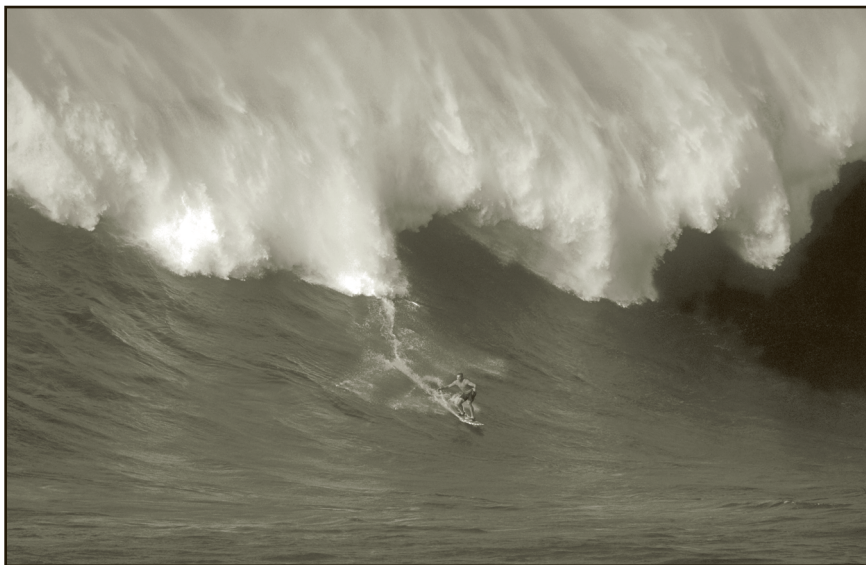


In *The Wave*, author Susan Casey describes an extreme sport and her fascination with it. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from **The Wave**  
by Susan Casey

1 As I watched the surfers launch themselves into the churning ocean and paddle toward the break, I worried for each of them. Their sport seemed more gladiatorial than athletic, like showing up for work each day to grapple with bull elephants.

2 Which is why, a few years later, I was stunned to see a photograph of a man riding a wave more than twice the size of



Sunset,<sup>1</sup> somewhere in the sixty-foot range. The surfer was Laird Hamilton, a six-foot-three, 215-pound twenty-eight-year-old from Hawaii who looked completely at ease inside a barrel<sup>2</sup> as tall as an office building. His blond hair whipped back in the spray; his muscular arms were spread wide for balance as he plummeted down the wave on a tiny board. He had classically handsome features, chiseled and intense, but no fear showed on his face, only rapt focus. Looking at the picture, I didn't understand how any of this was possible.

3 Since surfing became popular in the mid-twentieth century, faces in the forty-foot range have represented the outer limits of human paddling abilities. Anything bigger is simply moving too fast; trying to catch a sixty-foot wave by windmilling away on your stomach is like trying to catch the subway by crawling. Never mind, though, because even if you could catch it, there would be no way to ride it. Too much water rushes back up the face of a giant wave as it crests, sucking you, the hapless human (not enough momentum), and your board (too much friction) over the falls. So while the most popular surf spots quickly became so overrun that fistfights erupted in the water, all over the world the most impressive

<sup>1</sup> *Sunset* — a surfing beach in Hawaii known for its large waves

<sup>2</sup> *barrel* — the tube-like part of a wave created when a wave breaks

waves were going to waste. To Hamilton and his friends, this was unacceptable. The rules had to change, and a new system invented. So they came up with a technique called tow surfing.

4 Borrowing ideas from windsurfing and snowboarding, they created shorter, heavier surfboards with foot straps, and thinner, stronger fins that sliced through the water like knives. Then they added Jet Skis and water-ski ropes to the mix, using them to tow one another into perfect position at thirty miles per hour. In the optimal spot, just as the wave began to peak, the rider would drop the tow rope and rocket onto the face. The driver, meanwhile, would exit off the back. Using this method, with its increased horsepower and redesigned gear, a surfer could theoretically catch the biggest waves out there. Riding them—and surviving if you fell—was another story.

5 Hamilton was the test pilot, followed immediately by other surfers and windsurfers in his circle: Darrick Doerner, Brett Lickle, Dave Kalama, Buzzy Kerbox, Rush Randle, Mark Angulo, and Mike Waltze. Nicknamed the Strapped Crew, they experimented on the outer reefs of Oahu and Maui, far beyond the crowds. “No one was there,” Hamilton said. “No one had ridden waves this size. It was the unknown. It was like outer space or the deep sea. We didn’t know if we were going to come back.”

6 Anything involving giant waves qualifies as a risky pursuit, but tow surfing seemed to invite disaster. The sport’s learning curve was a series of hard lessons, and the price of falling was high. It included dislocated shoulders, shattered elbows, and burst eardrums; broken femurs, snapped ankles, and cracked necks; lacerated scalps, punctured lungs, and fractured arches; hold-downs that Brett Lickle described as “sprinting four hundred yards holding your breath while being beaten on by five Mike Tysons.” As for stitches, Hamilton “stopped counting at 1,000.”

