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[Chasing Tales: Part VI](#)

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By Justin

Chasing Tales: Part VI

The Tale of the Slam

By Robby Myer



(Above: Your author (left) and the devious bastard who conned him into doing this race, John Dady.)

It all started back in early summer; I just wanted to get something running that I could blast around the lake with my nephews. In the course of getting a boat together I got in touch with Johnny at Blowsion. He was pretty fired up about his [then] upcoming annual Surf Slam party becoming an IJSBA event and he wanted me to compete in it.

I declined for a while, creating a whole new excuse each time Johnny would ask: I'm too fat; I'm too old; I don't have a boat. Each time, though, he

What's your idea of the perfect PWC getaway?

- A week exploring the Colorado River, camping out each night under the stars.
- I want to circumnavigate New Zealand on my own. Anything less is for wimps.
- Chasing glacial waves in the Arctic Circle. Got a dry suit and tow board?
- Cruising around a nice resort, like Golden Eye or Atlantis, taking breaks for the occasional massage.
- I already live this vacation: It's called the National Tour.
- It doesn't matter where I go, as long as I get to ride my ski and leave everything and everyone else in my wake.

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countered with what fun it'd be, that he's fat too, that he has a boat for me.

Finally, one Saturday night he caught me off guard boozing.

"Hell yeah, I'm coming!" I drunkenly hissed, "And I'm gonna kick everyone's ass on my old 550!"

Shortly thereafter, a "News Flash" appeared on Blowsion's website confirming my commitment to race a fire breathing Kommander-built ski while wrapped in Slippery gear.

Now I've done it...\$%&#ing whiskey.

Johnny got me in touch with everyone he thought I'd need to get a ski together, sent me stuff on the cheap, and most importantly, made me feel like a long lost brother returning home.

I got a ski running for the first time in years. It didn't take long to rediscover the adolescent joy I found jet skiing. That handful of throttle and sense of "zero destination" freedom on the water got the old flame burning so hot that I bought a used SX-R 800. I fell completely in love with the new hull. It didn't take long for the obsession to take hold; I'd been missing out.

I started training again and liked having a goal to prepare for. I expected rough water so every chance I got I took it to the roughest waters on my lake, the Narrows. I starting finagling parts for the new SX-R and built it into a surf racer. I rode surf with Victor "Slasher" Sheldon, decade-old memories coming back like scenes from of a favorite flick. I even decided to do a local race and won it hands down. "Hey," I thought. "At least I can still hang locally."

I knew I had a better chance of getting hurt than winning, but I told Johnny I'd do it, plus I invested a considerable amount of time and money into it so I was determined to line up in those waves and pin the throttle no matter what. I was confident that I'd put in the time and was in good enough shape, I felt good about the boat I'd built and knew that I had as much surf racing experience as most anyone else so I was sure I could compete.

The pre-race preparations were unexpectedly enjoyable. Packing totes with parts and tools brought me back to the days of the tour. I even got old pics out and hung them up in the shop. The racer in me was coming back and I liked having him around; Robby Racer was a pretty fun guy.



(Above: Myer getting his SX-R ready for a pounding.)

It was like a homecoming walking into the Blowsion HQ taking in the pre-race buzz. Ross Champion was busily tweaking on an old boat of his to loan to a buddy for the event while foreign freeriders and racers arrived by the rental car load.

The next morning, I drove out to the race site and got the first indication of how the weekend was going to shape up. First, the truck got stuck in the sand high up on the beach, so I backed about halfway down onto the harder packed sand, unhooked, unloaded, and set up the pop-up.

John Dady had gone to the airport and borrowed one of those staircases on wheels so the freeride judges would get a sweet elevated vantage point of the competition. Wiser yet was the tractors to pull all the idiots - myself included - out of the sand.

The rising tide quickly forced everyone to move all of what we had just set up. I recruited a gang of able bodies and pushed the trailer up the beach by hand. Little did all of us know that this exercise would be repeated all weekend.

My SX-R ran good in the surf and I felt comfortable in the five- to six-foot waves, so I pulled in and gave it the once over. The weather was perfect, and since I was making this a family vacation, I splurged on a beach house; my daughter and wife were obviously stoked. We spent the rest of the day taking in the beautiful Oregon coast from the beach in front of the house. Good thing, too, because we wouldn't see sunshine again until Monday. That evening we enjoyed a nice dinner and rested up for the day ahead.

