

THROWING A SHAKA TO CARLSBAD PIPELINES

THE BEST LITTLE SURF SHOP IN CARLSBAD TURNS 40.

WRITTEN BY WENDY HINMAN



Tony Hawk soared over Carlsbad Pipelines in the early 1980s (photo by J. Grant Brittain).

“Witt and his surf shop are one of the original staples in Carlsbad!” Jake Blackburn, coach of Carlsbad High School’s newly crowned Scholastic Surf Series state champs, said. “Some of my early surf memories are walking around his shop talking with Witt, Chris Adams and Phil Triebel.” Once you’ve lived in surf culture—the stoke, the brah, surviving the gnarl together—it becomes part of your identity. Witt Rowlett not only entered that culture, he embodied it and helped form its Carlsbad iteration. Carlsbad Pipelines Surf Shop turns 40 this year and that has to get a shaka all around.

THE MAN

When you say “Witt” to a Carlsbadian it’s enough said. Like Beyoncé or Adele, no surname needed. Growing up on Basswood Avenue, “I came into surfing a little late,” he says. He was 13, a Valley seventh grader. Witt, Watson Gooch and Jimmy Watson got the bug together.

“I surfed Camp Pendleton a lot back when my dad [going surf fishing] would make a lefthand turn across I-5. But I cut my teeth at Tamarack.” This was “The Rack” in its glory days, when locals had a pecking order for waves and gangs of surfers, jarheads and Mescaleros would fight for dominance on the Tamarack stairs. By then, Witt’s crew grew with Vince Gyron and Doug Dobecki.

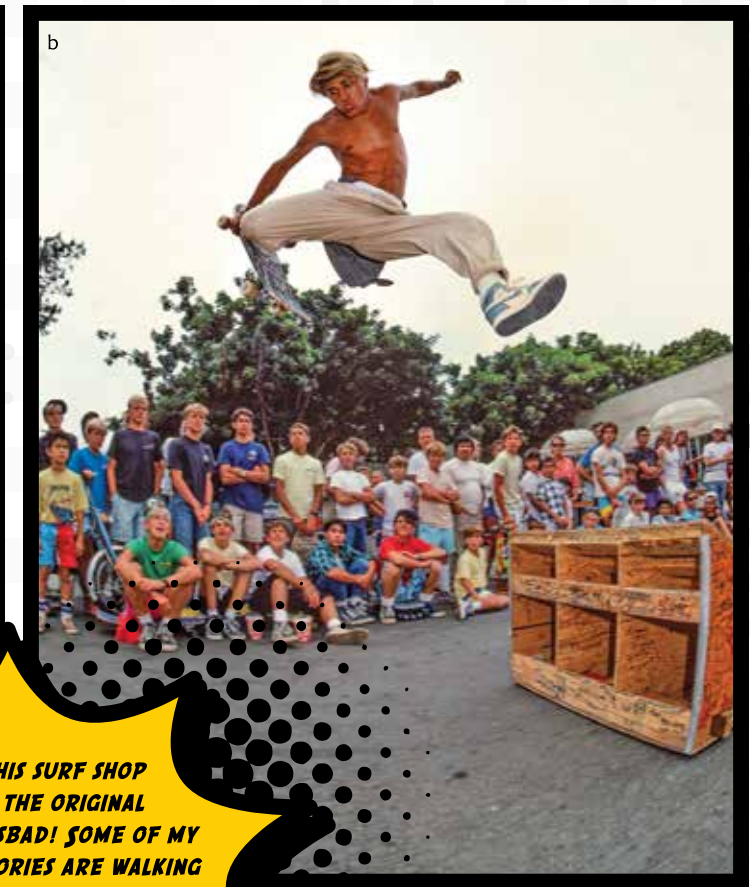
“We’d store our boards at Vince’s house, near Chase Field and under the lifeguard tower was our spot.” These were the days of beavertail wetsuits, no leashes and burning tires in the fire pits in the winter to have a place to warm up when you had to chase your board in. By high school (Witt is a 1976 CHS grad), “I never moved up the Tamarack hierarchy,” so the crew moved down to the State Park. “We called it Maingate. We had it to ourselves. It was as good or better than Tamarack.” And they added Russell “The Enforcer” Kubota in the days of localism. Witt and Jerry McCardle started the first surf club at CHS and started competing in local contests.

