

A North Shore shredder and a legend at his Waikiki home breaks, Kai Sallas has been in the very top handful of longboarders on the world tour since 2008 – here heading for a close second in Spain 2019. Photo: Damien Poullenot

INTO THE GREAT UNKNOWN

THE WSL LONGBOARD TOUR

Words by Lucy Small

“Now that’s how you lose,” Joel Tudor said as he ran by the competitors’ tent. He bowed with an air of femininity: “Not by throwing any boards,” he said. For anyone who may have just arrived, this might have seemed like the act of a gentleman. I could feel the sweat on the back of my legs as I sat watching the quarter-finals of the Men’s Longboard Classic, New York. The waves were small, the wind was still trying to stay offshore and the vague scent of the city runoff wafted across the contest site. I would agree – that is how you lose. It is how the Godfather of longboarding could only be disposed of by the young and bright Hawaiian, Kaniela Stewart. I have a feeling, in fact, that Tudor had rehearsed the whole routine. As far as I could tell, there was not a chance in hell he would ever make it past Kaniela.



Heading for their first surf in New York City, Noosa’s Emily Lethbridge and Nic Jones off to test the waters at Long Beach. Where are the wetsuits? Photo: Andrew Carruthers



Atlantic coast, north-west Spain . . . a top spot for a tour stop. Photo: Andrew Carruthers (right) Hawaiian young gun Kaniela Stewart with Joel Tudor – who was making his first WSL appearance in 13 years. Photo: Cait Miers



It was a good heat. The final wave in which Joel and Kani swapped boards and Kani hung 10 through the tiny inside section on Joel’s board, the WSL holding tight to their guns and giving Tudor an interference, was gripping. The surfing was an exhibition of some of the best noseriding I’ve ever seen in competition and Kaipo was quick to draw together a narrative of the master and apprentice in his evening episode of Surf Breaks. I wondered vaguely how exactly Kaniela had been Joel’s apprentice in the blue waters of Waikiki, surrounded by figures like Kai Sallas, while Joel was in California and if, in fact, Kani may have gotten this way all by himself.

Maybe these are nitty gritty details but for me the more significant moment was the heat before in which Frenchman Edouard Delpero had moved through ahead of Joel Tudor – the same Delpero who’d thrown his board and flipped the bird to the judges in a close loss to Justin Quintal the week before in Spain. Who had then made a cameo appearance on Tudor’s Instagram for his “training wheels and knee-leash” – an exchange that had made Tudor’s presence in New York all the more controversial.

But forget about all that. The longboard tour has had new life breathed into it in a big way. Tri-fins are out, hard rails are dead and logging is in. I am curious to see whether what the WSL has called “no changes just implementation of the criteria” will stick in the sphere of noise cancelling

headphones and diet plans. I have always kind of thought, and what I have loved about logging, is that there is something rebellious about it. Logging culture, in my mind, is imbedded with hangovers and double denim and to see it suddenly thrust into the mainstream feels like new territory.



Six heats straight in New York without being topped, Kaniela back on the beach after taking out the Men’s Final. Photo: Cait Miers

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The four-stop tour now includes an event in Spain, held on the margin of the European continent and the Atlantic Ocean. A momentary festival built on a hill overlooking the Pantin, the backdrop was a patchwork of cornfields and short-statured houses nestled into the hills. The contest was run off the back of a QS 10,000 so it had all the mod cons that the shortboard tours are afforded - including cheap sangria and sunsets that lasted for eternity.

The swell kicked the day the event started after being a beach of gutless ankle-biters in the days leading up. This was the reverse of the previous event in Noosa - day one in Spain was solid. It pumped actually, and they eventually called the event off because, well, it was big and lumpy and looked like you might need a hard rail out there. Then it got good and stayed good for the rest of the contest, dropping to the perfect size lefthander for Chloe Calmon and Justin Quintal to take out the event all over again. It was fascinating how quickly things changed out there. It looked like a completely different break every 25 minutes and each heat seemed to come down to whoever was able to detect what drastic change might be in store.

One of my favourite heats was the men's semi-final between Kai Sallas and young Japanese surfer Taka Inoue. The afternoon sun was hot and the grass hill that dropped down to the sand was packed. Everyone from the tour watched the live feed from the shade of the marquee and the atmosphere was tense from the tight heat previous. Taka had a panic attack and was taken into the medical tent. The biggest heat of his life was about to start and he was prone in the



The site, all buffed out for a longboard tour event on the back of a shortboard QS. *Photo: Damien Poullenet*

tent, the medic checking his breathing. The beach announcer, unaware, called his name and the Japanese contingent scampered to try and get a delayed start while Taka recovered. They announced a five-minute hold, Sallas was already out the back but Taka declared his return by springing high across the astro-turf deck. His hands shook as he pulled on his suit and did up his watch - dashing down the prickle-covered embankment and paddling out as the clock ticked over. The tide had gotten high, fast, but a set wave swung Taka's way, he took off, soul-arching over a tight ten and stating his return to the heat. He didn't make it but his spirit was impressive.

