

AFTER THE SHARK

Top: Brett Connellan bending into a south-coast cavern with flawless backside technique, on a recent swell. **Photo: Scott Ruzzene** • **Bottom:** Confronting imagery of the compromised limb that relies heavily on re-purposed back muscle. **Photo: Sam Tolhurst**

BRETT CONNELLAN: ATTACKING LIFE

Written by Sunny Fassler

On March 30, 2016, 22-year-old, competitive surfer, Brett Connellan was attacked by a shark at Bombo Beach, 124 clicks south of Sydney, New South Wales. The attack was brutal and should have been fatal if it wasn't for a leash-turned tourniquet that day.

Almost six years later, Brett's back in the water, ripping. His left lat muscle making up the missing tissue in his thigh - a procedure doctors said would enable him to walk again (at best).

The media loves a good drama. They love a hero who fought through adversity to come out on top despite doctors telling him he might never be able to walk again. It's that feel-good, happy ending shit that makes us feel warm and fuzzy inside.

The only issue with it; it represents about 17% of what really happened in the last few years.

Brett is a legend. Not by means of triumph, because he lost that fight on March 30 2016, by half a leg. As a friend, I remember feeling everything on the scale from shock to panic that day, sending a series of messages to Brett's phone, with blank uncertainty being the only reply.

Fast forward to today. A lot has been said, written and speculated about since then. Yes, it was ugly. No, it probably wasn't a Great White.

While the media likes to work the angle of "young aspiring pro-surfer attacked by a

shark" to maximise eyeballs on the story, I don't dig the perspective. And Brett doesn't either because there's nothing heroic about that narrative. It translates as failure because Brett never made it Pro. There's nothing heroic about getting lucky. And that's what Brett was that day. Damn lucky. He didn't ask to have his leg mauled by a shark. They didn't meet up after school to settle an old dispute with bare knuckles in a circle of spectators. It just happened. Wrong place, wrong time - a wicked dance with a creature that should have turned Brett's lights off. But... it didn't. And that should be the basis of all the notoriety. He shouldn't be getting credit for something beyond his control, but instead, for everything that followed after.

"It's how you respond to things that matters most," insists Brett. "Life's going to throw shit at you, whether you like it or not, and you are ultimately given two choices. Be defined by what happened, and feel sorry for yourself, or by what you're going to do about it. I'd choose the latter every time."

The shit life threw at Brett that day was a car-sized shark, a few months of rehab, lifelong souvenirs scattered across his body, and most of all, squashed dreams of ever going Pro. He could have begun enquiring about those weekly disability checks and started reaching for the antidepressants.

Ask him. He doesn't want to be remembered as the guy who punched death in the throat. That's the other blonde guy with a flawless hairline (and three World Titles). Not Brett.

"I've always found it uncomfortable to be described as inspiring, motivational, courageous etc., for having survived a shark attack. It wasn't up to me. It never was. I just tried to control the narrative after.

In reality, you can't have those connotations without struggle. Obviously, that struggle for me was a combination of physical and mental pain after being told I wouldn't walk and later surf again.

That loss of purpose and identity was tough for me to overcome... I learned very quickly that some things couldn't be worked through alone, and the context of mental health became an integral part of my story. For example, I wouldn't have been able to take that first step on my journey of physical recovery if I hadn't looked at my mental health first."

Resilience and vulnerability might not be words Hollywood uses to describe their on-screen heroes, but they illustrate the heroics Brett should be getting recognised for.

Surviving a shark attack was the easy part, but it took courage, motivation and a ton of strength to A: To open up about the demons in his head, and B: ask for help to come out the other end. The subject of mental health is complex. Processing a traumatic event like a shark attack also puts Brett in an exclusive 'Bite Club' and the shrinks don't get to study 'shark incidents 101' at university. In a revolving carousel of emotions, Brett's working through anger, grief and sadness on one side, hope, joy and happiness on the other.

