



**"You don't count as a pro surfer if you can't cut it at Pipe," Herbie Fletcher told his boys.**



# STEEPED IN THE BREW

BY CHRISTIAN BEAMISH

**Nathan Fletcher** lives with his wife, Adela, and their newborn son, Lazer, in a neighborhood of neat, two- and three-bedroom suburban-style places just west of Waimea Bay, on the inland side of Kam Highway. A few lifted 4x4s with the yellow and green stickers of Hawaiian Sovereignty on the back windows are parked across the cul-de-sac, and the other neighbors have chickens in small coops on the front lawn. Nathan's house is two-stories, clean, and almost modular in appearance. The side yard has a gnarled breadfruit tree and a stand of bamboo that seems to have engulfed a fence. Three or four Stretch quads lay fins up in the grass, suggestive of the kinds of waves he's been riding, as the boards range in lengths from sub-six-foot, to about 8'0". One of his boards has a hand-painted portrait of a blond girl in a blue dress with a black bar painted across her eyes, the "Blind Girl Surf Club" logo from his Dad's longtime friend, New York artist, Julian Schnabel. Schnabel dated and initialed the work and also painted "Nate" along the bottom like some version of the beach boy tradition—Duke with his name on his board. Nathan said they clear-coated the painting so he can still ride it.

Independently, both Stretch and Nathan asked me what I thought the fastest shape was for the rails of a surfboard—down-rails with an edge, or round? Looking at Nathan's boards, from the 12-foot guns to the 5'10" air machines, their answer is, surprisingly, "round," as there is little edge to the bottom of these craft but for the aft-most six-inches or so. Nathan is not as doctrinaire as Stretch is when it comes to talking board design, but both of them are enjoying the results of the particular combination of elements they incorporate: the aforementioned round rails (that blend evenly to a "full" thickness flow throughout the designs) and generally wide plan shapes with a straight-ish run, offset by increased tail rocker, pronounced concaves, and four fin set ups. When I asked how he came to the four-fin, Nathan explained that San Clemente shaper, Cole Simmler, had been making him boards and they had tried

a couple of twin fins, but these had him "falling on my face." Cole suggested a four-fin and Nathan said that he took the first one out to Strands in Dana Point and immediately came up to speed and boosted an air on a two-foot wave. "I had a career session," Nathan said, going on to point out how Thrusters work by pivoting through turns, where quads go rail-to-rail. "I tried my uncle's [Marty Hoffman] single fin at Waimea, and all that fin in the water scared me. But I thought if four-fins work that good in small waves, they must be good in big waves."

Without much shaping experience, Nathan nevertheless carved the concaves, general outline, and came up with the fin configuration for the "Mr. Buzz" model that Stretch refined and that Nathan soars on. Yet despite having virtually singlehandedly re-introduced the four-fin to the surfing world, Nathan shrugs-off accolades even as the extra fin plugs on most of the top pros' boards these days offer silent testament. Sitting at Turtle Bay, watching a mai-tai colored sunset, Stretch almost seemed incredulous as he described how Nathan came up with "Mr. Buzz" (named for Nate's beloved Terrier-mix dog, who sports a caramel coat and a stiff little beard with a winning personality): "He took a regular shortboard blank and turned it around for extra tail rocker, then just went to town with the planer. Of course he paddled out and just ripped on the thing."

"No one gives Nathan credit for the four-fin," longtime time friend and fellow Vans team rider, Joel Tudor said, "but he changed big wave surfing" as big guns for places like Jaws are nearly all four-fin set-ups today. When asked how he and Stretch came up with the 12-footers, Nathan said, "Six-inch increments don't mean anything on boards that big, so we went ten-foot, then 11, and then it was, like, 'fuck it, let's make a 12-footer.'" The result is a huge thing, swathed in Astrodeck, with a flat nose area on deck like a paddleboard and surprisingly subtle bottom contours. All together, the characteristics of his giant guns are similar to the everyday boards he rides, with each element—from



