

# THE RED LEFT HAND

— Pain, confusion, darkness.

Shaun Manners is wondering,  
“Did the last three years even  
happen?”

By Hugh Forward

Shaun sits on a bench on the veranda, backdropped by tall eucalypts, cascading rain and the chirps of wrens dashing around the garden. His long brown hair ripples down to his shoulders. If it weren't for the black fisherman's beanie, it would be blown out in an afro. He wears dark, understated clothing – a black hoodie, blue work jeans, black socks and plain black sneakers. The clothes have grease on them from working on his two cars. His white Subaru Brumby with the fibreglass canopy is his runabout. It fits a few boards in the back and gets him down most tracks around home. His 80 series Land Cruiser is the touring vehicle, for trips up north or to South Australia. It's not running at the moment and out of rego. He's finished work on the body, removing rust, bogging up and repainting, but the engine needs reconditioning. He lives in Margaret River's industrial area, in a studio carved into the back of his old man's shaping factory. The factory shares a shed with a diesel mechanic and is opposite another mechanic and a machinist. Shaun is surrounded by grease and foam and often woken by the screeching tyres of local drifters as they rip wet laps around the neighbouring streets at early hours of the morning.

Sitting with his left leg crossed over his right, sipping his coffee, he tells me about his mum's parents. There is a lot of love for both in the things he says about them, and in the way he says them. His eyes widen when he talks about them meeting and their young lives together in Ireland. Conversation moves on to his father's parents, who he speaks of with the same warmth. Both sets of grandparents are still alive and still together, only a few hours north. When he travels he stops in on his way past to hang out.

While Shaun considers memories of his parents, he is picking at the wooden table in front of him or playing with a loop of string or fiddling with the cords of his hoodie, hands always moving. When he talks about a photo of his dad on a Jiu-Jitsu tour, standing on the Venice Beach boardwalk wearing three-quarter pants, sneakers, socks pulled up, shirtless with a bum bag, flexing, looking ripped as all hell, he perks up.

His hands wave and dance in front of him to liven the conveyance of his vision. In both his modes of communication, the quiet and the animated, there is a pervasive sincerity. A weaving of thought and feeling. He means what he says.

Shaun's father, Mat dropped out of school and started repairing surfboards when he was 14 years old. Without the structure of school and with some holes in his life at home, Mat dived into the factory and learned hard from his mentor, Murray Smith. While surfing gave him direction, he needed more to belong to, and in his late teens friends got him involved with bikies. Mat was never patched-in but had relationships with guys who were.

Shaun's mother, Michelle Manners (née Callan), grew up in the Irish community around Fremantle. In her early adolescence the family moved back to Ireland for a few years, then back to Fremantle. After school

