

SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL PHOTOS

Taj Burrow lands a sharp cutback on his win-clinching wave during the Coldwater Classic final against fellow Australian Matt Wilkinson on Tuesday.

BURROW'S BIG BREAK

Aussie Taj Burrow wins by a narrow margin over countryman Matt Wilkinson

Events
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By JULIE JAG

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SANTA CRUZ — Steamer Lane didn't make a very good first impression on professional surfer Taj Burrow. In fact, the Australian used the word "horrible" in describing how he felt about the break when he first set board in it last week, a couple of days before it became the arena for the Association of Surfing Professionals' penultimate World Tour event, the O'Neill Coldwater Classic.

"To be honest, I could not believe it when I first got here and tried to surf the place. I was like, 'This wave is horrible,'" Burrow said. "I had the hardest time, I was getting hung up in the wave, I was cold and I just felt really uncomfortable."

Tuesday afternoon, the

Lane did its best to change his mind. On a gorgeous day with a consistent swell pushing beefy, beautiful overhead waves through the break while thousands of fans cheered from atop the cliff, Burrows squeezed past Matt Wilkinson to haul in the 2012 Coldwater Classic title. He outscored Wilkinson, a fellow Australian, 13.10 to 12.70.

Not so bad now, is it?

"I love it for sure, definitely," Burrows, rated No. 6 on the World Tour, said with hearty laugh. "The wave was so much fun in the end. I was definitely impressed. You can get two or three huge turns and some really good ramps too, because I like the way it wedges together. So, it's a really sick wave. It's high performance. I liked it."

SEE COLDWATER ON D2



Australian Taj Burrow exults as the last scores of the final come in, making him the 2012 O'Neill Coldwater Classic champion.

COLDWATER

Continued from D1

He might want to get used to it. While this is the first contest of this caliber held in Santa Cruz since the 1990s, O'Neill Inc.'s president said he would like to bring it back.

"We'd love to if possible," said Pat O'Neill. "I'm sure ASP is happy with it. Santa Cruz showed its best."

Little could be found to complain about as the Lane produced one of the best Coldwater Classics in years. After rumors of a move to an alternate site at Ocean Beach clouded the early days of the contest window, the final day showcased Santa Cruz's best sun, swell and a stadium-like atmosphere, as well as some nail-biting heats.

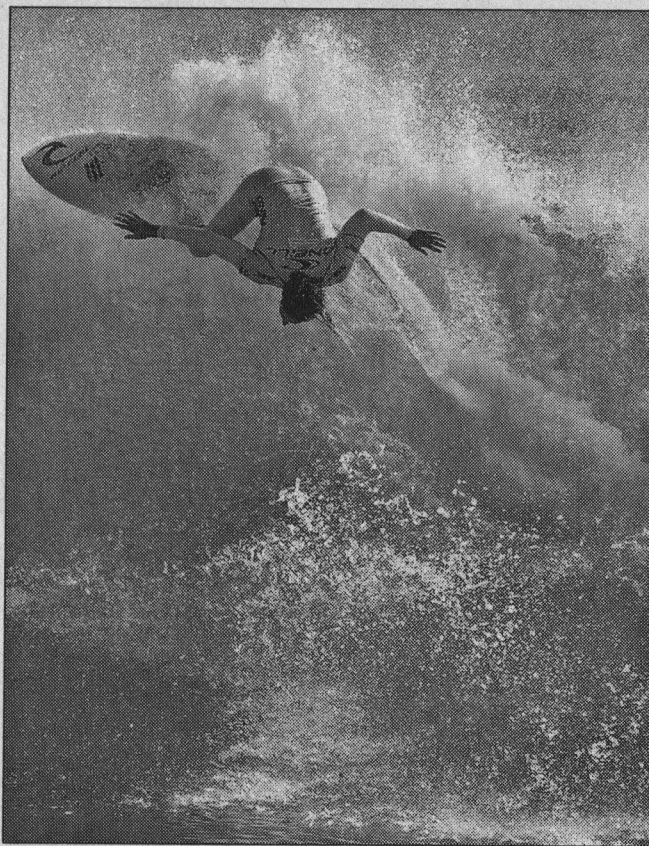
None was more tense than the final.

It pitted Burrow, who won a tour event earlier in the season and hadn't lost a Coldwater heat, against Wilkinson, who had never advanced past the quarterfinals in any World Tour event. Ranked No. 31 by the ASP, he was in danger of missing the cut for the 2013 World Tour.

But Wilkinson, 24, has surfed four contests at the Lane and won the Coldwater in 2010, when it was a lower-tier ASP Prime event. That experience separated him from many of the other top 34 surfers in the world who had flocked to Santa Cruz. Among them were 11-time world champion Kelly Slater, who never found his rhythm at the Lane and fell out in the fifth round Tuesday, and tour leader Joel Parkinson, who was knocked out in the quarterfinals in perhaps the second-closest heat of the day.