Every hero’s journey needs a sage, a mentor and a strange new world. Enter Davey Smith and new surf spots in the environs of Santa Barbara. A full-ride academic scholarship to UC Santa Barbara took our hero to Rincon, The Ranch and Jalama. Smith is credited as innovating the “floater” and the aerial in surfing. Scott Tammen (current co-owner of Offshore Surf Shop) was also in SB at the same time; they were roommates.

What a long, strange trip it’d been. “I was 17 and moved to Isla Vista after the riots.” Witt recounted some golden days of surfing and skating with his slightly elders. Their tutelage took him beyond his days with Paul Buckner on the CHS blacktop dip. Witt dropped out of UCSB, but his education on the central coast dropped him into full surf culture.

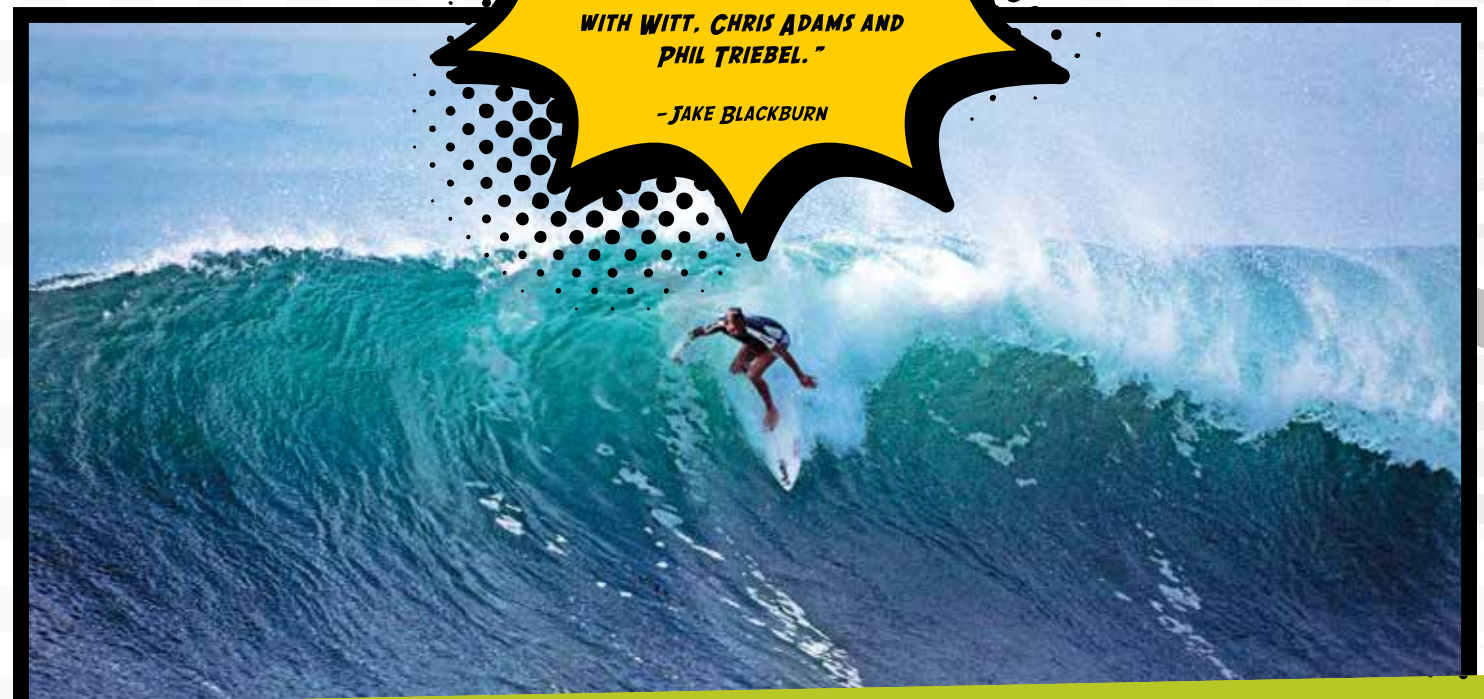
Returning to Carlsbad, Witt went to work on sprinklers with Phil Triebel. Two things here: first, these were the kind of pipelines Witt’s dad worked—only dad’s were bigger and deeper—when Witt’s dad started Carlsbad Pipelines. Witt used his dad’s license for his sprinkler biz. Second, Witt was working with Phil Triebel. In Carlsbad, Triebel is a legend among legends in surfing. They worked, but they surfed every day. “Phil helped my surfing tremendously.”

