

Coming Clean: A Searching and Fearless Moral Inventory

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*T*hirty-seven-year-old big-wave champion Darryl “Flea” Virostko and I stood on a cliff above the grey North Pacific. The wind howled. The surf spot we’d come to check folded in upon itself far below us. Flea unburied his golf bag from the bed of his battered Toyota Tundra. Just couple of years old, it belched white smoke from the exhaust pipe, bled steering fluid, and ran unevenly on seven of its eight cylinders. The right-hand door and mirror were mangled from a night a few months past when Flea was driving wasted and hit a tree. A number of nights unfolded like this, Flea admitted, that when driving debilitated, hazards jumped out at him. The words “Tow Fag” had been etched in acid on the windshield by Morro Bay locals (unaware they slandered the current poster boy for the Eddie, the world’s most prestigious paddle-in contest).

The truck's interior brimmed with remnants of his former three-bedroom house. No longer able to make mortgage payments on the place just a few blocks from Steamer Lane, Flea was forced to sell. Fortunately, he'd often doubled his mortgage payments when the money was good, and even though he'd lost most of the home's value by selling during a recession and paying delinquent taxes, he'd still pocket a fraction of his principal. Waiting on that check to arrive, however, was tough. Flea, his girlfriend, and their two dogs had spent some time living out of the truck. They'd recently found a cabin in the hills above Santa Cruz. Still, they might be hiking in and out of there. Letters tossed on the floorboard of the Tundra threatened repossession.

We traded driving balls into the wind, attempting to discern the white of the balls from the white caps on the sea. Obviously, he'd known that the surf would be crap, yet activities were the order of the day—hiking in the woods, building a dam in a creek bed, gathering rocks and shells from the beach—anything to keep the mind occupied. There was surfing, too, but these days it lasted such a short span, when his former pursuit could stretch through the night and day.

Importantly, however, this was a mission: Flea wanted to get it out, all of it. Rambling up-coast from Santa Cruz, we worked through the bending winter greenery in an effort to assemble his story. He'd been high for the last big chunk of it, so precise chronology became fuzzy. The obvious events were hard to look at, but unavoidable. "My contracts were up. The recession hit. And I was, basically...a drug addict," Flea said.

Three-time consecutive winner of the Mavericks big-wave event, Flea was leaning toward the four-month sobriety mark via a 12-step program. And he was coming clean in dramatic fashion. Hovering somewhere between steps No. 4 ("a searching and fearless moral inventory") and No. 5 (admitting "the exact nature of our wrongs") Flea possessed strength enough to bounce between pre-occupations with a reclaimed buoyancy. But there were the darker moments, and the just plain, being-Flea moments—like rolling down the windows to sound "Eastside fags" and getting in the face of a Steamer Lane surfer who'd been dropped-in on by a buddy and assumed to be raising arms in protest. Despite the public postures that still

clung to him, the candor with which he now framed his life was courageous to the point of endearing.

For the past year he'd been drinking a half-gallon of vodka a day. The first thing he'd do in the morning, if he'd slept at all, was grab a Gatorade, pour half of it out, and top it off with vodka. He called this his "little sipper," and it accompanied his surf checks. This massive consumption was made possible by the "sparks": smoking crystal methamphetamine, maybe four or five times a day, maybe more. By dawn on the morning of the '07-'08 Mavericks event, Flea hadn't slept a wink, was wide awake in fact, but made sure to pick up a coffee to blend in with his health-conscious competitors. Paddling out high was not new, nor did it boost his game. He fell out in the first round.

Today, under the influence of coming clean, Flea finds it easier to say that he was a simple alcoholic, than to admit the rest. During the paddle-out for this year's Mavericks opening ceremony, when asked to say something in celebration of the event by Jeff Clark, Flea said, "My name is Flea, and I'm an alcoholic." The battle with methamphetamine that he and an entire group of Santa Cruz surfers have fought most often comes out in hushed tones. It's been the gorilla in the room for most of the past decade.

"It got dark up here. Dark, dark, dark . . . It got grim," said former WCT competitor Adam Replogle, "The partying started in high school and continued on, until that *substance* hit."