"It's a really tricky wave, it's pretty inconsistent and there are so many elements that are here to wreck your surfing — there's kelp and backwash and sidewash and the peak's not in one spot, really," Wilkinson, 24, said. "But I think I've been really inconsistent all year, so maybe two inconsistencies make it better."

It certainly looked that way after Wilkinson scored a 9.23 out of 10 to blow out Michel Bourez of Tahiti, 17.73 to 12.10, in their semifinal. An hour later, he was back in the water taking on Burrow, a longtime friend who



SHMUEL THALER/SENTINEL

Matt Wilkinson flies across the face of a large wave during the finals against Taj Burrow on Tuesday.

O'NEILL COLDWATER CLASSIC

FINAL

- 1: Taj Burrow (AUS) 13.10
- 2: Matt Wilkinson (AUS) 12.70

SEMIFINALS

- SF 1: Taj Burrow (AUS) 14.57 def. Travis Logie (ZAF) 12.40
- SF 2: Matt Wilkinson (AUS) 17.73 def. Michel Bourez (PYF) 12.10

QUARTERFINALS

- QF 1: Taj Burrow (AUS) 13.83 def. Gabriel Medina (BRA) 8.60
- QF 2: Travis Logie (ZAF) 13.83 def. Joel Parkinson (AUS) 13.00

ROUND 5

- HEAT 1: Gabriel Medina (BRA) 13.16 def. Alejo Muniz (BRA) 6.70
- HEAT 2: Travis Logie (ZAF) 10.50 def. Raoni Monteiro (BRA) 8.90
- HEAT 3: Michel Bourez (PYF) 15.00 def. Damien Hobgood (USA) 8.00
- HEAT 4: Adriano de Souza (BRA) 10.50 def. Kelly Slater (USA) 9.40

had flown under the radar throughout the contest.

"I actually had a feeling earlier, I don't know, maybe around the quarterfinals, that we would be in the final. It was a really strong feeling, and I was like, 'Man, it's going to be a hard final if it happens,'" Burrow said. "And sure enough, it happened."

And it was tough. Wilkinson scratched for the first four waves in the 35-minute heat, but never scored more than a 2 on any of them. Patient Burrow, meanwhile, held priority for nearly 10 minutes before breaking out a big turn, adding a few smaller carves and extending his ride for a 7.17.

Needing a second score, he added a 4.9 and seemed to have full control of the

heat. With about 15 minutes to go, however, he got sucked under just after takeoff. That gave Wilkinson his opening with a big wave coming in, and he grabbed it. Wilkinson rattled off a 7.20 — it would have been more if he'd made it through the whitewash at the end — to pull within half a point of Burrow.

Burrow padded his lead slightly with six minutes remaining, boosting Wilkinson's magic wave score to 5.9.

"Let's go waves!" anxious Rip Curl team manager Nick Greeninger of Santa Cruz — perched on the rocks below the cliffs to support Wilkinson — yelled out when the ocean subsequently calmed.

Right on cue, a set rolled in. With a minute left,

Wilkinson caught the one that could turn the heat on its head. He started with a power hook and another big turn. Before he could grind out a crucial third maneuver, though, the wave closed out on him and he tumbled into the whitewash. He said he knew then, even if he didn't want to believe it, his score wasn't enough for the win. He was right: 5.5.

"I felt like I was building and surfing really smart heats, which is pretty rare for me. I was being patient and doing the things I don't usually do," Wilkinson said. "I felt really good and to make it to my first WCT final is incredible. It has been my dream since I was a little kid — though obviously winning it was my actual dream."

For Burrow, the win served as a nice consolation prize for being out of the running for the world title.

"It was a lot of hard work through the whole event," Burrow told the crowd after being presented with a gold bust of Jack O'Neill. "There's lots of water moving and you have to choose between a peak paddle or run around and muddy feet and there's so many elements. It feels good to come out on top, but I'm pretty wrecked."

Many locals hoped the title would be decided at Steamer Lane, but instead the Coldwater only whittled down the contenders. Five entered as title hopefuls, but only three remained after John John Florence (44,350 tour points) made an early exit at the Coldwater and the fifth-place finish of Adriano de Souza (42,350) wasn't enough. Mick Fanning (47,000) is still in it, although he also lost in the second round, allowing front-runners Parkinson (53,900) and Slater (50,700) to pull ahead. Despite Slater's frustrations, his ninth-place finish replaces his previous low score from Brazil, where he nabbed only last-place injury points, and exponentially narrows the gap between Parkinson and him.

"I haven't looked at the numbers, but it's funny enough — I gained a couple thousand points. Joel dropped a ninth and gained a fifth and I dropped a 500 and gained about 3,000 points," Slater, 40, said. "It's a huge opportunity lost for Joel."

The title will be decided at the final ASP World Tour event at the Banzai Pipeline in Oahu, Hawaii, from Dec. 8-20.