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Surfing legends want U.S. Open to return to the—you know—surfing

By Moss Perricone Thursday, Jul 24 2014

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"Not a riot," surfer **Greg Starr** says from his post at the Rockin' Fig, when asked about last year's, um, events after the U.S. Open of Surfing. "It was more of a gathering."

Pete "PT" Townend, the first officially crowned world champion surfer, gives the hundreds of

people who broke windows, news racks and more in downtown **Huntington Beach** a little more credit. "Last year was a skirmish," he claims. "But it was nothing in comparison to [what happened in] '86."

Cindy Cross, director of the **International Surf Museum**, laughs from across the room. "They tried to turn over a car in the parking lot, and it was too much trouble, so they went on to something else," she says. "That's how we riot in **Huntington**."



Luke McGarry

It's difficult to watch footage of the 2013 H.B. riot, to see drunk kids pummeling one another as though they were an Affliction-clad beast eating itself, and not wonder how it came to this. But to the local surfing royalty, those men who were there as contestants and fans when ABC's *Wide World of Sports* broadcast the inaugural United States Surfing Championship to the world in 1964, the sad state of the U.S. Open's current crowds was inevitable. The regulars at the Open have known for decades that "largest surf competition" and the sport's mainstreaming doesn't necessarily equate to a high attendance of surfers. Indeed, it's almost always the opposite.

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Bruce "Snake" Gabrielson, former president of the **Huntington Beach Surfing Association** and founder of America's first high-school surf league, had a stand at last year's event. He recalls that "maybe two or three dozen surfers came by the booth" out of an estimated 1 million attendees during the nine-day event.

"When I get together with some of the other surfers from that era," Snake says, "we talk a lot about how pure [surfing] used to be."

PT, Snake and other legends are applauding this year's grand experiment: to return the spectacle to the sport's simpler days, when it was just about the—yes—surfing.

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"It reached a point in the past few years . . . where it transformed into [something] more like **Coachella**, where everybody had to go just because you had to go," PT says. "Probably 70 percent of people didn't even know who **Kelly Slater** was."

"It's going back to what the event was in the first place," says *Orange County Register* columnist **Corky Carroll**.

Vans' **Doug Palladini** (Vice President, General Manager, Americas) praises the elimination of

live music and the vendor village as a method of going back to the basics of surf culture—and hopefully averting another "gathering."

"You see it kind of run the gamut," he says. "From being purely a surf contest to being the complete three-ring circus where very little of action sports seem to have a place. And I think this year, you'll see us endeavoring to return the focus on action sports."

This includes augmenting the additions Vans made last year, their first time as sponsors of the event. "We built a substantial structure to support skateboarding and BMX," Palladini says. "We added more events to the surf contest, including the Joel Tudor Duct Tape Invitational, which is a really cool way to show a different side of surfing."

But chaos and surf are inextricably linked in popular culture, ever since **Jack London** penned "The Royal Sport," in which the author gets tossed around, tumbled and spit out by the sea's "smoking crests" and "white battalions." Not all U.S. Open fans think this new path will stave off the unruly masses.

"I think they have a tendency to feel like all the extra features of the contest were dragging people down here," says lifelong Huntington Beach resident **Pat Lien** from behind the counter at **Chuck Dent**. "When it's the fact that there's an event going on here [in] the only beach south of Los Angeles that has any reasonable amount of parking. It could be a juggling contest."