That January afternoon, Flea and I had been to another white rock cliff just down the coast. Its nickname is "90 Degrees" because the track descending to a scenic beach is sheer for more than 100 vertical feet. At the bottom of the goat trail is a mangle of steel left from a pier that serviced the nearby cement factory. The pier is only pilings in the ocean now. Last year, Flea had been partying on the beach with other friends who orbited within methamphetamine's gravity. The small alcove lies far enough from Santa Cruz, and obscure enough in geography, to prevent casual police intervention; it remained a kind of haven for partiers and addicts. In the early evening, Flea began to ascend the cliff trail with his dog. Two-thirds of the way up, a friend on top yelled down at him to fetch something or other. As Flea's gaze rose upward, he became dizzy, and he blacked out. Witnesses say that his body completed a full back flip before striking dirt and stone.

He eventually woke up to find himself on the metal leftover from the pier—60 feet below. Flea's arm was badly broken and his face cut up, blood ran in dark ribbons. Once he came to, he wanted to scale the cliff again. Luckily, friends stopped him and called for a helicopter MedEvac. Flea recuperated in a nearby hospital for four days. "I was dead...I mean, I should have been," he said.

When Flea and I visited the spot on our up-coast tour, he pointed down at the ledge he remembered standing on. I descended, expecting him to follow in the wake of the narrative. Instead he remained on top.

"So you're not coming down?" I asked.

"No way, I haven't been down since."

The cliff is impressively steep. It's difficult to imagine that a human being survived a fall from the place Flea indicated to the gathering of steel at its base. I tried to think of the fall in terms of Mavericks at its biggest. If he hadn't bailed from paddle-in surfing from similarly high ledges, certainly he'd bailed from even bigger tow-ins. I remembered something sobering he'd said about his Mavericks career: "I know that every time I paddle out at Mavs, I'm going to get worked bad at least once. It's just part of the program. There are guys who won't face that fact, but they're fooling themselves."

Now recovered from his own addiction, Peter Mel recalled that when he was high on meth and surfing Mavericks, he could take two-wave hold-downs and pop up without bothering to think through the death dance he'd just endured. Sober, he said, those hold-downs "sit with you, they haunt you."

I looked up to Flea's head peaking over the cliff's crown and hollered the obvious, "Have you ever fallen from a wave at this height?"

"Yeah," he said, "I've probably bailed from that far at least."

The thing is, Flea's cliff-bail was not his "rock bottom" moment. After the hospital stay he spent a couple of weeks semi-sober, "only drinking."

Then he was back on the “program.” It’s a word that could mean a serious athletic regimen, or a seriously drugged out regimen. In the cases of some of the world’s most elite big-wave surfers from the area, the term meant both.

Despite the consequences of surfing massive waves and abusing drugs on an equally large scale, the idea of “rock bottom” remains a fleeting one. To contrast it, I’d asked Flea about another passing moment: his glory years. Santa Cruz surfers are often late bloomers in the cash game. At 20, after a disenchanting attempt to relocate to the North Shore, Flea secured his first paying endorsement deal as an aerial phenom. This was the early ’90s, and the agreement paid \$200 a month. He supplemented the pay with work as an apprentice plumber. That same year, Vince Collier, a local charger who’d made inroads into professional surfing, began introducing young Santa Cruz rippers to the scene 58 miles north at Mavericks. Flea’s level of performance surfing then merged with a rare lack of fear for the bigger realm, the optimum combination. “He wasn’t afraid,” said Hawaiian big-wave vet Brock Little, “And he was super talented.”

Collier can only be praised for introducing the best young surfers from Santa Cruz to the next big deal in surfing. Yet, Collier partied as hard as he surfed, and that kind of partying came as another kind of introduction for the area’s youth. Replogle explained, “There was two polar influences growing up in Santa Cruz: Richard Schmidt, clean and sober . . . and then there was Vince Collier.” Flea famously tells the story of his first go out at Mavs as a 20-year-old, and the half tab of acid that he’d dropped an hour before. As the acid kicked in, Collier drove him up to Mavericks and ushered him into the lineup. In the early days, that story only magnified Flea’s reputation as a badass.

Peter Mel, who rose alongside Flea in the most important generation of big-wave stars since Pat Curren and Greg Noll, pointed to Flea’s paddling ability as a prime factor leading to his success. Whatever the combination—fearlessness, high-performance acumen, or paddling skill—Flea harnessed it to dominate in a lineup of committed surfers pushing the boundaries of big-wave paddle surfing. He won the inaugural Mavericks event in 1999 (earning 98 of 100 points on a single ride), backed it up with another victory in 2000, and when the contest failed to run a few years due to small surf, Flea returned in ’04 to beat Kelly Slater in the final for a third consecutive win.

