



## **Pandemic Del Mar Surfing**

*Brett Bookser*



*March 29, 2020. Yellow tape restricting Powerhouse Park Beach Access*

On Tuesday morning, March 24, 2020, I got up at 5:10 AM to prepare for dawn surfing at 15th Street, Del Mar. But this day would be much different than those others spent watching the horizon line go from dark gray to light green to rosy pink floating on my surfboard. Now, once again, alone in predawn water, I was watching for where the wave was turning over and was positioning for a ride. The predawn was my time, sometimes so dark, that if I did somehow manage to stand up, I might see only wavy gray before getting flipped upside down into a midnight spin cycle. Again, this was no ordinary day.

About 15 minutes earlier, while I'm waxing my board, out of the darkness Luke walked up and asked me, "Are you really going out this morning?" Now Luke had never talked to me before surfing, ever, for pretty much 20 years.

I had gotten that greeting many times over the years. Most often it came from Kenny. He always seemed to be there before me no matter how early. One time I paddled out under a full moon at 5:30 AM and there he and Luke were. When I reached them, I said, "Of course you two are here!" Kenny and Luke both knew that if I was there, waxing up in the dark, I was going in no matter what. This day though, was the first day of the complete beach closure. This had never happened before. Being unprecedented, I was thinking, "Really, how hardcore will they be? You know, the guys we used to call 'The Man.'" I asked Luke as we both looked at the yellow caution tape blocking the sidewalk to the beach, "Do you think the lifeguards will really role up and bullhorn the surfers out of the water?" He didn't respond. Though he seemed to ponder this for a second and said, "I'll see you out there." Then he walked past me down the road into the darkness.

I swam out directly in front the 15th Street park with no real problems. This day was going to be a fun small surf day, but I still had that yellow tape in the back of my mind. My thoughts drifted while sitting over the board. I stared through darkness at the thin white leading edge of a wave, a short distance away, "I wonder if I'll see Kenny today?" Six weeks earlier was the last time I had seen him. Kenny, 72, was the senior member of the 15th Street Dawn Patrol. He was there more than 20 years earlier when I first paddled into the morning lineup. Older, yet his vision seemed better than mine. He knew when the good wave was coming and would get on his knees and double hand paddle, always with webbed gloves on, catch the wave and ride it left into the beach. I always like going right, but often it would turn over in front of me, rolling me ass over teakettle.

The last time I had seen Kenny, near the beginning of February, it was predawn at my car. But where he would usually offer up opinions on surf that no one could see anyway, this time he started talking about his wife. He had never mentioned his wife to me before. He told me he was worried about her since she had been seriously ill for a week. He was worried she might have this new flu from China. I said, "You mean Corona virus?" This was still early February and the only cases here were in Seattle. I tried to reassure him that it was unlikely, but as he walked off, I couldn't put his concern out of my mind. Now, six weeks later, I had not seen him!

I managed to catch a short ride, my first of the day. Nobody else was in sight. I wondered if anyone would come out that morning or if everyone would heed the yellow caution tape and stay away. Maybe Luke was more ethical than I thought and decided against it. "Not likely." I wanted to ask if he had seen Kenny recently. My heart was beating fast as I began the short swim back outside. I rode another wave into shore break. When I stood up, I saw Luke swimming out after just having his own ride. I asked him about Kenny and he said he hadn't seen him in more than a month.

After a third wave, I got out, heart still pumping. I banked the ride in my long-term memory. It would have to hold me for the next six weeks of surf shutdown.

That day, I told my wife I was worried about Kenny and his wife. Could they have been early victims of COVID-19? She said I should contact him. I had his email from years before. So, I wrote to him. It was the first time.

Sent: Tuesday, March 24, 2020 7:21 PM

Hi Kenny-

This is your dawn patrol 15th St. surf buddy checking in. How are you and your wife doing? I haven't seen you in about 6 weeks when you told me your wife was seriously ill.

Anyway, stay safe and I hope you and your family are well.

He replied the next morning:

Received: Wednesday, Mar 25, 2020, at 7:27 AM

THANK YOU for writing!

YES...Melody got really sick (influenza A) turned into pneumonia...I got the "A" part, now this! When this is lifted, it'll certainly get crowded! I can see you dawn patrol "boys" with the HP On Tap Cam.

See you soon & take care!

Ken

We started emailing each other a little. One of his:

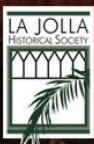
On Apr 10, 2020, at 7:56 AM (A surf shutdown day)

Your parking spot is lonely! (mine too)

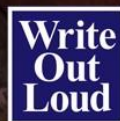
Ken



*Ken Bloch, circa 2017. (Photo/Frank Kovacs)*



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