

Q&A With Kelly Slater

A nine-time world surfing champion, Kelly Slater knows waves—and surfing—better than just about anyone. Slater stars in *The Ultimate Wave Tahiti 3D*, a new documentary that explores wave science and surf culture. Last summer, I traveled to Teahupo'o, one of the world's best surf spots, to watch Slater ride the waves. Camera crews—in boats, on jet skis, and underwater—followed his every move. Slater seemed unruffled by all the attention, and by the massive waves breaking on the reef.

—Suzanne McCabe



Kelly Slater

PHOTO: SUZANNE MCCABE

Q: What makes the ultimate wave for you?

A: The ultimate wave's different for everyone. For me, I would probably like not a massive wave, not a 60-foot wave, but probably like a 20-foot wave. Anything between 10 and 20 feet is really what I love. Because that allows you to play with the wave still, but it's also got enough power to wake you up and scare you and get your adrenaline moving. I generally like a wave that's hollow. Has a tube on it. Not just a tube—I like to surf the base of the wave. I like to get a tube and do maneuvers on the wave too. A wave with some variety in it, where you can kind of play with it, but you can also get a nice barrel. Some people ride longboard with a head-high or smaller wave. It feels perfect for a minute or two. Other guys tow in on the biggest waves they can find. You can't really perform so much on those waves, but it's just a battle.

Q: What about the reef in Tahiti? How does it affect the wave? Is it scarier?

A: Well, yeah. When you're not familiar with it, it's scarier. Knock on wood, I don't hit the reef that often. Some reefs can be so deep you won't hit them anyway. And you can surf a wave where it's 20-foot-deep water on the reef, and you'll be fine. But a lot of the waves we're surfing here could be 20 or 30 feet high and

only breaking in 8 feet of water, so obviously you're going to hit the bottom on a wave like that. There's no room to move.

But some reefs are kind of flat. They don't have a lot of really jagged coral. It'll be rock and coral, but it's sort of smoothed out, like the pictures you see in *National Geographic*. But then other reefs will be totally alive. Next week I'm going to Fiji, and there's a reef there that has live staghorn coral and fire coral. The reef is so jagged you can't believe you can surf over it, but it's one of the best waves in the world. But big, intense waves generally will keep the reef in check. If it starts to grow, it'll get knocked and broken apart when a big swell comes.

It depends, not so much on the reef, but how the reef drops off. For instance in Florida, where I live, we don't really have reefs, but the water is really shallow really far off shore. You can go a couple miles out, and it's a hundred feet deep. Whereas you'll be in Hawaii and you'll go a mile out, and it'll be thousands of feet deep. So you have swells coming out of really deep water abruptly. They don't slow down; they don't drag on the bottom. They don't get any smaller. So all that energy is breaking really quickly when it hits a reef.

Q: How far under have you gone when landing a wave?

A: Oh I don't know, maybe 20 feet.

Q: That's all?

A: Yeah. But when you get tossed around, you lose your breath, you're 20 feet deep, and then you have to swim up against that energy. It's pretty scary.

Q: What was your scariest moment in the water?

A: I've had a few. Not one comes to mind where I thought I'd die. But I've had a couple times I thought I could drown.

Q: Does your mom worry about you?

A: I don't tell my mom when I go surf until after I've done it. I surfed a contest at Half Moon Bay, at Mavericks. I was really sick two days before the event. I was in bed for 24 hours, and I didn't really eat any food the day before. When I got there I was really weak, and I went out and I fell on my first wave of the morning. I had one of those experiences, "Well, I might not come up." I got back to the surface, and I couldn't believe how intense the wave was. And I was like, "All right, I'm going to be safe the rest of the day." I ended up getting second in the event that day, and I didn't fall again that day.

Q: What kind of skills do you need when you are in dangerous surf?

A: You need to be able to be calm in intense situations. My mom was a paramedic and firefighter, so if I see a car accident or someone drowning, to me it's an opportunity to help somebody as opposed to being a scary thing. I tend to gravitate toward those situations where I want to jump in and help out.

In the ocean, you've really got to be ready for those—I've seen a lot of friends get hurt really bad. Honestly, I can't even tell you offhand how many friends have drowned. And a couple real close calls. One day I was surfing the pipeline in Hawaii and I saw my friend get his head opened up from front to back. He had to get 200 stitches in his head and [it took] 6 hours of surgery to fix him.

Q: How is he now?

A: He's OK. He doesn't even remember it. I was on the beach with him, talking to him and trying to help him, and he doesn't even remember.

Q: What has it been like to work on the film in Tahiti? And what would you say is the message of the film?

A: I guess for different people working on it it's a bit different, but for me it's to explain what we do in the most up-close and realistic way we can. I'm really proud to be working with Raimana [Van Bastolaer, Tahiti's most famous surfer and Slater's co-star] who's just amazing. He's such a hard worker. He's so committed to everything he does. But there's a little bit of science in the film.