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rocker to outline to spiral vee—flowing evenly and complimenting the next. What wave does he envision riding this board on? “It’s not like that for me,” Nathan responded, “I don’t have a certain wave in mind, I just check the conditions on the day it’s happening, you know?” But as an invitee to both the Eddie and Mav’s events, there are two obvious locations. Add the Outer Reefs, Jaws, and the other deep-water big wave spots around the world, and there are more than a few scenarios where this board might come into play. There is also a neat connection to what Nathan’s great-uncle, the late Flippy Hoffman, was after when he had Mickey Munoz and Fly Van Swae build the 15’3” *Ah-wooo* pintail in 1977—that is, essentially, a massive board on which to hunt down massive waves. Of course, in the Hoffman-Fletcher family, these kinds of connections extend in all sorts of directions.

In addition to the four-fin, Joel Tudor wanted to point out Nathan’s longboarding accomplishments, noting that he had “won a bunch of those contests as a junior,” too. But the conversation soon came back to Nathan’s big wave surfing, and Tudor said, “It’s the same level of craziness that Nathan had with motocross, doing those massive jumps—if you go down, it’s not a good thing.” Nathan’s brother, Christian, provided some perspective when he said that as a kid Nathan was very cautious. “He wouldn’t take his bike out of second gear for a whole year.” But given the fact that Nathan went on to pioneer the sport of freestyle motocross,

it seems his measured, even incremental approach to dirt bike riding laid a solid foundation. In big wave surfing however, Nathan’s approach seems to have been pretty much full-tilt since his earliest days. Christian related a story about Nathan ordering an 8’0” gun from Gerry Lopez, and then paddling the purple-and-pink camo-painted board out at 15- to 18-foot Waimea when he was 11-years-old: “[Nathan] was sitting off to the shoulder and farther outside when this set caught everybody else. He got one of the biggest waves of the day...I never even ordered a board that big in my life.” Tudor added that, “Christian was good at surfing, but Nathan was good at everything.”

And “everything” means surfing—from doing airs on small waves and not-so-small waves, to paddling into the biggest surf on the planet, and riding places like Pipeline, Teahupoo, and Cloudbreak—freestyle motocross, vert skating, music, and painting. Yet of each endeavor Nathan speaks evenly, quiet in an attitude of having done the thing and therefore not having much to add in the way of words. Of their relationship as brothers, Nathan gives Christian a lot of credit for influencing him in airs and in skating. And both brothers speak of their appreciation for their father, Herbie Fletcher, not only for providing a surf and skate-centered life growing up, but for the specific guidance he gave the boys. “My Dad always said that if you can’t cut it at Pipeline, you don’t count as a pro surfer,” Christian told me. “But he didn’t just say that and bail, he set us up at

**LEFT** **Terror of the Boys Division** circa early-'80s Southern California, Nathan has come a long way from throwaway lip rebounds.

**RIGHT** **But** mutating Teahupo'o on a tow-board is about as far as a surfer can travel from childhood days of "three-to-the-beach" on a pink Stussy twinnie.



Gerry's house so we could actually learn to surf that wave." Nathan has a similar take on his family background, summing it up by saying, "We were just really lucky." A profile in *Surfer Magazine* last year quoted him as saying it was easier to love his family from a distance, which he repeated to me, and Christian said, "Nathan didn't like me for a while, but it's been so long that it doesn't matter anymore, which is a good thing." But getting back to surfing, Nathan clearly values Christian's approach, portraying the difference in their wave riding this way: "Christian is more into the technical aspect, and I'm more into adrenaline."

Having grown up coming to the North Shore each winter with his dad's various business projects around Astrodeck and the *Wave Warriors* surf videos, and living here off and on over the years as well, Nathan seems to know everyone—from the guys who were born in Hawaii, decedents of Polynesian seafarers, and others of lifelong Oahu residence, to annually visiting pros from California and abroad. The crew that Herbie Fletcher assembled for some of his Astrodeck ad shoots on the beach at Pipeline composed the top echelon of 80s surf stars and surf enforcers, a few of whom wore both titles. Stopping by one of the industry houses at Pipeline en route to an evening go out at Rocky Point, Nathan drops off sandals to some of the local crew disassembling the Masters' scaffolding and towers. "What a funny job I have," he says as we get out of the car. He says hello to a few pros

staying there who advise him that someone got a good photo of him at OTW that morning, which he acknowledges with a skeptical leer. "Really?" he asks.