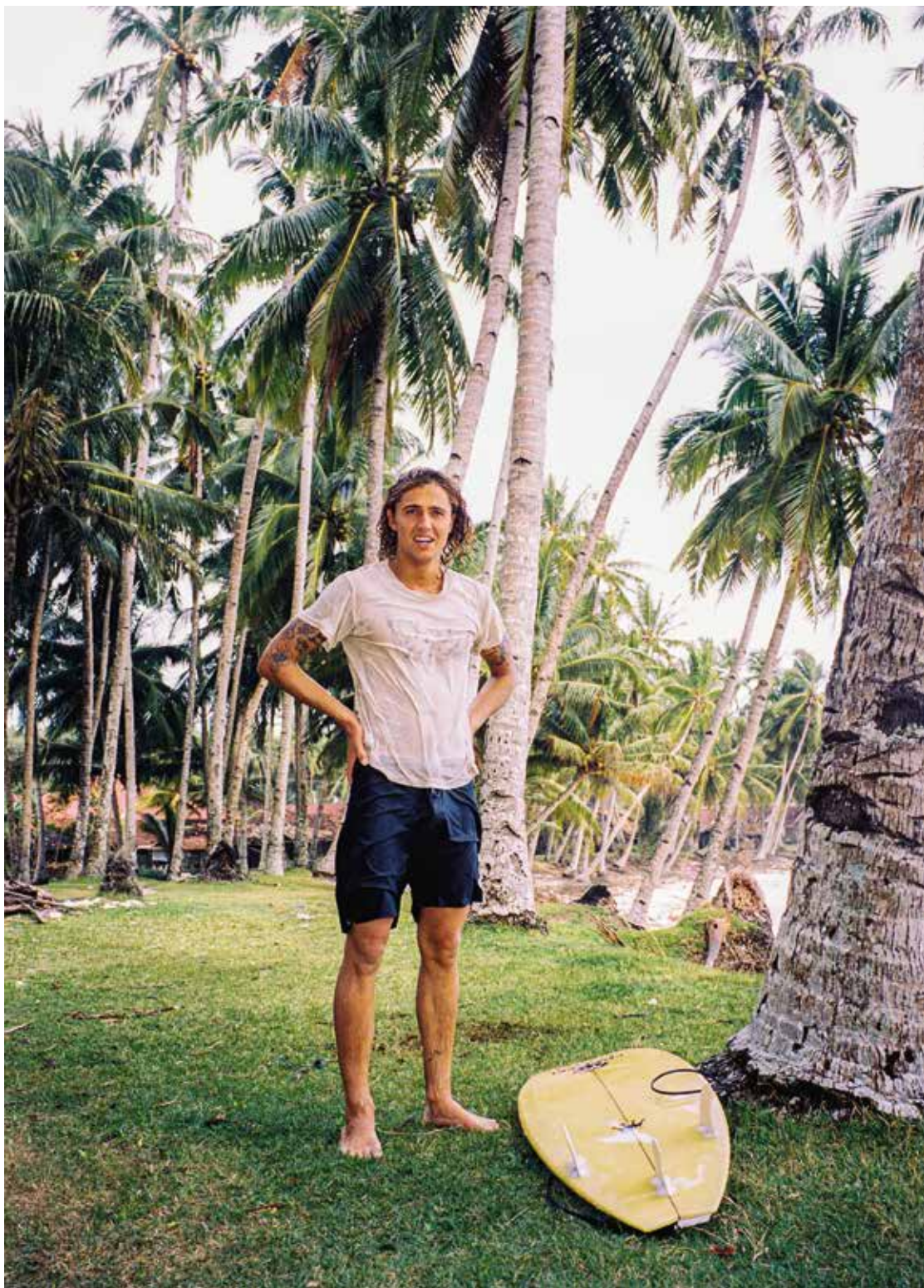


[ABOVE] Shaun is still trying to make sense of the past three years, a phantom injury crippling his surfing and forcing him into some dark corners. Today, back in the light, he's got a new gratitude for everything. Photo Josh Tabone  
[BELOW] Shaun's dad, Mat in his shaping bay at home in Margaret River. Photo Driftwood





It was a pretty crazy place to grow up," recalls Shaun of his home town of Margaret River. "It's super chilled, but I was there until I was 17 and it's a pretty small town. Just like any small town in Australia, you get pretty over it, but it was definitely sick to grow up surfing there. There's so many good waves, heaps of slabs and bombs, but I just couldn't stay there my whole life." [Photo: Kim Feast](#)



Back in the groove, pain-free and shredding, Chunny has been on a surf bender, which this past winter included a bunch of trips to Indo, including this mission to South Sumatra. Photo Tim Newey

she was working in a surf shop, not sure what she wanted to do in life when Mat came into the store. She captured his attention. He came back in a few times to drop some boards off and partly to see her. He asked her out and they started dating, cruising at the beach and going to parties together. Living and working by the ocean in Perth's northern suburbs, their relationship developed in harmony and they set about building a life for themselves. Their love progressed and Michelle fell pregnant with a boy, soon-to-be Shaun Callan Manners.

Pregnant, Michelle delivered Mat an ultimatum – sever ties with his bokie affiliates or she was going and taking the kid with her. Mat listened and went the other way, finding spirituality and structure in Christianity. After a few years the family moved to Margaret River, to a bush block cottage bought by

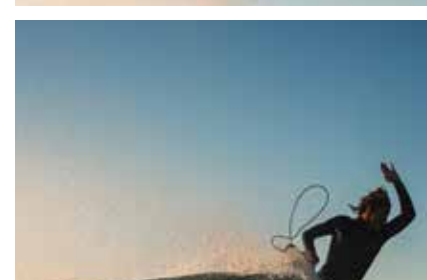
Mat's parents with winnings from their prized racehorse, Old Money. Michelle soon gave birth to Shaun's sister, Bridget.

Mat was a church-going Christian with some shade in his history, Michelle an atheist nurse. Shaun was attending a Catholic primary school, finding it hard to connect with the dogmatic nature of religion, but worshipping his dad and their mornings surfing together before school. Shaun was given little snippets of Mat's brushes with the bikies, served to him as lessons in what not to do.