The Ultimate Wave—I guess the title is almost like a question: "What is the ultimate wave?" And for me, it might be something different than the next guy. So it's talking about

what creates a wave, what it does in the ocean, how it's used, the way it's used by us. Searching the world for the best wave we can find.

Q: Do you follow tidal tables worldwide?

A: Funny enough, I was talking to somebody about this last night because I don't understand the tides. I know it has to do with the gravity of the moon and the Earth, so when the moon's in a different phase, it's going to have more or less effect. So no, I don't actually study the tidal tables too much. When I get to a place, I want to know when is high or low tide, and I'll base my knowledge of the breaks on that. Some places are better on a high tide or a low tide, depending on the direction of the swell.

Q: What about the wind?

A: Yeah, the wind is really critical at every spot. Some places are actually more fun when the wind's blowing from out in the ocean onto the shore. But most places are better when the wind's blowing from the shore, because it makes the wave really clean and pretty—and manageable. When the wind is on shore, it's really choppy and messy, but that can be good for certain breaks. But generally, people want a glassy, nice, pretty wave.

I grew up on choppy waves in Florida. For performance, I prefer choppy waves most of the time. You can do more aerials, and you can play with the wave a little more when the wind's blowing against you. When you come up to the top of a wave and you get in the air, near the top of the wave, the wind's always blowing the board back towards your feet. So it lets you stick to the board a little better. When it's blowing off shore it's almost

impossible to do aerials because the wind takes the board away.

Q: How does the length of your board affect the rides you get.

A: I ride boards as short as 5'2" and as long as 10'. The 5'2" are usually more the fun boards. A board that short is generally my widest board—about 19 inches wide, maybe just over. My typical short board that I have ridden for years has been somewhere about 6 foot, 6'1". I've been trying to shorten that down so that there's less board sticking in front of me.

A lot of the boards I'm normally riding now are 5'8"s, 5'7"s. I'm 5'9", so it's a little bit shorter than me, but I kind of subscribe to the theory now that to ride any size wave I don't need a board any taller than I am. If you look at the guys towing in on massive waves, they're only riding boards that are 6 foot long.

So the thing with surfboards is you have to design them to where they're always balancing maneuverability and control. The more control you have, usually the less maneuverability you have. So as you narrow up the tail of the board, there's less movement it can do. It doesn't plane as much. It doesn't have as much lift. So as you have less planing area and less lift, you have more control, but you lose that maneuverability. But if you widen it up, you get a lot of maneuverability. The board will be real loose, but if you get too wide you start to lose your functionality.

Q: When you started surfing, did you know all of this?

A: No, I've learned most of it along the way. You're just trying to keep the same volume so you can paddle and catch waves efficiently. But

you're trying to design the board for maneuverability. As I go shorter, they're more maneuverable, but there's less area, less lift in the board.

Q: What about today? You were out there for how many hours?

A: Oh, just off and on over a couple hours.

Q: Did you use the same size board the whole day?

A: Yeah, I used the same size board the whole day, 5' 8½". That's generally my smallest wave board. Today would be as big as I would ever ride that thing. In fact, today was probably a little bit big for that board. So the face of the waves was maybe about 8 feet today for the big ones.

Q: What's the longest you've ever been out there without being tired?

A: Without being tired, probably about two hours. But the longest surf I've ever had, probably about seven or eight hours.

Q: Do you wear wetsuits a lot?

A: Yeah, today I wanted to wear a wetsuit. I was kind of cold. As soon as that wind comes and the rain comes and the clouds come. it's like a 15-, 20-degree temperature change.

Q: What does it rain so often at Teahupoo?

A: It's on the corner of the island. There's a microclimate, and you have really high mountains with a lot of moisture in them, so they're sucking up all of the moisture out of the trees.

Q: You don't mind surfing in that?

A: No, not really. If the waves are good, I don't care what it looks like.

Q: What are some of your favorite places to surf in the world?

A: I like Teahupoo. Do you know the meaning of that? *Teahupoo* means "wall of skulls." There was a big fight between the people that lived out there and the people at Papeari, and they had a war. And the people from here—gosh, I don't want to get this story wrong—they tricked the people from Papeari. They had had a war before, and there was still bad blood, but the people from Teahupoo sort of tricked the people from Papeari to come ashore and meet with them. They said they were going to have a feast or whatever. And then they made a big cookout for them, and I think they poisoned them all. And they killed all the men and chopped their heads off. And they did it all on this one rock. That rock's in my friend's yard, and they chopped all these guys' heads off on that one rock.

Q: Is that where you are staying?

A: No, I used to stay there. I don't know if the rock was originally in that place, but that rock is apparently in my friend's yard now. I think what had happened is the people from Teahupoo had originally lost this war. They had been sabotaged or something. So later on they had a plan to invite them and kill all the men. So they invited them, they poisoned all their food, cut their heads off, and they literally made a wall of skulls. And that's why it's called "Wall of Skulls."

Q: What were your favorite subjects in school?

A: Math and English. I've always liked numbers and the way they worked together. I'm not the greatest mathematician. I did well in school. It's good to know numbers and all that. It's also good knowing numbers when you're surfing in competitions so you know what you need, or you

can sort of guesstimate what you need, based on what the other guy did. You can figure out in your head exactly what number you need to beat him.