By comparison, no surfer has won the Eddie even twice. Financially and emotionally, Flea considered this the height of his career. Until late last year, it buoyed his market value, and he dragged down 10 to 12 grand per month in endorsement pay.

Eighteen years and a harrowing hellman career beyond his first session at Mavericks, much of that success seemed to have vanished through a glass pipe. After his hospital stay and return to drugs, Flea's broken arm failed to heal and the arm went gimpy—a debilitating injury for a surfer known for his paddling prowess. By fall of '08, friends and family assembled for a surprise intervention. It wasn't the first one, but it stuck. "What was Flea's bottom moment?" asked Mel. "Walking into a room and seeing all of those faces, that's what it was. Everyone's bottom occurs when you realize you're not just killing yourself, that you're affecting the people who love you—because the people who love you are the last ones to leave."

The night before committing to rehab, Flea smoked speed and drank through the wee hours. He emptied the tobacco from a pack of cigarettes, combined it with weed and repacked the cigarettes to smuggle in. On arrival, he blew a .28 on the Breathalyzer, a sometimes-fatal blood alcohol count. Even though his girlfriend accompanied him, inside the facility Flea announced his presence with, "Where are all the bitches? I thought there was supposed to be chicks in rehab." The staff pounced, quickly discovering the weed cigarettes. And because of his state, they pushed a little red detox pill on him, chemically landing the high-flyer to the ground.

By January, more than 100 days sober, filling out physically and surfing again, Flea appeared to be growing younger. He busied himself rebuilding a life, a big part of which was work on an ambitious new plan that just might set things right.

Still, he said, "I wish I would have felt like this 10 years ago, I think there would have been a lot more success than there was."

The meth epidemic gained a hold on Santa Cruz county around 2002, and by 2005 more than half of the local Sheriffs' arrests were meth-related.¹ A 2007 *Santa Cruz Sentinel* piece estimated that the epidemic still hadn't peaked. Housewives, people with day jobs, and teenagers were caught up in it.² Although members of Santa Cruz's big-wave community fit a Sheriff's study of dominant users (male, Caucasian, over 25), as professional ath-

letes at least midway through their careers (supported by contracts largely dependent on their public images), the decision to begin using 'meth' made no sense.

"Bottom line, doing drugs was just fun and acceptable among my friends," Flea said.

"You add what we were doing [surfing big waves] on top of that, and we were high—lit up like marlins on a double shot," said Mel, two years sober at the start of the year.

Flea and Mel had shared nearly everything—from solitary go-outs at Mavs in which each of them traded bombs, spun under lips, pushed the sport further in singular rides, to chasing the raucous surf party into addiction. More than once they would end up surfing giant waves while high. "Fuckin' crazy," Mel admitted, his face in his hands.

"We were a peer group. We all pushed each other in whatever we did," he said, "We spent a lot of time together, surfed every session together, called each other every morning. Who got the best barrel? Did the biggest air? Who's partying the hardest? We were pushing each other, but we weren't helping each other. We partied and it seemed innocent at the time. But it got out-of-hand, and then some drugs came out that took a hold of us. The drugs that brought me to my knees are the same drugs that brought Flea to his knees. It just took him a little longer to figure it out."

The addiction, in fact, would end up fracturing the peer group. While still using, Mel said that he began to hear voices. He became paranoid. He thought his home was under surveillance—that "they" were listening to him. Mel eventually acted on his psychosis by cutting the cable lines to his house, which, in his mind, sealed the listeners out. "It [meth] basically made me crazy. I was crazy—losing it," he said. This was a low moment, but not the bottom. Mel last used with Flea. He remembered staying up tossing around the idea that he would actually move in with Flea and that they would come clean together. In hindsight, it was just another attempt at hatching a plan to keep using. "I knew in my heart that that wasn't going to work."

Mel finally realized that his immediate family was "not going to take any more of it." He came out to his extended family, and thereby began a

path toward recovery. “My love for my family is what turned me around and brought me back. That, and the 12-step program.” Yet there were a lot of costs. “The drug doesn’t leave you, you have to keep working on it. I had to disconnect myself from all the things that led me down that road. I had to stop seeing my other *family* [his close friends]. When I first started getting clean, that was the hardest thing I had to do.” Other than supporting Flea at a recent meeting, in fact, Mel hadn’t really communicated with him in two years.