Afterwards, walking the path out to Rocky Lefts, he sees a young kid, maybe 8- or 9-years-old, walking back from the surf with his dad. Nathan says to me, "This little grom is rad," and says, "Yeah grom!" when we pass, holding up his hand for a high five. The boy is stoked on being acknowledged, beaming, and his dad gives us an appreciative nod, smiling too. I don't know where they are from, but they don't look Hawaiian, and if I had to guess I'd say the dad has made some money—enough to relocate the family, like a good number of haole families one sees here. But violence haunts the North Shore, so many beat downs and rip offs, the undercurrent of hard drugs, and the legacy of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries' effect on Hawaiian culture as well. So many layers form the present day reality on the North Shore that one can either leave it all behind and just "be stoked," or attempt to navigate the complexities of race, class, and poverty with respect and awareness. I introduced myself to a couple of the guys Nathan had come to see back at the Pipe house, and talking there for a few minutes I explained how much of an impact Hawaii was having on me—the historic surfing grounds, the fact of Polynesians having sailed here by signs and wonders like ocean going Israelites—stopping just short of using the word, *mana*. Perhaps sensing my hesitation, one of them, a thickly muscled man



JUSTIN JAY

**LEFT Christian (in shades) is more “into the technical aspect” of surfing, Nathan says, “and I’m more into adrenaline.” With five years between them, the brothers’ rivalry wasn’t the pitched battle that their friends Andy and Bruce Irons had growing up, but Nathan counts Christian as one of his biggest influences.**

**RIGHT Motocross teaches velocity control and proper weight distribution—handy skills for any medium.**

with triangles within triangles tattooed on his chest said, “Hey, don’t worry—you cruising with Nate, you’re all right.”

As a little kid, Nathan remembers grabbing Michael Ho’s leash to get towed out at Haleiwa, which Ho remembers fondly as well. “He was probably 7 or 8-years-old the first time I pulled him on the leash,” Ho recalled. “Just watching him, I knew he was going to be surfer,” he added, mentioning not only having Herbie for a Dad and Christian for an older brother, but implying that there was something innate to Nathan’s talent as well. “Nathan set the bar for the kids today in airs and big waves.” But “as much as he’s a great surfer, he’s a great person too—out in the water, everything—and that’s pretty important to the whole damn thing.” Both Nathan and Christian grew up spending almost as much time in Hawaii as they did in California, which Ho acknowledged by saying that “Nathan has always been part of the [North Shore] community, but more so now that he’s permanent. His son is stoked [to grow up here], and I can’t wait to tow him around too.”

I asked Nathan, variously, who he travels and hangs out with, and who I should talk to, to get perspectives on his surfing life, and he mentioned Kohl Christensen (in the context of telling me about an ill-advised session at a maxing rock reef in Chile that Fletcher characterized by saying, “we should have known better...”) and Makua Rothman, who towed him into *that wave* at Teahupoo. But later Nathan said I should talk to John John Florence, who I had just

interviewed days before. Although I couldn’t get back to Florence, Nathan’s enthusiasm for his friend’s talent is telling: “He showed up at Phantoms at 13, with a tow vest, a tow-board and a gun. He didn’t have anyone to tow with, so I took him out there.” Not riding coat tails (because he wouldn’t), Nathan said that he was stoked to be friends with the best surfer in the world, that they had spent a lot of time skating together, and surfing as well. To prove his point about JJJF being the best in the world Nathan said, “Kelly is irrelevant,” not to dismiss the champ, but to suggest that he’s on another level and therefore “irrelevant” for comparison, “and Dane does all his crazy shit in waves that are shoulder high.” The fact that John John represents the fully-evolved high performance surfer—doing the cross-over surf/skate moves that have been the goal for that style of wave riding since Larry Bertlemann was doing grinds on the lip at Backdoor, and does those moves in surf of all sizes—and that JJJF in large part honed his approach by hanging with guys like Nathan Fletcher, goes some way to explaining Nate’s influence.

