

When the cold snap came, it went right through you. In May, we were still surfing in boardies, but by June you were deadest searching the basement for your booties and hood, not to mention the old hell steamer that had shrunk two sizes while you had grown three.

I got caught out on the night it hit, cruising the streets with a mad brother and a bellyful of beer, still enjoying that false sense of security that stretching the Christmas spirit through to May will bring.

So it was with frozen-cold iron-ball headaches in each temple and the frontal lobe that I first saw those big slabs of south swell charging up from the depths of the icy blue Tasman, way out there on the horizon. The wind, they told us, had made its overnight journey up from Antarctica, squeezed like some alien virus from a gigantic pimple by the two huge thumbs that were the high- and low-pressure systems on either side of our coast. The swell was from the southwest, if you can believe that, and there was filming to be done.

There were three messages on my answering machine advising me of how best to make use of myself that morning, so I packed up my camera gear and put on my darkened sunglasses, had a Panadol sandwich and headed back out into the cold, sunny morning.

It was the classic start to a winter. Nothing like the winter we had last year, where short johns in June and continuous north swells made it more like a long, late cyclone season than anything else. Most of the swell was missing us but clearly visible out to sea, like giant shifting tables of deep ocean swell. It was the local fishermen's/surfers' vehicles I looked for first, knowing the wind on your hands a mile or two out would make it very difficult to get keen about the passing taylor. They would have been up early enough to have already sussed the best spot by that hour.

The tide was still quite high by the time I got to the point, and the silver reflections of bending swells led my eye further up the coast to where one of the phone messages

had told me to head. There were only four cars in the carpark and two pushbikes leaning against the fence when I got there and one of the pushies belonged to my brother Ben, so I decided to just wetty up and get out there with my water housing to shoot some vid.

The water was still warm and not nearly as inhospitable as it looked, even if it was that brilliant blue you only get when you have a perfectly clear sky. The first wave I saw as I kicked toward the break (after thinking about anything but sharks as I swam across the bay) was little Laurie Towner's, and at about five-foot-nothing he was standing way back inside the tube with his hands behind his back and making it look six-foot. It was a different world out there in the water. Far from the freezing wind up on the hill, the sun was lighting the barrels like some big-budget surf movie. Jeremy Walters was taking off from way deep inside and negotiating the warping tube like he had grown up with it in his backyard—which, of course, he had. I laughed as he paddled back out and past me and asked

A Winter's Tale From **Northern NSW** by Monty Webber

First day of winter, south swell action. — HILTON



Mick Fanning obviously enjoying his early winter dash down Yamba way. — HILTON



Laurie Towner setting up for the sacred slot. — KEEGAN



Lennox, 1 June 2000. — HILTON



him if he liked where he lived. He stopped and sat up on his board and, looking around, said, "This is what I think about when I'm stuck overseas somewhere in transit or waiting for my heat in 2ft slop."

Then there was another set and it was brother Ben squeezing his way into a backdoor barrel on his backside after an incredibly late takeoff. He passed me smiling in the tube and I stuck my movie camera in his face and got that incredible feeling you sometimes get as a cameraman that what you are recording is extremely special. It's more than just feeling your good fortune at the events unfolding before you; it's like you are a part of an extreme experience that somehow represents life itself.

Then there was someone jumping off the


ledge, paddling across and into a sideways takeoff into the tube. It was Sam Carrier. He stomped hard on the tail as is his wont, and did a classic hook under the lip before pig-dogging right through the guts of it and past me on the inside.

By 9.30am there were a dozen guys out and, unbelievably, almost as many cameramen. The Rip Curl team had materialised and were wanting as many waves as was politely possible; plus, the girls modelling next year's swimwear on the rocks were putting the guys off their game.

Mick Fanning sauntered into the lineup and picked up a couple of quick in-between ones. Mick surfed with all the grace and agility of a young jungle cat. He winds up like a coiled spring and then cuts loose on

the unsuspecting wave with a radical combination of aggression and elegance; and, no matter how hard or high he goes, he always seems to land on his feet.

Unfortunately, as is often the way, the tide also conspired against us and the sets became less frequent and everybody just started walking like we were catching up back in the carpark between sets.

"Where's Will?" somebody asked me and I told them the last time I saw him was late last night and he'd been trying to hitch into town as if there was something going on in Yamba at a quarter to one in the morning. Then Sam paddled over and whispered the name of another spot into my ear and four of us slipped away and onto the only break that works at that high tide in a south swell. 

Sam Carrier like a pig in mud — KEEGAN



Monty loving winter by the fire. — WEBBER ARCHIVES



Ben Webber following the real rules: pull in and don't look back—not when it's a meat tray way too deep, anyway. — HILTON



Tom Donkin' deep. — HILTON



Angourie lining up in May — KEEGAN