Margaret River in the early 2000s was a fierce yet dreamy environment to grow up in. "It felt like my childhood went on for twice as long as it did. It went forever," Shaun reflects. He gained confidence from regular immersion in the Indian Ocean. "I felt so

comfortable in the water. I wasn't like that at school. At the beach I felt comfortable and felt like I was as good as the older kids." Mat soon got too busy shaping boards to take Shaun surfing regularly, so he'd send him surfing with Dino Adrian, Mick Short and Camel, watermen who knew the ocean around Margaret River better than anyone. The older lads did not pander to Shaun's youth. They would send him out in the large, throaty slabs they wanted to surf, giving him no choice but to keep up.

In 2015, Shaun moved to the Northern Rivers of New South Wales with hometown friend Creed McTaggart. Shaun was 17. Living in the laundry of a share-house in rural Bangalow, he quickly became the cheeky little mate of Beau Foster, Toby Cregan, Kelly Budden, Ellis Ericson and Noa Deane... not a bad bunch of talent to take notes from. It was Creed who got him to move over there, thinking of Shaun's future. Creed also worked on instilling in him the work ethic he knew he'd need in the cutthroat surf industry. Shaun looked up to Creed like a brother, and because of this was often resistant to his teachings. Instead, it ended up being Noa who'd inspire Shaun. He could relate to Noa's surfing more. "Where Creed has beautiful flow and sick style, I could never do that. I gelled with Noa's surfing because he gases it and loves pulling into sketchy pits and hitting ramps," he says. "The first Real Axe film came out and I had no clips. That felt really bad, and it started cottoning on that I needed to surf for longer. I went on a surf trip with Noa and he surfed all day and it made sense. It doesn't just come easy."



In 2015, Shaun moved east, into Creed McTaggart's laundry. "Creedo invited me to come stay at his place in Bangalow for a while, just outside of Byron. I think he invited me over for a couple of weeks and I just ended up staying for a year. I moved into the laundry. There was no washing machine in there, just the hot water system, but people pop in every now and then to get their clothes." Sequence Kim Feast

Shaun would spend the next 12 months surfing and filming for his own project. His debut film offering, *Blastoid*, received high acclaim. It was 13 minutes of stylish, explosive surfing and a mind-melting Tombstones ender that announced Shaun's arrival. "I had a sense of accomplishment. I'd finished something that I was proud of. The past five years were kind of a blur trying to figure out who I was, but then I knew that I'd applied myself to something and this was what life was supposed to feel like."

He turned his attention to work on the new RAGE film, which started with a boat trip to the Mentawais. The team – Beau Foster, Creed McTaggart, Noa Deane, Jaleesa Vincent, Jake Vincent, Toby Cregan and Shaun – surfed for six hours every day before drinking and carrying on until early morning. They were going huge the whole time, a mentality that carried on after they returned to Australian shores. It was non-stop travelling, surfing, filming and boozing. And it was working.

On a trip to Western Australia Shaun landed a huge straight air at North Point that got people talking. Noa Deane was telling people it was the best air he'd ever seen. Shaun felt he had the foundations of a film part. He loved the way he was living his life. He was 21, working hard and getting results, doing it all with a group of his closest mates. Drinking beer and whisky, getting stoned, frequenting country pubs, playing guitar, sleeping in a swag and pushing his surfing. Everything felt right. Why wouldn't it? He was partying and performing, something people had always said would not be possible together. He was silently proving them wrong. Though he was drinking booze and smoking weed and occasionally other party supplements, he was measured enough to keep them in check... at least for the moment. His hard drive was filling up and he was having the time of his life.

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The drizzling rain has stopped, the clouds have thinned and a cool, winter sunshine washes the west. The air is uncharacteristically still for this time of year. Just out of town on a large block, Shaun finishes his coffee and replaces it with a glass of water. He's steadying himself to tell the story of what went wrong. A confusing two-year journey with no answers that had him seriously considering life without surfing. He's told some close friends bits and pieces of it, more than he intended. Shaun prefers to face personal challenges on his own, retreating into himself to deal with it. It's an approach he learned from his at-times painfully stoic father. There's a hint of agitation in his body language. Telling this story in detail for the first time is a daunting prospect. He's ready to let it go.

