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# Creating the Comfort Zone

By Kirsten Fairchilds

## Drew Kampion: The life and legacy of wetsuit pioneer Jack O'Neill

"The message is simple, but the principle is profound: The wetsuits created by Jack O'Neill opened the door to surfing around the world, in virtually every frigid corner of every wind-lashed shoreline on the planet. Surfers in more temperate climates discovered that the wetsuit extended their sessions, making any go-out, long or short, more comfortable. And then this same technology, inspired by the same logic and philosophy, extended into the mountains and into all other water sports."

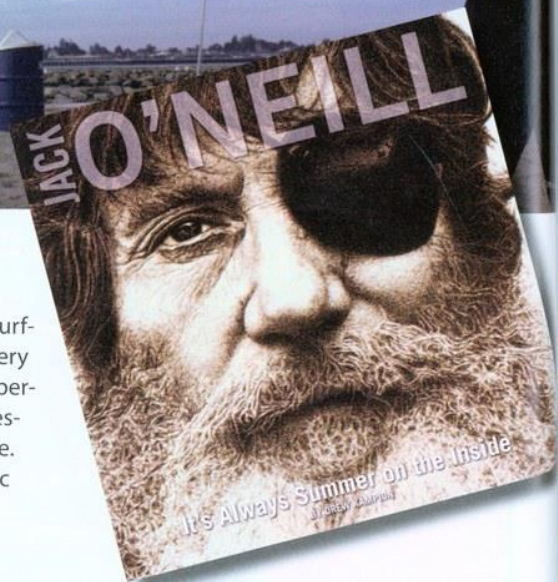
— Drew Kampion, *Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer on the Inside*

Drew Kampion had found a treasure chest. A former editor of *Surfer*, *Surfing*, *Wind Surf*, and *Wind Tracks* magazines, Kampion had spent nearly a lifetime in the water. Upon drying off, Kampion had for decades put pen to paper or fingertips to keyboard to write about watersports and the folks compelled to participate in them.

But it wasn't until Kampion, 67, under-

took the task of writing the biography of his friend and former boss Jack O'Neill, 88, that he found a treasure trove of tales, yarns and anecdotes recanted not only from his entertaining and accomplished subject, but also those who knew him well.

Author of *Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer on the Inside* (Chronicle Books, 256 pages, \$40), Kampion conducted more than



(Top) Jack O'Neill with his airship on the beach at the Santa Cruz Small Craft Harbor.

(Above) The cover of *Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer on the Inside*.





Jack O'Neill adjusts one of his early prototype wetsuits on a California beach in the 1950s.

### Jack O'Neill: It's Always Summer on the Inside

Available at all three O'Neill Surf Shop locations in Santa Cruz.  
also  
[www.shoponeillusa.com](http://www.shoponeillusa.com)  
[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)

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150 interviews and collected a wealth of historical and archival photos to produce a biography that is perhaps better described as an illustrated oral history of a true pioneer.

"Jack is one of those unique American geniuses who created his own path in life," said Kampion in a recent telephone interview from his home on Whidbey Island, Washington. "He was a dyslexic self-starter who was never comfortable in institutional education situations, but found his life in the world of self-sufficiency and entrepreneurial adventure."

A graduate of San Fernando Valley State College — now known as Cal State Northridge — with a bachelor's degree in English, Kampion first got his feet wet in journalism at a familiar spot.

"I covered the first professional surf contest in history," said Kampion, a native of Buffalo, New York. "It was the Smirnoff Pro-Am at Steamer Lane in November 1967. That was the first time I wrote an article, which was then published in *Surfer Magazine*."

Kampion had made his first trip to Santa Cruz in the summer of 1959. His family had recently moved to Cupertino, and Kampion and a friend drove to Santa Cruz because he had heard about surfing.

"I went to this little surf shop down by the wharf, right where the Dream Inn is today," Kampion said. "It was called O'Neill Surf Shop. Jack had just opened it. I rented a surfboard from him and paddled out on a high-tide day. I watched four to six surfers by Cowell's Cliff. That was my introduction to surfing."

An off-and-on Santa Cruz resident from the 1960s to 1980s, Kampion crossed paths often with O'Neill as the journalist's career continued to flourish. He even worked at the O'Neill's 41st Avenue shop for a few months in between freelancing gigs. In 1978, Kampion went bodysurfing with O'Neill in San Francisco and was offered the job of advertising manager for the company.

Kampion moved on after a few years to jump back into the journalism world. His first book was published in 1989, and he wrote seven more before taking on the often daunting task of sifting through the stories, milestones and accomplishments of O'Neill's life.

"The core of this story is the wetsuit's creation," Kampion said. "The wetsuit has taken a Polynesian-Southern Californian sport and expanded its territory to include literally the entire world. The sport of surfing is now in all of these brutal environments in the world, and it's because of the wetsuit. Jack was that guy who took neoprene and made wetsuits,

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Jack O'Neill (second from left) displaying surfboards and wetsuits at his first trade show.

specifically for surfers and bodysurfers."

Kampion began work on the biography in September 2009. His mornings and days were spent conducting, recording, and transcribing interviews. His evenings and nights were dedicated to writing. He and Los Angeles-based designer Steve Rachwal turned in their final version in February 2011.

"It was great to work with Drew," O'Neill said. "He is as knowledgeable as anyone when it comes to the surfing field. I am very, very enthusiastic about the book. I think it's great. There were a lot of nice things said about me. I got a lot of good comments from people who have read the book and I feel really good about that."

For Kampion, it was a privilege to get to know his much-admired subject better.

"I have an appetite for learning about people's stories, and Jack is an incredible treasure chest of stories," Kampion said. "When you open up his head, it's crammed full of stories. Just to be in the position of extracting those stories and delivering it to the world at large is an honor, but hearing those stories was also incredibly entertaining." ■

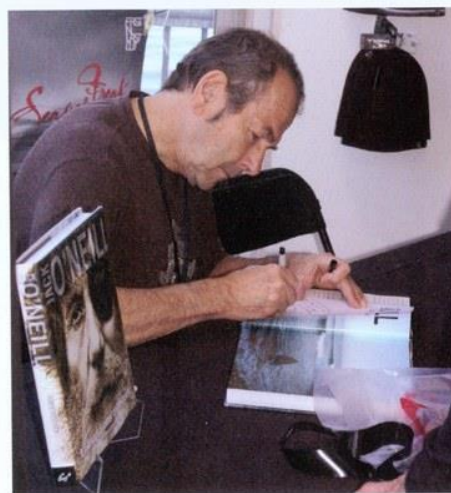


Photo: Mickey Carroll

Author Drew Kampion signs a copy of his Jack O'Neill biography in October during the O'Neill Coldwater Classic.