7 Regardless of its dangers (or maybe because of them), tow surfing’s popularity and visibility grew throughout the 1990s, the surfers venturing onto more treacherous waves every year. They tinkered with equipment. They refined their techniques. Working in teams of two—a driver and a rider—they figured out how to rescue each other in behemoth surf. As the stakes got higher and the margin for error got slimmer, a kind of natural selection occurred. Riders who’d glimpsed their own mortality a little too closely drifted to the sidelines. At the other end of that spectrum was Hamilton. Watching him, you got the feeling that no wave was out of reach. The more intimidating the conditions, the more he seemed to thrive in them.

8 Then in July 2001 a surf impresario named Bill Sharp issued a challenge. “For 2700 years,” his press release read, “the Homeric [*sic*] epic known as the *Odyssey* has been associated with beautiful-but-deadly temptresses, forgetful lotus-eaters, and scary, one-eyed monsters. But now thanks to surf wear giant Billabong, it’s associated with an even scarier monster: the elusive 100-foot wave.” The company, the press release continued, would offer a prize of \$500,000 to any man who rode one. This payday was exponentially larger than anything surfing had seen; millions more would come from sponsors in the wake of the triumph. A select group of tow teams would be invited to participate, a crew Sharp referred to as “the Delta Force of surfing.”

9 It was a sexy frontier, defined by a nice round number. Marketing that number was Sharp’s intention; he noted that he’d sold the hundred-foot-wave *Odyssey* contest, originally named Project Sea Monster, to Billabong in less than fifteen minutes. Prone to flourishes

of hype, Sharp delivered vivid sound bites: “The Odyssey is Jacques Cousteau meets Evel Knievel<sup>3</sup> meets *Crocodile Hunter* meets *Jackass*,” he said. And almost overnight the idea of the hundred-foot wave became the media grail, tow surfing’s equivalent of a moon landing.

10 There were a couple of snags. First, was it physically possible? No one knew how riding a hundred-foot wave might differ from, say, riding a seventy-five-foot wave. As they grow in size, waves increase dramatically in speed and energy. At what point would the forces overwhelm the equipment, or the surfers? “The 100-foot wave would probably kill anyone who fell off it,” *Time* magazine wrote. Honolulu’s then-ocean safety chief, Captain Edmund Pestana, agreed: “It’s a deadly scenario for everyone involved.” The trade journal *TransWorld SURF Business* was blunt: “You’re asking these surfers to take huge risks for our titillation.”

11 Next, even if a surfer wanted to take his chances, finding the wave was a problem. Although they were no longer considered imaginary, hundred-foot waves were not exactly kicking around within Jet Ski range. Further complicating things, for tow surfing’s purposes not just any hundred-foot wave would do. The enormous seas the *Discovery*<sup>4</sup> encountered; the huge freaks that pop up to batter oil rigs—these are unsuitable, despite their great height. Waves that exist in the center of a storm are avalanches of water, waves mashed on top of other waves, all of them rushing forward in a chaotic jumble.

12 Surfers need giant waves with a more exclusive pedigree. In their ideal scenario, a hundred-foot wave would be born in a blast of storm energy, travel across the ocean for a long distance while being strengthened by winds, then peel off from the storm and settle into a swell, a steamrolling lump of power. That swell would eventually collide with a reef, a shoaling bottom, or some other underwater obstacle, forcing its energy upward and sideways until it exploded into breaking waves. And that’s where the ride would begin—far enough from the storm’s center to be less roiled and choppy, but not so far that its power was too diminished. This was a pretty tall order. If the ocean was a slot machine, rideable sixty- or seventy-foot waves came along about as often as a solid row of cherries.<sup>5</sup> And the perfect hundred-foot wave? Hit that one and the sirens would go off as everyone in the casino stopped what they were doing to gawk, and the staff rolled in palettes to help you haul away your money.

13 A surfer who intended to participate in the Odyssey, therefore, would be signing up for a global scavenger hunt. Not only would he have to ride the wave, he’d have to scour the oceans to find it, monitoring the weather’s every nuance like a meteorologist, and then show up at precisely the right moment toting Jet Skis, safety equipment, surf gear, and photographers along with him—not to mention a highly skilled partner who didn’t mind risking his life when called upon to do so. This was a surfing competition the way the Space Shuttle was a plane. “The Odyssey makes climbing Everest look easy,” one British journalist wrote. Regardless, Sharp was undeterred. “I think everybody’s ready,” he said. “Now, on the giant days, there’s no wave that anyone’s backing down from.”

<sup>3</sup> *Jacques Cousteau meets Evel Knievel* — references to a famous oceanographer and a daredevil stuntman

<sup>4</sup> *Discovery* — a ship that recorded the largest wave ever encountered up to that time (2000)

<sup>5</sup> *a solid row of cherries* — a rare winning combination of symbols in a slot machine