Q: Can you give a simplified version of the scoring system?

A: It's basically a 10 point scoring system, 0 to 10. Ten being the best. And if you surf what's deemed to be a perfectly surfed wave you get a 10-point ride. That's really rare.

Q: How many waves might you surf in one competition?

A: Well, you get scored on your best two waves per heat. And you don't carry those scores. You just surf in that heat, you have those scores in that heat. Then you move on to the next heat if you win, and you start all over again. But you only count your best two rides, and then you get a new heat.

Q: How many heats might there be?

A: If I won a contest, I'll have surfed six times, I think.

Q: Were you and your brothers competitive growing up?

A: Yeah, me and my older brother were really competitive.

Q: What did you learn from that?

A: How to beat people [laughs]. How to be ruthless. My brother was pretty ruthless to me when we were young. He used to just torment me. He was my older brother so he kind of bossed me around, but those are the things you end up using in life to your advantage or disadvantage. And I think it was good for me with my career. It taught me how to be really focused on competing and how to sort of try to outdo the other guy.

Q: What advice do you have for kids who might be struggling?

A: Well, I think you'll find with most people in the world who have done really great things, their obstacles are their gifts. That's where people become really intelligent and respected and knowledgeable—from dealing with hardships, understanding them, breaking through them, and being somehow able to use those lessons for their career or to help other people.

Q: I understand you're passionate about the environment.

A: Yeah. Obviously, I'm in the environment every day, being in the ocean. I think there's probably a lot of misinformation. You don't know what to believe. It seems climate change has been very sensationalized in the media the last few years, and I don't think it's too difficult to figure out whether climate change is happening. . . . But I think the important thing to realize is all of us, no matter where you live in the world, have an impact on the environment. And you have a possibility to make a change. A simple thing anyone can do is take your own bags to the store. Don't use plastic bags. It's been a big thing. Some cities have been outlawing plastic bags. Some countries are even starting to outlaw them.

I keep half a dozen good size cloth bags in my car and get my groceries in that, or if I leave something at my friend's house I'll throw it in my bag. Or you can use them for beach bags or picnic bags or whatever. That's a simple thing anyone can do. There's lots of things like turn off lights or turn off computers or TVs.

Q: Have you noticed a change in the ocean since you've been surfing?

A: I think there's probably more industrial runoff getting into the ocean than ever before. A lot of kids are getting sick surfing. Especially after rain.

Q: Is it ever too dangerous to surf? What about rogue waves? What is a rogue wave?

A: I don't know if the scientists know what a rogue wave is. They know in theory what it is, but have they seen a rogue wave? All these shows about, "Are there rogue waves?" They say there are rogue waves. People say they've seen rogue waves. We have had situations where a guy is surfing, and it's 40-foot waves. And all of a sudden something comes in that's way bigger, that doesn't fit into the equation. So I have had those situations.

There was a time back in the early '80s where these guys were surfing at Waimea, and it was a really big day. And this wave came up that was like 80 feet. There's a picture of it. One of the guys barely snuck under it. A couple of the guys got caught under it, I think, but it was so much bigger than anything else that day that it just didn't make sense.

Q: Do you ever say, "Today's too dangerous to surf"?

A: You do have those days where you say, "Not today." A few years ago, my friends went out and surfed beside a reef about a mile offshore, probably 40-foot faces. I get a little bit of asthma sometimes, and I just didn't feel like I had full breath that day. And my friend's like, "Grab your board, let's go, let's go." And these two guys—one of them's my best buddy. Both of them are pretty crazy. They're not scared of anything. I just said, "You know what, today's just not my day." Once in a while, you

have that feeling, and you have to trust it, because you don't want to get out there and get over your head. The last thing you want to think before you die is, "I knew I shouldn't have done this." You've gotta be intuitive, and you only really get that intuition when you do things a lot.

Q: How would you compare the waves of Tahiti to those of the East and West coasts of the U.S.?

A: Well, I think it depends on where you go. Tahiti is generally going to be a much gnarlier, more dangerous, hollow, intense wave. The East Coast has by far the most tame waves, because we have a big continental shelf that extends way far offshore. And so as soon as swells hit that they drag, and they lose energy and slow down. But as you go further up the East Coast it gets deeper offshore, so you get up by North Carolina and the Outer Banks have really good surf, and sometimes New Jersey and New York.

Q: I grew up at the Jersey shore, so I have to ask: Have you ever surfed in New Jersey?

A: Yes, in Seaside Heights, Manasquan, and Ocean City.

Q: What about the waves on the West Coast? How would you describe them?

A: They can get really big, big surf. Up near Half Moon Bay, up near San Francisco, they actually have more consistent big surf than Hawaii has in the winter. But it's really cold water and sharky and [has] lots of rocks. It's a different breed of people that do that.

Q: Do you see sharks out there?

A: Yeah, I've seen sharks. Not in California but I have seen sharks.

Thank you.