be good, but there are ten kids that are just as good, and one of them's willing to work. That's what makes the difference. And if you start making some money where you can travel and really surf, boy, are you going to get good really fast. So you just have to figure out how to pay the dues and do the work . . . and I was really good at that.

"Maybe because my pro career started really late, I had no delusions of grandeur when growing up, so I went to school. How many pro surfers have a college degree? I mean they just don't. By the time they're 14 or 16, they might be pretty good surfers and the industry is large enough where everyone's getting free crap . . but normally you'd have a little job so you can buy a new board or wetsuit. Well if you're getting all that for free, you never get a job or establish a work ethic. They don't know what it means for the average consumer to work a 40-hour week to get a pay cheque and put a deposit on a new board. Kids have no idea what that is if their parents are silver spooning 'em. But whatever it is . . . they're not used



(opposite page, top) The 'ho at work, 1991. (centre and bottom) Carrying the speed through some pretty smooth moves. (above) Wingy at home with his quiver. "My main boards are a 7'6", a 9'0", a 9'4", a 9'8", a 10'0" stepdeck, plus a 10'6" which I call the 'I got it' model. If you see this board turn around, then don't bother, I got it!"

to working so you get these pro kids that figure they can do whatever they want."

Surftech Story.

"That whole journey started years and years ago. Being a factory groupie I love watching boards get made and I'd hang out at [Doug] Haut's factory, John Mel's and Randy's [French]. Randy's was where I saw the first generation of the Surftech boards that were wood with red painted rails. I was like, 'Boy, if you ever get this thing figured out it could be pretty neat'. And as Yater and Velzy got involved and the boards started looking really good I talked to Randy about Robert [August] and long story short, they did a great board for Robert which led to my first model, a 9'4". Through the promos I was doing with O'Neill, I brought the first Surftechs to Australia, Europe and Japan.

"It wasn't a plan, it was just because I was going there and took them 'cause I loved 'em. I mean, I'm a pro surfer, I'm a whore, a 'ho. Janice hates me using that word, but you can pay me to wear your watch or your sunglasses, wear, y'know, stuff . . . but you can't mess with my surfboard. I ride what I ride because they work for me, not because of any financial incentive. And I firmly believe that if you design the board correctly, it'll be the best board you'll have ever ridden. And that's what it is with my models.

"Commercially, if I wanted to sell more of them, I'd have made them with a little more rocker and I would have changed a few things to make them a little friendlier to the consumer. But because they're pretty tuned for me, that allows me to ride them everywhere I go. I wanted to be able to pull one off the rack and ride it anywhere. And it's the best thing ever. I mean we've got distributors in every surf country in the world, and I don't have to fly with a board bag anymore. There's literally everything I want waiting for me when I get to wherever, my 7'6", 9'4" or 10'0". It's almost like cheating!"

Where is longboarding heading?

"Longboarding comes and goes through stages of popularity, but now is a really neat period because there's a genuine appreciation for the history of the sport and a wider recognition that various equipment works better for various situations. More than ever it's all about a quiver. Like your golf bag, there's putters, drivers, wedges . . . and if you're lucky enough to have a few boards then you can ride what's appropriate.

"When it comes to surfing performance itself, there's still the super high-performance stuff going on, the retro game is going on, it's all there, and there's devotees of all parts of it. That's what's great about it, there's no wrong way, it's all how you choose to enjoy the sport. That's what I find so funny when people get all worked up saying 'that's not right' or 'that's not cool'. If there's a guy out there smiling and having a good time, then he's on the perfect board. That's what it comes down to.

"I mean, I do agree that there are people that'll use longboards just as wave harvesters and that's inappropriate, but that's the individual, not the equipment. That guy will be a jerk no matter what he does, on land or water he's still going to have that greed aspect." *