Triebel and Witt surfed any contest they could. Witt was riding for Gordon & Smith (G&S) in those days. They did well, including in the big ones at the time like Stubbies. Witt made the main event for the OP Pro against Dane Kealoha, number two in the world at the time. Witt technically won, but Kealoha is down as the official

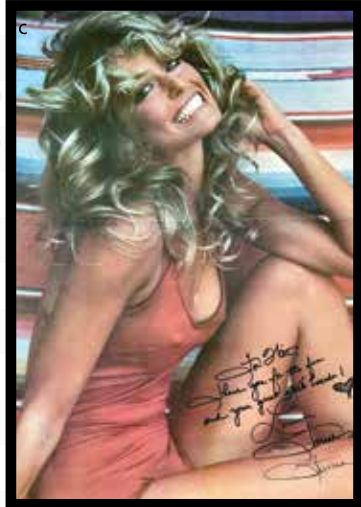


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— JAKE BLACKBURN

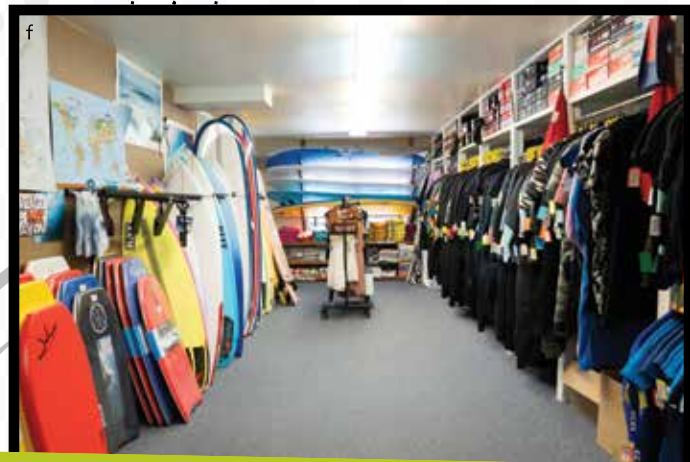


a) Former employee Adrian Demain on the job.. b) Powell-Peralta was a demo partner with Carlsbad Pipelines during the early rise of skating (photos by J. Grant Brittain). c) Witt rides a wave in Mexico (photo by Aaron Chang).



"WHENEVER YOU WALK IN, YOU FEEL THE WARMTH AND THE SMILES, ESPECIALLY FROM WITT, WHO HAS SHARED HIS KNOWLEDGE AND KINDNESS WITH ME. EVERYONE THERE IS ALWAYS SO KIND AND HELPFUL. COMING FROM A TEAM RIDER, THERE IS NO COMMUNITY LIKE IT."

-REID VAN WAGONER



a) Rick Anderson and Jim Hanan prep for the shop's grand opening in 1984. b) Witt eats a breakfast of champions on the the circuit. c) Not all legends coming into Witt's rode boards; Farrah Fawcett signed her best-selling poster for Witt (photos courtesy of Witt Rowlett).

winner. Kind of killed his desire to compete. The details make a good surf shop story. Ask him next time you're in about the buoy rule.