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Top: Brett has worked tirelessly to rebuild his body. **Photo: Scott Ruzzene** • **Bottom:** Long-distance, prone paddling became Brett's way of proving to himself that serious physical quests are still within his reach. **Photo: Sam Tolhurst**



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“No doubt, the attack is the fuel to the fire and the type of story that catches people’s attention,” he explains. “It’s like I’m having a target on my back I’ll never be able to shake. But rather than push it away or sweep it under the rug, I found it was the best conversation starter for being able to talk about the more important things in life. So it’s kind of like the ultimate, positive bait and switch in a way.

Seeing my story’s impact on others brings me purpose ... But, at the same time, it’s so wild because I’m naturally a quiet person, and all that attention is kind of weird, but for me having a new purpose is stronger than anything.”

Quite the career change for a guy who was once touted to cash in on event wins but instead finds himself on morning shows and podcasts. But where does surfing sit for Brett after the attack?

“I’ve undergone a huge shift in considering where surfing sits in my life. Although I can still surf well and have worked hard to get here, the reality is that surfing with your lat muscle in your quads feels different. But that doesn’t mean I can’t still enjoy it.

If anything, I actually enjoy it more now because I’m just grateful to be out there and taking that attitude has helped me redefine how I approach surfing.”

In the wake of the attack, Brett was approached by various news agencies and producers, but ultimately he decided that he was the one best equipped to tell his story. “It let me tell the story the way I wanted.”

Sam has teamed up with cinematographer, Sam Tolhurst, and their documentary ‘Attack-

ing Life’ is scheduled for release early in 2023. “There’s a reason for waiting for this long,” explains Brett. “Firstly, I had offers to ‘sell’ my story early on. That never sat right with me because I knew I would be surrendering any control I had over the film. It would just become some shark-centred narrative (in a negative way), and that kind of defeats the purpose.”

“Secondly, at that time, I didn’t feel my story was done. It might sound clichéd, but if we had released the film back then, I don’t think it would be a true reflection of what I’ve learned and what I have to offer the world as a result of everything I’ve been through.”

Eager to find new purpose and prove to himself and others that he could still overcome challenges, Brett embarked on a number of physical quests. They told him he may not walk normally again so he completed a 100km walk with Oxfam. However, it was the Molokai challenge that seemed to coalesce all the various forces at work in Brett’s life. “It’s an ocean based challenge, there’s also the spiritual dimension of the paddle as a surfer and the connection to Hawaiian culture,” explains Brett.

On a more literal level, paddling a prone paddleboard relies heavily on the back muscles known technically as the latissimus dorsi aka the ‘lats’ to do a lot of the heavy-lifting. As previously mentioned it was Brett’s left lat’ that was sacrificed to act as a substitute for the hamstring destroyed in the attack. Completing the Molokai would thus serve as a very powerful symbol of Brett’s capacity to overcome adversity. While he’d been paddling on a haphazard routine throughout the COVID years, training for the 52km effort begun in earnest earlier in 2022. Brett put himself through a gruelling regime for

three months only to have the race cancelled in July. He elected to do the paddle anyway, but despite the intensive preparation the reality proved to be much harder than anticipated. “You can train all you want but until you’ve done it you don’t know what to expect... Out there in the middle of that channel I felt so unprepared.”

The paddle will be a feature of the film and ultimately the Molokai became a kind of microcosmic representation of Brett’s life journey. “A lot of the things I went through in the paddle relate to my recovery... I learned life-changing things that have an impact on me all the time,” insists Brett.

He hopes that those who see ‘Attacking Life’ will be inspired and learn something about the grit, determination, honesty and vulnerability it takes to comeback from any kind of curveball life throws at you. “The shark attack’s kinda the hook for something greater,” he explains, chuckling at the accidental metaphor. “Two thirds of the film are about my recovery and the paddle.”

Brett is quietly confident that ‘Attacking Life’ will provide a segue into more film production roles. Having worked hard to craft his own story into an authentic and compelling documentary, he feels he may have something to offer to others with tales to tell. However, for now he and Sam are busy putting together the final edit on their own film and negotiating with the streaming platforms that have expressed a keen interest in the project. Meanwhile, before he hits the edit suite, most mornings you will find Brett somewhere on a south coast beach, ‘attacking the lip’ and pulling into anything that goes round. Nothing was ever going to rob him of the pleasure derived from a good barrel... these days he probably appreciates it even more.