The next morning I met up with Randy Laine - he'd be judging and had just checked the surf report. "Looks like the surf got bigger. Man, it must be double overhead out there." I said as we scoped the sets.

"It's supposed to hit 20 feet by tomorrow." He says with a wiry grin, adding, "I hope you're ready..."

By mid afternoon the unusually large surf had gotten larger with the rising tide. Vendor row bore the brunt of Mother Nature's power as the surging surf swept the beach free of any and all not fully secure. I was busy helping a sunken Mark Gomez try to resuscitate his drowned SuperJet when one such rogue wave took us for a ride. We both had our heads into his boat when a surge lifted it up and literally took it from us, turning the EZ-Up tent we were under into a bent mess of a wrecktangle.



(Above: Mother Nature strikes back.)

The series of waves that followed wreaked havoc on the beach. Event staff scrambled to keep the order of the herd as vendor tents washed away, display skis got lifted from their stands and tossed mercilessly about. Even runabouts were flung across the beach as if they weren't runabouts.

Chaos ensued as everyone scrambled to protect their valuables. Some people just didn't know what to do. I remember seeing this one guy chasing an ice chest headed out to sea. One lady was screaming about her lost dog. While we were fighting to keep Gomez' boat from being ripped out of our hands while also trying to keep a Blowsion display ski from banging into the trailer, the same lady started asking me hysterically if I knew where her dog was. I don't know why she chose me, so I told her I wasn't the dog whisperer and fought to help Gomez get his hood on before the next surge came.

Once the surge subsided, I took in the carnage. Jet Skis and debris were strewn about; cars, trucks, and trailers were scattered across the beach; and all the while, a very busy Blowsion team - Johnny included - hustled to contain the chaos.

Race practice was canceled and we called it a day, which was fine by me. Tomorrow, the forecast threatened, would bring even bigger surf.

And it was. The next morning we had monsters rolling in and I began to second guess my commitment. It was one of those days you look out at the

break and say, "Nah, let's go get some tacos." But there was no saying that out loud, I put on my race face and lied to anyone who asked.

Usually, everyone's stoked on big surf, but when it's the size of a two story house, it starts getting scary. Freeriders were getting banged up, boats were coming in on the hook, and plenty of injuries added to the drama. Motz twisted up his ankle on a BIG barrel roll. Even the safety team required rescuing with help from the competitors, an interesting if not noble twist of circumstance.



(Above: Quickly rising tides and brutal surf made this year's Surf Slam more true to its name than ever before.)

The surf was leaving zero doubt as to who was truly in charge. Again, the races were postponed until the next and final day.

Sunday morning started with the event team trying to get the location venue changed to another beach to avoid the inevitable fury of the rising tide. No dice; we would be racing here: both in the surf and the surf itself. High tide was scheduled to be late afternoon and to reach its highest point of the weekend. We absolutely had to have the beach clear by mid-afternoon or the ocean would do it for us.

Blake Corning was fighting a losing battle. Despite the heavy duty yacht anchors he had brought to secure the buoys, they simply were no match for the angry Northwest surf. The best he could manage was a three-buoy triangle inside the break that still kept getting washed in.

With the buoys changing positions freely, we lined up to race. I got a good start and was in it to win it for a minute with the Motz brothers and Jordan Fielder in sight. I knew I was racing but somehow forgot about the "in the surf" part. I rounded a buoy and wasn't looking far enough ahead when I pounded face-first into a whitewater wall that removed me from the boat. I managed to hang on to the bars and get back on, but I had lost a few positions (as well as my goggles).

I regained my composure and struggled around the shape-shifting track trying to stay hooked up in the froth of the crashing waves. At least four skis sank that first moto, and with the track being so small and two identical boats on the track adding to the confusion, nobody even knew who won or who placed where. Controversy rippled across the beach as Jeff Troegner, who was originally announced as the winner, was bumped to fourth.



(Above: Chris Rosner, Ross Champion, Mark Gomez and others look on at the epic battle of Man vs. Nature taking place in the waves.)