One of the things that allowed them to keep using, Mel believed, is that drug use is not talked about in the surf world—and this unwillingness to address the issue eventually hurts the grommets. “The kids know. Nat Young and those kids know. Maybe the parents don’t, but the kids are talking. But, no one [in the media] wants to touch it.” Flea’s sponsorship pretty much dried up early last year, so he hasn’t much to lose there. Quiksilver continued to sponsor Mel. Socially and financially, it was not an easy decision to talk. And yet, a major part of the 12 steps is providing service to the community, helping those who need it, and offering the experience only recovered addicts can. That, and a very tough form of honesty.

Mel admitted, “I’m embarrassed by the things I did. I’m so embarrassed I don’t even want to talk about it. There’s a quote. But what’s the cure? To communicate about it. And that’s what Flea is doing.”

Without forewarning, Flea drove me to another spot on our coastal tour. Wedged into a wooded canyon that lead to a private beach and the same towering white cliffs, there lay a ranch owned by family friends. Flea’s esteem for the place was obvious. He knew where to find a fossilized tree buried in a creek, a kind of stone comprised of oil that would actually burn, an abandoned tree house nearly invisible from the ranch. There was a good break on the south end of the beach. On the north end he pointed to ancient shells gathered in bands of the cliff face. Flea didn’t mention that the ranch was for sale, nor the grander possibilities he saw in it as he detailed its qualities. I wouldn’t learn until later, instead of a more rational rebound into the paid ranks of surfing, Flea’s ambition was a pie-in-the-sky idea he saw himself developing here.

The entire impetus for coming clean—and for this article, in fact—was a plan for community service Flea had been in the midst of creating with wetsuit manufacturer Jack O’Neill and Santa Cruz big-wave pioneer Richard Schmidt. The working title was “Flea-hab.” It proposed to serve surfers and athletically minded addicts through a 12-step program while healing the body and connecting with nature—“Using the ocean as a healer,” as Schmidt put it. This idea contrasted sharply with Flea’s experience of rehab, which lacked physical activity. Further though, Flea envisioned a special program capable of connecting with the ethos of “Surf City.”

The three would-be founders met early this year at O’Neill’s home overlooking Pleasure Point. At 86 years old, O’Neill’s awareness of drug culture and its aftermath is long and personal. He’d experienced the ‘60s counterculture through his children, as well as many of the surfers he met since opening his shop in 1959. “The surfers, especially in the beginning, were always adventurous guys—and they tried everything, too. Some of them got stuck, you wouldn’t see them anymore,” O’Neill said, later adding, “It’s extremely disturbing when your kids get involved.”

As well as a longer view of history, O’Neill offered his financial power and business acumen to the planned rehab. Schmidt offered his organizational expertise in running camps, as well as his more recent experience with interventions. Flea offered life’s experience, counseling, and name. “There’s a big, big need for this,” O’Neill said, “And I think Flea can really do something. You’ve got to have been there in order to impress these guys and gain a following.”

Mel, however, openly worried that Flea was taking a lot on his shoulders for someone just a few months sober. “I’m two years sober,” Mel said, “And I struggle every day. Sometimes it’s more than enough work trying to save yourself.” He did add, however, that accountability, responsibility to others, and service to the community might just be the thing to serve in Flea’s own recovery.

After our tour of the coast, life grew a bit tougher for Flea. He learned that back taxes on his house would nearly clean him out. And a hoped-for sponsorship deal failed to materialize. Still, sponsorship or not, Flea was invited to the Mavericks event and the Eddie, and he knew he would be present and clearheaded when they ran. His dream of creating a rehab

moved slowly, but the ranch was still a possibility. He said recent hardships wouldn't drive him to use again, but that, "It's hard to suck up sometimes. Getting clean and all that shit is good, but it gets harder as I go...There's wreckage."

And yet, Flea has taken hold-downs before, sucked it up, and paddled back out.

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ENDNOTES

¹ "The Meth Epidemic." *Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Office*. 20 Jan. 2009
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² Squires, Jennifer. "Meth study: Drug use rampant, devastating to Santa Cruz County Meth study: Drug use rampant, devastating to Santa Cruz County." *Santa Cruz Sentinel* 21 Sept. 2007.