Then the event ended and the travelling

circus moved on to New York, something American Airlines struggled to grasp. As hurricane Dorian thrashed the Bahamas and hurtled toward Florida, dozens of longboards headed for a selection of US cities - the airport in Charlotte, North Carolina, was inundated with long, heavy, unwanted surfboards that should have been headed for New York. The swell hit New York and it pumped. If you ever mention that a longboard contest is held in New York, the unfailing reaction is "there's surf in New York?!" For a few days there most certainly was. Hollow lefts of what felt like river water - riding waves awash with the remnants of big pharma that have made their way into the waterways.

Playa Pantin got solid, 18-year-old Japanese surfer Taka Inoue stepping up. *Photo: Laurent Masurel*



Manly's Tully White between heats in Spain. Her tag for this shot was "Just storming Area 51" . . . can't top that.
Photo: Andrew Carruthers



Arriving in New York felt like 100 surf rats had suddenly been thrown into the bowels of the capitalist system. At the foot of the offices of the world's richest multinational corporations people sit swathed in sleeping bags and the dust of the city. No one looks as they stride by in suits and ties and you can imagine if someone were to topple off the curb into oncoming traffic people would just flap their briefcases and stride on by. It was humid and Manhattan at night time is as bright as day, fat drops of rain were not enough to clean the city of the toxicity that reverberates out into global economic and political systems. The standard food is sugary and people line up out the door of Starbucks, who serve their entire cafes with exclusively single use plastics. In New York City, you're free to get as rich as you like, but you're also free to die of a scratch if you don't have the money to pay for it. Strange place to have a surf contest, but the quiet outskirts suburb of Long Beach was a welcome reprieve to hide out from the harsh realities of today's world.

One of the highlights of the events was the introduction of the WSL's Rising Tides program to longboarding. Rising Tides, led by Jessie Miley-Dyer, is an event that has been held at each of the Championship

Tour contests in which local surfer girls meet and surf with women from the tour. This was the first time it has been held at a longboard tour event and it felt very special. There were tiny girls and teenagers and we all paddled out in the hurricane swell and tried not to crash into each other. It was a moment that felt separate to competition, that we were all in the water together but the tenseness of performance was momentarily gone. Mahina Akaka and Sophia Arky tandemed and girls went flying in all directions. The guy on the ski yelled at us to move back north and Honolua Blomfield stopped a tiny tot from disappearing at sea. It was chaotic and beautiful and gave us a moment of ownership over the sport and lifestyle that female athletes can often feel excluded from. It was also an insight into the local surf culture that exists on the coast from Long Beach to Rockaway and was a welcome inclusion in the event.

Honolua finally had it over Chloe in the final and Ben Skinner pulled a rabbit out of the hat in tiny onshore conditions to dispose of Quintal in round five – only to be defeated in the following round by Steve Sawyer. Brazilian styleman Jefson Silva defeated Tony Silvagni in the semis to meet

Kaniela Stewart. Kaniela, surfing like he'd just arrived from a ballet production of the Nutcracker on Broadway, tippy-toed his way to victory and then they rushed us off the beach as the sun dropped behind the city.

When I think about the state of longboarding and the tour at the moment, I'm reminded of the way women who were on the Championship Tour in the '90s describe what it was like. I remember someone once saying, maybe it was Pauline Menczer, "Back then we were all just sharing beds and scraping together the money for each contest". I have this feeling, that longboarding is at that stage right now. Like, it's about to grow, a lot. And while it feels like it has changed significantly this year, I know that no matter the criteria, the best surfers always manage to rise to the top. Devon Howard is captaining a voyage into the great unknown, and from my perspective, what's on the horizon looks pretty thrilling.

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WA shaper Ryan Egan from Barefoot Surfboards, free-surf relax between heats in Spain.
Photo: Andrew Carruthers





On a NY sunny morn, genial Brazilian Rodrigo Sphaier with cheer squad. *Photo: Andrew Carruthers*



I'm a legal alien . . . I'm a longboarder in New York. Aussies in Times Square: Kathryn Hughes, Kim Molnar, Kirra Molnar, Matt Mulder, Lucy Small, Declan Wyton and Tully White. (right) Proto-logger Dane Perlee from Washington State on the pristine Pacific Northwest sussing a Long Beach lip. *Photo: Andrew Carruthers*



The WSL's Rising Tides program – beautiful chaos with the locals.