

## **Stacy Peralta**

Growing up in southern California, Stacy Peralta learned to ride boards from an early age. As a teen-ager, he surfed the Cove at Santa Monica's Pacific Ocean Park. As a member of the Zephyr Surf Shop team, he was part of the first wave of skateboarders to fashion an alternative-sports niche.

In the 1980s, Peralta directed and produced skateboard videos that became cult classics. That experience served him well when he decided to make a documentary about the origins of Southern California's skateboard culture. In "Dogtown and Z-Boys," Peralta used archival footage and contemporary interviews to chronicle the beginnings of skateboard culture, as experienced by the now-legendary Zephyr skate crew. Released in 2002, the film won Peralta best director honors at the Sundance Film Festival.

This summer, Peralta returns with "Riding Giants," a documentary about big-wave surfers. Featuring such surfing holes as The Mavericks of Northern California to Oahu's west shore, the film became the first documentary to open the Sundance Film Festival. The San Francisco Chronicle's Carla Meyer praised it as "a thrilling, informative history of a sport-subculture."

Called a "guru of the board-sports culture" and "the Ken Burns of rad," the 46-year-old Peralta lives in Santa Monica. SportsLetter spoke with him as he toured the country to promote "Riding Giants."

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** A lot of movie-industry people see you as a skateboarder-

turned-director, but you shot and produced a lot of early skateboard videos. How did those experiences help you make the two feature-length documentaries?

**Stacy Peralta:** Doing the skateboarding videos taught me how to be a filmmaker. That was something I didn't know I was capable of doing. I only made them out of necessity. At the time, we were trying to figure out a way to show the world how the products we made [at Powell Peralta] could be used. I had never shot or edited film before, so I grew into that. Because I was not formally taught and didn't have a bunch of people telling me how I was supposed to do things, I developed organically. I must have done something right.

Later, working for commercials and television, I learned that filmmaking is a business. People who give you money to make a film want a return on that investment. They want you to make the project you said you were going to make, in the time you said you would make it and within a certain budget.

**SL:** Both "Dogtown" and "Giants" feature lots of original footage: how did you track down that material?

**SP:** When you're a documentarian, you're also part investigative reporter. You have to go out and talk to people and discover what footage is out there. You have to find out who was there that day and who had a camera. Then you have to track these people down and convince them to license their footage to you. It's hard work. A lot of that footage is rare and these people have to trust that you're going to use their footage respectfully.

**SL:** Is that work - the sleuthing - the unglamorous side of documentary filmmaking?

**SP:** Documentary filmmaking isn't glamorous at all. It's really hard work. I don't know what's glamorous about it except premiere night.

But it's really rewarding, especially if you can act and be independent. What I didn't like about working in TV, I didn't have a lot independence. It was very difficult to do anything original because they condemn originality.

With the last two films, I was very fortunate. I was able to make the films I wanted to make. It took me a long time to be in position to do that.

**SL:** When did you decide to do a surfing documentary?

**SP:** Number one, I never expected “Dogtown” to succeed. When it ended up doing well, it was a great surprise . . . I originally set out to do another story about surfing. I was going to do a documentary about Mickey Dora, a very controversial figure who’s sort of the dark prince of surfing. After we made the agreement, he was hit by devastating cancer and passed away.

I had interviewed [big-wave surfer] Greg Noll for “Dogtown.” He was so funny and charismatic, I thought, well, gee, why don’t we use this to do a film about the history of big-wave surfing. At the very least, the general public will marvel at the size of these waves. I spent the remainder of 2002 getting financing and we started filming in 2003.

**SL:** Why big wave surfing?

**SP:** From a filmmaker’s point of view, it has everything. It has adventure and discovery. It has life and death. It has resolution and overcoming and learning. There’s a lot of drama in that.

Big-wave surfing also has some great moments - like Jeff Clark’s solo rides at Mavericks — and some of the great characters in surfing, from Greg Noll to Laird Hamilton. On top of that, big-wave surfing parallels the history of modern surfing. There’s just a lot of material.

