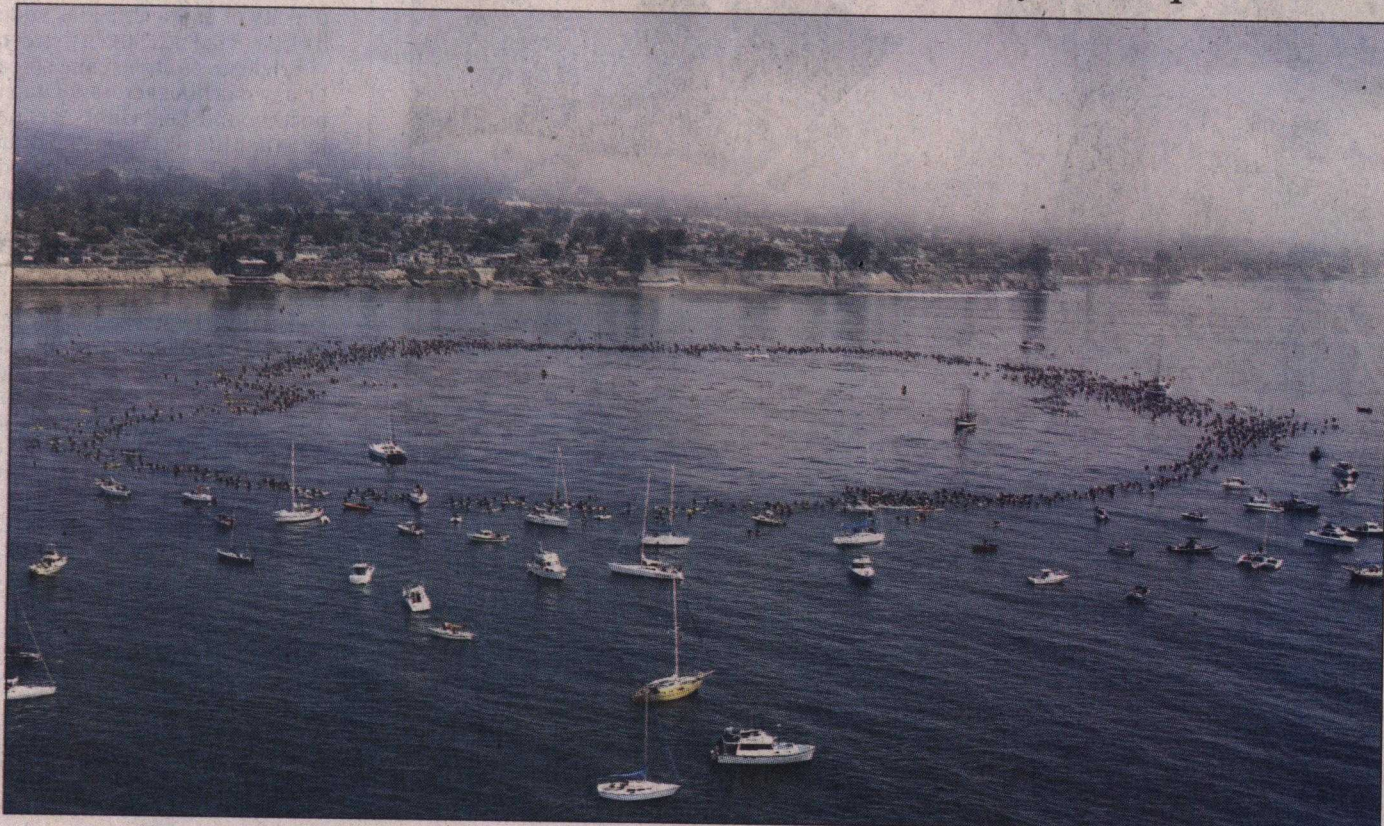


THOUSANDS PADDLE FOR JACK O'NEILL

Santa Cruz icon honored by the surfing community he helped create



WILLIAM SCHERER — CONTRIBUTED

On Sunday, thousands gathered at Pleasure Point, both in the water and on the cliffs, to remember surfing legend Jack O'Neill.

By Kara Guzman

kguzman@santacruzsentinel.com
@karambutan on Twitter

SANTA CRUZ » Thousands of people converged at Pleasure Point Sunday morning to witness what was expected to be the largest-ever paddle-out memorial, to honor Jack O'Neill, inventor of the modern-day wetsuit.