Trying to get a sense of what his freestyle motocross days might have been like (although Nathan sent me a photo of himself soaring on a dirt bike taken just a month or so ago), I checked out the website for the “Metal Mulisha” brand that Nathan helped create with owner, Larry Linkogle, and found that I had clicked my way into a world of drug-addled, bare-knuckle score settling, where circular



reasoning rules the day: “We’re in SF to poach some jumps, and, fuckin’, get chased by the cops, so fuck it.” But the heavies he hangs with, and the fireball explosions on motorcycle stunt jumps don’t seem to jive with the reserved but fairly friendly way he has of being, and I come away thinking that these “darker” worlds that he’s been a part of are almost spectacles that he must enjoy watching, even as they serve as vehicles for him to get rad in—be it on a motorcycle, surfboard, skate or snowboard. His favorite band is Black Sabbath with front man, Ozzie, but that doesn’t make him a devil worshipper. And when I asked how freestyle motocross—which centers on massive jumps, with acrobatic flips on the bikes 50- or 60-feet in the air—has influenced his surfing, Nathan said, “Doing an air on a big closeout after going on a triple [jump] is nothing. As far as injuries go, freestyle moto guys will break both femurs and be back riding in three months.”

**His two surfing priorities** are the Eddie and Mavs contests, and other than those events he’ll be in the lineup at Pipe whenever it’s working. But on the afternoon we first get together the surf has fallen off, and we decide to head out front for a paddle. Nathan grabs an enormous SUP that Stretch made for him, and I take the 9’6” keel fin gun I made a few years back. We walk the curve of his street and stand on the side of Kam Highway, waiting for a break in what

seems like an endless line of traffic. A narrow beach access between two oceanfront houses leads to another world as a pretty sand cove rimmed in by lava rocks stretches out before us. The brightest rainbow I’ve ever seen cleaves the blue Pacific sky over gently swaying palms as we pick our way across the shallows, and a two-foot peak feathers across in a neat little right-hander. Nathan sweeps away over the inside section, and just as I’m reaching the line up I see him pivot that big board and dig in with the paddle. The wave has a little bowl wedging up as it peaks, and Nathan deftly slots under the hook and shoots the section in a relaxed parallel stance with the paddle tucked in the crook of his arm. It’s a clean bit of surfing, with the kind of athletic coordination that the best surfers have and don’t even seem to know they possess.

Nathan drives a Ford Transit with about four boards stacked in back, cigarette butts in the ash tray spilling onto the center console. There is a lot of sand and moldering beach towels, trunks, and wetsuit vests in perfectly neglected piles. On another afternoon we climb in to go check the waves, I mention that if the Eddie runs it’ll be right around the corner from his new house. “Yeah, I was stoked on that too,” Nathan tells me. I had been buzzing between Sunset and Pinballs at Waimea over the previous five days, getting a sense of Island surfing in long drops and banking turns. The Bay came to life one dark grey evening at about 15-feet, and it was all green lights for traversing that

**“There’s no such thing as retirement. It’s more like trying to be there on the days and participate and go home safely...But other people have their intentions and that’s fine too, you know? There’s money and then there’s passion. So it’s about not letting the money overtake the passion, because then you’re fucked. But at the same time if that’s what drives you to be gnarly, then that’s cool too.”**







100 magnificent bowl. I thought about the waves that Nathan chases as I watched a guy paddle back to the beach on the remaining half of a thick gun snapped clean in two, reminding myself that this was still the small end of the big wave scale. But rounding the bend down into Waimea on the second afternoon I'd spent hanging out with Nathan, we catch a glimpse of a wave capping at Pinballs. "Oh, your spot's firing, huh?" he says.