**SL:** A recent article in the Los Angeles Times intimated that former professional surf champ Shaun Tomson cut out a crucial snippet of archival footage that depicted Greg Noll’s famous 1969 ride at Makaha — what many people consider the biggest wave ever ridden. What do you think happened to the film?

**SP:** I don’t know. I don’t know if it exists or not. It’s funny because the mythology of that — whether Shaun has that shot or doesn’t — is now approaching the mythology of Greg’s ride. The evidence suggests that maybe he does have it. I was on my way to finding it. I was a few waves

from finding it when the screen went white. I don't know if I'll ever know.

**SL:** What other material did you have to leave out?

**SP:** There were a couple of segments. What was really difficult was to take all this material and make a film that's an hour-and-a-half long. We didn't have the flexibility of a Ken Burns — someone who gets to tell a story in a 10-part series. We had to focus on who we wanted to focus on. So we left out a number of big-wave surfers that I wish we could have used. All in all, we had 100 hours of footage. It was a process of going through everything and piecing together a story, with good pace and velocity.

**SL:** Your film traces big-wave surfing to its present-day incarnation, with towropes, foot straps and jet skis that transport riders out to the biggest waves. Does this technology take away from the accomplishments of someone like Laird Hamilton?

**SP:** No, I don't think so. First of all, all the old-timers support them 100 percent. If they could have done it, they would have.

It's a mixed bag. What they've done is eliminate some of the dangers in big-wave surfing, like not sitting in the lineup and not getting trapped by sneak-up sets. On the other hand, they're riding waves that are so big that when they wipe out, it truly is life and death. Before, no one could imagine riding waves this big.

**SL:** There have been many surfing films over the years, including "Endless Summer," "Five Summer Stories," and last year's "Step Into Liquid." Were you worried about how your film would compare?

**SP:** The thing is, I've never seen a film like the one I just made. I made the one that I wanted to see. "Endless Summer" is the touchstone film. It's the film that all others are measured against. But it's more of a travelogue. I wanted to give a deeper history of surfing, so you get to know characters over a long period of time.

"Step into Liquid" is also more of a travelogue. I didn't worry about it

as competition. I thought it would help pave the way. It would introduce surfing to a lot of people and whet people's appetites for more.

**SL:** Surfing seems like a natural for an IMAX type film. Will that happen?

**SP:** Absolutely. The IMAX people want to do a surfing film as well as one about skateboarding. It's just a matter of time.

**SL:** After doing two documentaries about board culture: what's next for you?

**SP:** I have two projects right now. I wrote the fictional screenplay for a film called "Lords of Dogtown," based on the documentary. They just finished shooting, and it will be released next summer.

I also signed a contract with Sony to write and direct a feature film based on Greg Noll's life. I'm writing that screenplay now. We hope to have the screenplay done this fall. I don't want to stop doing documentaries. I like the form. But I'm excited to try something new, and I'm interested in working with actors.

**SL:** What's the status of you making a film based on Allan Weisbecker's book "In Search of Captain Zero"?

**SP:** What happened was, I was going to do the adaptation. Because of the timing, we ended up hiring a screenwriter. If it happens, I will direct it.

**SL:** With the X Games coming to Los Angeles again, what's your reaction to the commercialization and mainstreaming of extreme sports?

**SP:** It's good and bad. It's good in that they expose the sport to more and more people. But I also feel the networks exploit this for profit. At heart, they don't care and they're in danger of ruining the soul [of extreme sports]. ESPN presents skateboarding just like pro wrestling - one thumping beat after another. I have no interest in that whatsoever. They can't show me anything I haven't seen before.

**SL:** Do you think we will see skateboarding in the Olympic Games, like

snowboarding?

**SP:** I think they're gonna have to get involved because every kid is doing it. A huge part of the Olympics is the need to capture the public's imagination, especially with youth. The Olympics is a business: they can't fall behind or they're going to lose the young viewers.