

Ron Smith: Living Life To The Fullest

Pat Steele

At your surf spot you know everyone in the lineup. You know who goes predominately left or right, who's a strong paddler, who might miss a set wave and who can make a steep drop. You know whose turn it is. Basically, everyone's on the same page. You might not know that guy's name on the red short board, but you know he wants to go left, leaving you the right. Then a stranger paddles out. He goes left on a right, doesn't split the peak and goes out of turn. The symmetry breaks down into chaos and now it's every man for himself. A great session has disintegrated.

We become very familiar with the surfing tendencies of the regulars at our surf spot; sometimes it takes years to get a guy's name, another couple of years to get to know him personally. Ron Smith has surfed where I surf for 10 years. Ron has qualities in a surfer that I admire. He is always polite, waits his turn, shows up solo (there's nothing worse than a surfer with his posse of friends), and he charges on big days. He is also 72 years old.

One day I was checking the surf and Ron was suiting up. "How is it?" I asked. "Bad," he laughed. "I can't be picky; I don't have that many days left."

Ron is a guy who, after getting hit by his fin, which almost cut his bicep in half, used his leash as a tourniquet and calmly drove himself to the hospital. The guy definitely intrigued me, but I really didn't know anything about him.

When I asked Ron if I could write a story on him, he was very reluctant. "I'm boring," he said. I had to approach him numerous times before he would give me any info. He truly is a humble guy. I was surprised at his accomplishments.

Apparently his dad was a Naval Officer who was stationed in Hawaii. Ron was 9 years old when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I can only imagine the impact of that event on a young boy. A few years after the war his dad left and never came back. Some boys never recover from abandonment. Others become highly independent at an early age. Ron fell under the second category. He has been everywhere and his careers are impressive.

Ron's life so far could easily fill a few books, so I'll summarize: In 1952 he received a scholarship to the University of the Pacific for football and swimming. After graduation he joined the Navy and graduated from Officer School. He became a Navy Seal and an expert in underwater demolition. He was a Navy instructor stationed in Korea. After the service he was a teacher at the Army Navy Academy in Carlsbad. He was a production manager at Hansen Surfboards and founded the U.S. Surfing Association of Southern California. In 1965 he co founded the Chart House restaurants where he served as CEO and president. During this time he also gave lectures in the graduate marketing department at UCLA.

In 1978 Ron retired, but his "retired" schedule would kill most mortals. He originated several restaurant and athletic club concepts in Hawaii, Louisiana and Oregon.

Ron also became involved in one of his passions, physical fitness. Besides training many world class and Olympic athletes, he participated in endurance events himself. He has completed eight Ironman races and won first place in his age group in 1981.

He has finished in the top five, four times. He finished first in the 800K 24-Hour Endurance Race in Sacramento and in the World Duathlon Championships in Palm Desert. In 1993 he was the U.S. National record holder in the 3000m time trial.

In 1994 he returned to the Chart House as senior project manager. Since then he has served as president of Paradise Bakery and Café and written several articles on physical training and business management. Currently Ron is the athletic program director for the Club Torrey Pines in Del Mar.

I usually see Ron around midmorning at the surfspot. He has already paddled his paddleboard, run or biked, and been to his martial arts class. I'm afraid to ask what he does the rest of his day; I would develop an inferiority complex. Ron, it's always a pleasure to see you paddle out, keep on charging!

Aloha, brother.