Ghost Wave: The Discovery of Cortes Bank and the Biggest Wave on Earth

By Chris Dixon. Published in 2011 by Chronicle Books (256 pp., $24.95 USD, hardback)

Reviewed by Kevin B. Witherspoon, Lander University, South Carolina

In writing a review of Chris Dixon’s Ghost Wave, it is difficult to resist the temptation to fall back on surfing metaphors and clichés. While it might be accurate to describe the book as a “wild ride,” a “thrilling adventure,” with a narrative “unfolding like a perfect wave,” such breathless descriptions belie the impressive scholarly research and depth of thought that Dixon has invested in this book. Received to much public acclaim upon its release in 2011, this book seems to have escaped the notice of historians and sports scholars, who would be well advised to discover it. In addition to being a riveting read, it offers a rigorous historical examination of the origins of big-wave surfing and the discovery of the wave itself, and a probing analysis into the minds of many practitioners of “extreme” sports.

Chris Dixon is a prolific travel and surfing writer whose name is likely familiar to surfing enthusiasts, as his work has appeared in the New York Times, New York Times Magazine, Outside, and Surfer, among many other credits. In Ghost Wave, he turns his attention to an examination of the history of the discovery of Cortes Bank and the efforts of a small number of adrenaline-seeking surfers to ride its wave. While not an academic, Dixon employs an impressive array of sources, including archives from all over the country, newspapers, magazines, journals, and interviews, the latter numbering easily into the dozens. Dixon explains that he developed an obsession with the wave, investing several years of attention and intense research to capturing its every detail.

The result is a stunningly well-researched work that, in addition to satisfying casual readers, offers fodder for discussion among sports scholars and their students. The first five chapters of the book provide a painstaking reconstruction of the process of “discovering” the wave, including a description of the unique meteorological and oceanographic conditions that create it. Cortes Bank, which is located in the Pacific Ocean approximately 100 miles off San Diego, is the site of an ancient island now lying just-submerged beneath the surface. The result is a place without peer on the planet, where a 2,000 mile stretch of uninterrupted ocean arrives at an outcropping of earth only a few feet below the surface, forcing mile-deep water to pile up into gigantic waves. Even on a calm day, the waves break with enormous speed and power. On days when the ocean is churned up by distant winds and storms, the waves can reach 100 feet or more.

The next part of the book catalogs man’s attempt to tame this unruly patch of sea, beginning with a 1966 expedition to sink a ship at the site, creating an island and a nation, from which the nation builders could make a fortune harvesting the great bounty of giant lobsters and abalone teeming in those waters. The tale—hilarious,
near-tragic, and bordering on unbelievable—is a highlight of the book, and only the first of many harrowing attempts by human beings to achieve mastery over the site. The remainder are almost exclusively the adventures of big-wave surfers, who were first drawn to the wave in 1990 and have made periodic expeditions to the site ever since. The onset of tow-surfing in the early 2000s made it possible to ride once-unsurfable waves, which opened up Cortes Bank to a steady stream of borderline-suicidal adventurers. In cataloging the return visits of these pioneer surfers to Cortes Bank, Dixon along the way provides compelling descriptions of many other big waves around the world, the evolution of professional surfing, the introduction of tow-surfing and its impact on the sport, and a number of other touchstones of debate, such as whether surfing should be considered a sport, the jocular rivalry between many of surfing’s alpha-male top dogs, and what drives a certain breed of man to attempt big-wave surfing in the first place.

Dixon’s work should find a place within the relatively limited realm of scholarly research related to “extreme” sports, joining a number of recent publications examining the global and political impact of the sport, including Scott Laderman’s Empire in Waves: A Political History of Surfing (2014), Peter Westwick and Peter Neushul’s The World in the Curl: An Unconventional History of Surfing (2013), and Isaiah Helekunihi Walker’s Waves of Resistance: Surfing and History in Twentieth-Century Hawaii (2011). Ghost Wave is a more introspective study than these, directing its attention more to the growth and evolution of the sport itself, and to the mentality of its founding fathers. In this regard, its closest peer may be Matt Warshaw’s The History of Surfing (2010).

Ghost Wave should be considered core reading for historians and students of surfing and extreme sports, and ancillary reading among sports historians more broadly. It is also recommended for anyone interested in reading a thrilling adventure, whose narrative unfolds like a perfect wave.

The Female Tradition in Physical Education: Women First Reconsidered

Edited by David Kirk and Patricia Vertinsky. Published in 2016 by Routledge (226 pp., $145 USD, hardback)

Reviewed by M. Ann Hall, University of Alberta, Alberta

In 1984, British historian Sheila Fletcher published Women First: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education 1880–1980. Its focus was the history of one college, Bedford Physical Training College, located 75 kilometers north of London. Founded in 1903, Bedford was one of several specialist women’s physical education colleges in the United Kingdom during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term female tradition refers not only to the professional autonomy of women physical educators but also to their belief in the importance of physical activity for women’s health and well-being that incorporated a child-centered approach and drew on a wide range of activities, including dance, gymnastics, and some games. After the 1960s, many specialist PE colleges closed or merged with institutions of higher education, which promoted the growth of sports science over