"It's so damn fun," I respond, as I'd told Nathan about how much I'd been enjoying gliding around out there in recent days.

"It is..." I'm surprised to hear him say. "And you can ride 'em all the way into the beach," he adds. This is the cool kid I'd met once when I was a gangly teenager—the same generosity of spirit that lets him engage with someone on their own level. Still, half-an-hour later, on the first wave of a set stacking up at Rocky Lefts, Nathan growls under his breath at a couple of guys of annoyingly lower-intermediate ability who are in position but do not go. A second wave feathers farther up the reef, one of the "fuckin' guys" pulls back at the last second, and Nathan turns his board and paddles into an under the lip, over-vert take off that he will undoubtedly land, and sure enough does pull off, flicking out way down the line at the end of the shelf.

We'd been talking about his "Code-Red" wave at Teahupoo before we paddled out, and I'd observed that things looked pretty good on that wave until the ledge got

ahead of him and the foamball exploded beneath his board. "How did you deal with the wipe out?" I asked.

"I just gave up," Nathan replied. "I was like, 'fuck it, you know what I mean? I just told myself 'hold your breath, try and remember which way is up, and whatever hits the bottom is staying there...' After awhile I just got shot to the surface [but] not right away by any means. It was just really violent. It was going to send me up or down, right? So it sent me up. That's why you can never tell which ones are good or bad—it'll obviously be the one that you don't think will kill you..."

We talk about Sion Milosky's death at Mavericks in 2011, and it turns out that Sion's is not the only shadow to have crossed Nathan's path. "[Sion] was kind of my partner, you know? [Nathan takes a small gasp for breath, as if to hold on for a big one.] When we went to Maverick's together for his first time—which was a big deal, you know, 'cause he was just starting to get to travel and that—we surfed, and then when we got out of the water we found out that Andy [Irons] had passed away." Andy's death was a particular blow as Nathan was close with both Irons brothers. "Then after that, we went back for [Sion's] second time, and he drowned." The surf was 25-foot with a big wind on it when Nathan returned to Mav's with Sion, who, by all accounts, was surfing hard—dropping in on the heaviest waves with no hesitation. Nathan said that he's had to deal with Post Traumatic Stress from the experience of losing Sion, and

LEFT Through the froth and into the pit at Pipeline, Nathan has surfed the famed break through many moods and seasons. “Have you ever been out there when it’s a little bigger?” Nathan asked. “It’s fucking insane. When it’s a big west swell it just does something that’s beyond magical. The way it sets up...from outside Off The Wall to the other side of Ehukai.”



I asked if he'd spoken to anyone about that. “No, it went away,” Nathan told me, “but I could see it whenever I would think about something. Like myself in the bowl, trying to turn around [to take off] and the next thing that would happen would be his face...I would see his face...the way I saw it when I first found him.” [Light wind chimes start tinkling in the background of the recording.]

“You told me before that you thought he would want you to continue what you’re doing in big wave riding,” I prompt.

“Yeah, I think so,” Nathan agrees. “But then it was trippy because Lazer was born on the day Kirk Passmore died,” he adds, referring to the surfer who went missing earlier in the winter on a big day at Outside Alligator’s. With Passmore, Nathan said that he had had a sense that he should have told him to wear a vest when he saw him prepping to go out via Waimea. In retrospect, it seemed to Nathan that Passmore might have been following the tight nucleus of Nathan’s group, which included the Gudauskas brothers and Damien Hobgood, with their own jetski for assist, when they decided to head to Outside Alligator’s. And Nathan indicated that he wished he’d said something to Passmore when he’d had the thought.

I then mention the random nature of accidents in surfing: “The wave that got Malik Joyeux” I point out, “was not that heavy by Pipe standards.”

“Yeah,” Nathan tells me, “I went right on that one.”