The procession filled the streets — wetsuit-clad surfers balancing longboards on their heads, couples on cruiser bikes, mothers with strollers and dogs, elderly people with lawn chairs — merging at the iconic cliffside

home of O'Neill.

The longtime Santa Cruz resident and founder of the O'Neill wetsuit and surfboard brand died on June 2 at the age of 94.

The circle

A paddle out is an age-old memorial tradition in which surfers form a circle in the ocean, whooping, splashing and throwing flowers in the water, to honor a fellow waterman's passing.

The paddle out circle on Sunday for O'Neill stretched more than half a mile across.

Estimates ranged from 2,000 to 3,000 surfers joining in the circle. Roughly 700 more people

were in 83 vessels, and on the cliffs, thousands more, a thick mass stretching from the Pleasure Point staircase to the Hook.

At around 11 a.m., when the event officially began, a Coast Guard helicopter circled twice, and as if on cue, the sun broke through the clouds.

Tucked into their wetsuits or held in their teeth, paddlers carried white orchids, which were passed out by organizers. Some paddlers wore eye patches, in honor of O'Neill's famous eye patch, which he had worn since the early 1970s, following a surfing injury at the Hook.

MEMORIAL » PAGE 6

"He wasn't like hanging out, surfing. He was always planning something."

— Mike Dufresne, friend and contractor who O'Neill hired for jobs

+ Online: To see a video of the paddle out, visit santacruzsentinel.com and click on this story

Memorial

FROM PAGE 1

At the circle's center was a wooden double-masted sailboat — O'Neill's first boat — holding his family members.

Also inside the circle was the 65-foot catamaran on which O'Neill Sea Odyssey, an ocean education nonprofit founded by O'Neill, holds its field trips and science lessons for children. Sunday, besides O'Neill employees and guests, the catamaran held several speakers such as former world champion professional surfer Shaun Tomson, who eulogized the surfing icon, broadcast on loudspeakers.

Jack the icon

Mike Dufresne, a contractor dressed in a flannel shirt, smoked a cigar and drank from his coffee cup as he watched the procession in front of his house on 38th Avenue.

Dufresne said O'Neill would hire him for jobs, and they became old friends. Every phone call he got from O'Neill was positive, he said.

"He'd call up to say I have some extra tuna," Dufresne said.



KEVIN JOHNSON — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Leis are placed into the water before a prayer is said for surfing pioneer Jack O'Neill near Pleasure Point in Santa Cruz on Sunday morning during a paddle-out ceremony.

O'Neill was an "American entrepreneur" who was "always busy" and involved his children in lead roles in his businesses, Dufresne said.

"He wasn't like hanging out, surfing. He was always planning," he said.

Matt Lochner, also known by his surf nickname "Lackey," grew up nearby and remembers going trick-or-treating at the O'Neill house.

"We think we'd get candy and all sorts of money, O'Neill stuff — no," Lochner said. "Toothbrushes."

Santa Cruz resident Kelly Lauter, 18, paddled tandem on a surfboard Sunday with

her father, Michael Lauter. She never met O'Neill, but grew up wearing his wetsuits, and in fifth grade she rode the catamaran with an O'Neill Sea Odyssey field trip.

"The first boat I've ever been on," Kelly Lauter said.

Santa Cruz resident Jahde Brown, who watched the paddle out from the cliffs, said she would see O'Neill in his old age, sitting on his back deck, looking out on the water.

"He was looking out to sea, like where his next surfing spot is going to be, like Valhalla or heaven or something like that," Brown said.

Handwritten letter

Another paddler on Sunday was Santa Cruz resident Jacob Meyberg, who as a child in 1988 wrote a letter to O'Neill for a school project. To his surprise, O'Neill replied with his own three-page handwritten letter, which was obtained by the Sentinel.

O'Neill wrote:

"How was I able to get into my field? It did take a lot of work. Planning, designing, and making suits. I worked a lot at night. It wasn't all surfing.

"I think my big break was timing. I started when surfing just started to get popular. Although the wet suit did have a lot to do with the popularity, there were people like Bruce Brown who were making surfing movies that I believe gave the sport a big push..."

O'Neill wrote that his childhood hero was the aviator Charles Lindbergh, and as a child O'Neill would build model airplanes, which helped him later in shaping surfboards.

"What I like about my work is primarily designing and trying out new ideas. Actually it is all enjoyable. I just run out of time," O'Neill wrote.