Troegner's ski was scored twice because Aaron Sanchez was riding one of Jeff's old skis with only an X marking it from Troegner. I let everyone else fight about it, I was happy to just not be one of the guys with their skis upside down trying to drain their crankcase.

I got another great start in the second moto, but rounding the first buoy my goggles fogged. I got them off and chucked them (that's two sets) while a couple guys blasted past me. Suddenly, I was in a chase for a lap or two and was riding pretty good; I actually got by one of the guys and was setting up another coming into the beach.

As a wave was washing toward a buoy, he lifted and I knew I had him. I went over the falls and turned, only to be grabbed by the wave. It was a

small one, just a little taller than the boat itself, so I just held on and sort of sat atop the wave and rode it for the whole front straight. It must have looked pretty funny from the beach. It also must have sucked a bunch of water into the engine compartment because as soon as I hit the first wave heading back out, I lost power, going down to one cylinder. All of a sudden, I became a sitting duck in the wrong place at the wrong time: I got pounded.

The first rule of surf riding is to stay with the boat no matter what.

I questioned this logic as I bounced around underwater for what seemed an awful long time. It's interesting how time slows down in perilous situations. I thought about the weight of the ski, the depth of the water and whether or not I was near the bottom. I thought about letting go, but didn't. Then I saw sky and gasped for air.

I got the bilge on and kicked and scrambled to get the boat pointed out to sea when the next wave stood up like a playground bully. I was still lying in the tray trying to get her started when I climbed past vertical. I went over backwards with the boat on top of me. I got the washing machine again and was really glad I got that one big gasp before going back under.

I hit the sandy bottom before the ski landed on top of me, squeezing the air out of my lungs. Then, somehow, I found my way back to the surface but was upside down. I rolled her over and immediately fumbled for the start button. I was still gasping for air when I saw the next roller coming in for the kill.

"C'mon *baby*, **START!**" I pleaded.

She kicked to life, and like me, was full of water. I pointed back out but still didn't have the power to climb the rising face; I was stuck in the surfers' sweet spot of the break. The next wave was big and glassy and - I swear - was laughing as it picked me up and tossed. This time, there was a weightless pause before the hammer fell, a momentary calm before the storm as I traveled from top of wave to bottom. I knew that I was in for one hell of a pummeling.

I was right. Tumbling more ruthlessly than before, I lost track of which way was up, the wave holding me down in the darkness until I actually started sucking water; for the first time I was scared. Choking down seawater, I thought, "This is it: retired racer dies at first annual Surf Slam event, film at 11."

Miraculously, I started to see light, finally surfacing 50 yards away from the nearest buoy. I concluded that there was no way I could get the motor back so I pointed my nose toward shore and rode the next wave in. I got to the beach and just sat there in the tray while the bilge emptied out the hull, catching my breath.

I hadn't had a near death experience in a while; I could feel the adrenaline still pumping. I looked back at the waves crashing behind me and felt like

old Santiago in Hemmingway's classic "The Old Man and the Sea," thinking to myself, "*You win today, old friend, but I'll be back.*"



(Above: *The survivors*)

That night, while talking over beers (supplied by the Worx guys), I got a chance to sit down and talk with Jordan Fielder and his family. It seems they had a similar Jet Ski career experience as I. They asked if I thought Jet Ski racing could ever get back to where racers could make a good living racing.

I told them my opinion, that if races take on this kind of format, then I think maybe, yes. What the sport needs is excitement, stunts, and carnage, in order to keep the interest of the short human attention span.

When I got back to my folks' place the next night, my dad asked how I did. I told him I did alright, but DNF-ed the second moto, ending up sixth. "How many guys were racing?" he asked.

"Seven."

He scoffed, "You spent two months training, bought a new ski, and beat one guy? Was it worth it?" I thought about it for a second and realized the answer to the question encompassed more than just the outcome of the race. While Surf Slam was the reason I got back on a ski, it's my love of competition and the preparation for it that I really enjoyed. Surf Slam was just the catalyst that fired off the resin of my passion long lost. I felt like I had gotten something back that was taken from me long ago: my identity. I'm a Jet Ski racer.

Looking him directly in the eyes, I smiled and answered, "Yep, it was."

-Robby

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