**Nathan’s wife, Adela**, comes from the Czech Republic and she is pretty and blond, and doesn’t have an ounce of surfer chick about her. She hands Nathan their 5-week-old baby boy after asking us if we want coffee, then goes to prepare our cups as we sit down in the living room. At five-weeks, Lazer is tiny, having come about a month early, and laying there in his Dad’s arms he’s just a ruffled, sleeping face swaddled in blankets and a little knit hat. Nathan is solidly built with broad shoulders and a strong chest and back. He has the weathered good looks of a wave riding Cary Grant, and a slightly world weary way about him even as he takes up my questions with thoughtful responses. He tells me that Lazer is all okay, that he just had to stay in the hospital for a few days to get his weight up. Nathan and Adela have only recently moved into their new place, having bought it and moved over from San Juan Capistrano late in the pregnancy. Babi (pronounced “Bobby,” which is Czech for grandmother), Adela’s mother, is here too. Like her daughter she has a steady presence, the two women moving to the porch to tend baby once we have our coffees.

When I ask Nathan how they came up with Lazer Zappa Fletcher as his son’s name, he gives me the progression of his thinking as if the conclusion was the result of pure logic. “One of my best friends growing up in San Clemente,” Nathan says, “was Anthony Cappa.” I recall that name, I tell him, from my time in San Clemente—



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LEFT **Boosting with Bruce in the Mentawais.**  
RIGHT **Nathan with son, Lazer Zappa Fletcher, born November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013.**

there are bumper stickers that memorialize him. “Yeah,” Nathan continues, “he passed away. But he turned me onto Frank Zappa, and so when we had the name Lazer, ‘Zappa’ just seemed to work, you know? Like a Lazer Zap [the wide tailed design from McCoy surfboards that Cheyne Horan rode in the 80s] and also, Zappa, which is kind of like Cappa, so it just sort of fit.” I nod my head in agreement, thinking that regardless of convention, the name “Lazer Zappa Fletcher,” is a handle a guy could get pretty radical with.

There is gravel in Nathan’s voice from cigarettes, which I ask him about as we step outside for a smoke. “Your lungs have to learn to go without air,” he says with a straight face. He’s understated, but more than this “manly” characteristic, there is an old-time quality to his speech. It’s plain talk, straightforward, and it sometimes seems that he could be working salmon from a Monterey trawler, circa 1933. This may have something to do with the generation of surfers that made up his extended family, as both Nathan and Christian speak fondly of growing up at Poche with North Shore pioneer and great-uncle, Flippy Hoffman, grandfather, Walter Hoffman, and their cronies—guys like Muñoz, Grubby Clark, and Phil Edwards—with a real sense of appreciation. “That was just our world,” Nathan said, and Christian added, “we hung out with those guys before it was cool to hang out with the old legends. They would take the outrigger out to Poche reef. They were a bunch of action

packed old dudes.” It’s easy to imagine Nathan having come from an earlier era when watching him in various interviews for action sports channels and surf outlets, as he seems a bit uncomfortable with the hyperkinetic quality of contemporary media. But he does his job, answers the questions asked of him, and maintains a strong personal presence which suggests that even as he’s detailing, say, his horrific wipeout at Teahupoo on his XXL Award-winning wave during the “Code Red” swell of 2012, the interviewer and anyone watching the interview, can’t really know what he’s talking about—that he really does exist in another realm. And this must be why, at 38-years-old, he is still a fully sponsored, free-surfing professional.

I won’t ask him about his money situation, but it’s clear that he’s pretty well set up. Not that there are necessarily outward signs of wealth, but more in the fact that we’re sitting in a nice house that he qualified for a loan to get, and it’s a Tuesday afternoon with only the question of where to surf lying before us. “It’s so great,” I say, “to be able to have a surfing life like this,” both awe and a touch of envy muddling my speech. “If you can... between your sponsors or whatever.”

“That’s the goal,” Nathan says evenly.

“You just keep surfing,” I add, as if I’ve had an epiphany.

“Right. That’s the goal,” he says. ■

FLETCHER





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