THE SHOP

Larry and Gale Gordon offered Witt a job at G&S Sports. He became manager within six months. At G&S, Witt saw the skateboard industry begin to rise like the surfing industry did. Witt found that he was adept at retail trend forecasting. He convinced G&S to carry this very odd footwear called Uggs. At that time they were the only shop to carry them between L.A. and SD. "Lines out the door."

It is very strange to see a sticker that says "Oceanside Pipelines," but three different versions existed. When Witt decided to go out on his own he had a couple of fits and starts in Oceanside before coming home to Carlsbad. "Too many break-ins," he says of his Oside time. At first he considered opening just a skate shop because Carlsbad didn't have one. He didn't want to step on his friends' toes, but the Gordons and Barbie Baron (the originator of Offshore) were both supportive. He talked to them first and then, in the end, opened a half-surf, half-skate shop.

In 1984, both surf and skate were on the rise to become billion-dollar industries, including popular fashion genres. Witt borrowed a chunk of change from his aunt and grandmother ("with interest, of course") and honored his father by heisting his business name. Witt's Carlsbad Pipelines officially began. Its first day was on the Carlsbad Street Faire's fall date, no coincidence there.

Costco has sent secret shoppers into Pipelines to see Witt's business acumen on display. Once Boogie Boards, Churchill fins and Penny boards hit the big-box stores, it's hard on the littler guys. It's why locals don't gear up at Costco. Fashion trends and surf and skate innovations have marked the time at Carlsbad Pipelines, but so do the crazy stories like the fire and the gas tanks.

There was the break-in where Witt arrived in time to start a car chase in pursuit of the thieves. "They were throwing skateboards out the window," he says. The day after he testified in court against the robbers, the shop was torched. Then there was the time the parking lot was resurfaced and the bulldozer hit underground gas tanks no one knew were there. No fire this time, but these are the headaches of doing what you love. Nothing a good surf can't soothe.

Pipelines is also the local's local shop because of Witt's team. In what used to be an outlaw culture, Witt insists on courtesy, from both his staff and the young groms hanging out looking for wax. The shop ethos has helped raise Carlsbad's kids.

"Whenever you walk in, you feel the warmth and the smiles," Reid Van Wagoner, currently sitting on top of the longboard world, says. "Especially from Witt, who has shared his knowledge and kindness with me. Everyone there is always so kind and helpful. Coming from a team rider, there is no community like it."

THE LEGENDS

"Witt is a sweet friend and has been a mentor since I was a small kid," Matt Hensley, a skater sponsored by Pipelines, says. "I had one of my first jobs at Carlsbad Pipelines. I got to be there at some amazing demos with Powell-Peralta; that always stuck with me. Witt has always been a constant to me and my family, a humble ruler."

Surf shops were the original sponsors before surf brands became huge corporate monoliths. It was all about name recognition and bragging rights. Witt has seen the sparkle in some of Carlsbad's best, like Tony Hawk before the Bones Brigade and Taylor Knox before "The Momentum Generation."

Besides Hensley, Adrian Damon and Ray Underhill worked on the skate side of Witt's. Sponsored or coached surfers, besides Triebel, include Chris Adams, Chuy Reyna, Paul Barr, Jake Blackburn, Sam Wright and Jeff Dana. His sponsorship has become more like lending a hand compared to the megacorps now. Not only Van Wagoner, but he's got Caity Simmers boards.

So when the surf's all mushburgers, Carlsbad Pipelines is the place to gear dream, swap cranking stories—if you don't have them Witt's staff will—or just feel community. Whatever you're looking for, Witt's got you covered.

d) Kiaya, Witt and Dresden Rowlett on the job. Dresden is pretty good on a board herself (a champion at the Big Air Worlds on a snowboard and two-time West Coast Open Women's surfing champion). e) This shop always has the top trends. f) Local surfers have made the Carlsbad Pipelines board room their favorite haunt (photos by Tanya Perez).