Shaun, on the back of his growing profile, was invited to a wavepool in Texas for the Stab High air event. It was a big deal. Despite all the work he'd done that year and the confidence he was feeling, doubt was creeping in. He was scared of the prospect of failing in front of so many important people, both peers and industry heads. It was a pressure he'd not felt before. Was he good enough? Or would he be exposed as a wasted talent? Two days of surfing in the pool was not make-or-break, but his mind had given it a gravity he



Chunny scrambled people's minds when he dropped a huge straight air at North Point that featured in RAGE 3, that got labelled by some as the biggest ever done. "Easily," confirmed Noa Deane. "It was unbelievable. It was so big." A chronic hip injury, however, is not a friend of anyone doing the world's biggest airs. With the pain under control now, however, Shaun has launched skyward with renewed confidence. Photo: Josh Tabone

could not shake. It triggered self-sabotage, drinking and staying up all night for four days straight. He fell into that tired old cliché of pretending not to care to protect himself. It was an immature response to a challenge that loomed larger for him than he probably should have let it.

He's reluctant to go into details of his behaviour at the contest but shares an anecdote from the last day. Everyone involved had been staying in rooms around the pool, surfing and partying together. At the end, when people were packing up and leaving, Shaun had his belongings spread out by the pool, drunkenly trying to get everything into his board bag. *Stab's* Sam McIntosh watched on as he was leaving and said goodbye. Shaun looked up, a fumbling mess, mumbled incoherently, tripped and fell onto his boards, snapping out fins in the process. Vaughan Blakey was nearby and ran over to help him up. Blakey finished packing Shaun's bag and bundled him into the back of the van, bound for Dallas airport. Shaun was too far gone to feel embarrassed. He spewed in the van on the way to the airport, and was soon alone, out of his mind, waiting for his flight. In a moment of clarity, he realised he was in the same airport in which his idol, Andy Irons had died almost a decade earlier. A strange woman helped him find his gate and board his flight home.

On the flight home from LA, Shaun found himself overcome by a steadily increasing pain in his left hip. By the time he was halfway home it was excruciating. He knew it was something serious. Thinking back over the preceding four days, he couldn't remember anything that might have done it.

Back home at the farm cottage he rented in Talofa, outside of Byron, he was in agony. He couldn't stand, couldn't walk and was having trouble sleeping. Surfing was out of the question. Over the course of the next few weeks the pain spread steadily from his left hip, up his side to his shoulder, then down his arm to his left hand. His right side meanwhile was fine.

He saw a physiotherapist who gave him a diagnosis of bursitis, when fluid in the hip joint becomes inflamed enough to cause pain and restrict movement. The physio prescribed rest and some physical therapy. For three months there was no improvement. Shaun started seeing Chris Prosser, the WSL's Medical Director, who concurred with the bursitis diagnosis. Chris got Shaun on a strict diet, high in protein and low in carbohydrates. He also got Shaun to give up drinking, smoking and to minimise the amount of walking he was doing. He started surfing again but was in agony and was a shadow of himself.

The lifestyle shift improved his general physical health, but the pain barely waned. Jake Vincent was living with Shaun at Talofa and saw it all unfolding. "To come off the back of a good run of momentum, he had done the highest air anyone had ever done and then being like, 'Fuck, I can't do airs, I'm just trying to do turns' at that point in your surfing career must have been scary and stressful," he laments.

Shaun pressed on, going on trips to Western and South Australia to film. Long spells in cars and on planes were excruciating but he pushed through. He was selective of when he would surf, being careful only to put stress on his body if the waves were firing. It was a strangely considered approach. A

measured summation of probability and sacrifice were required whereas normally his approach would be to surf and surf until his bones were dust and the waves had gone to shit.

An interesting pattern emerged. Shaun would spend the first hour of his sessions warming up, surfing gently as he loosened up the hip and built momentum. Then once he felt some confidence, he'd start to surf with the power and explosiveness he was used to, throwing himself into large sections with little thought of his debilitation. With his mind freed up and his confidence on song, he would make a wave good enough to be included in the film. Immediately after finishing that wave, the pain would return and bring his session to an end. This pattern was not apparent to Shaun at the time but there was a vague suspicion in his subconscious that this injury was not normal. It was a deep, almost imperceptible feeling that something did not quite line up.

Chris Prosser saw that treatment so far was having little effect and suggested Shaun try a steroid injection. It was going to render him fairly immobile for four weeks. His time at the farm cottage in Talofa had come to an end and he had no fixed address, but Toby and Kel offered him a room at their place in Bangalow for the duration of the recovery. He booked the appointment for the injection.

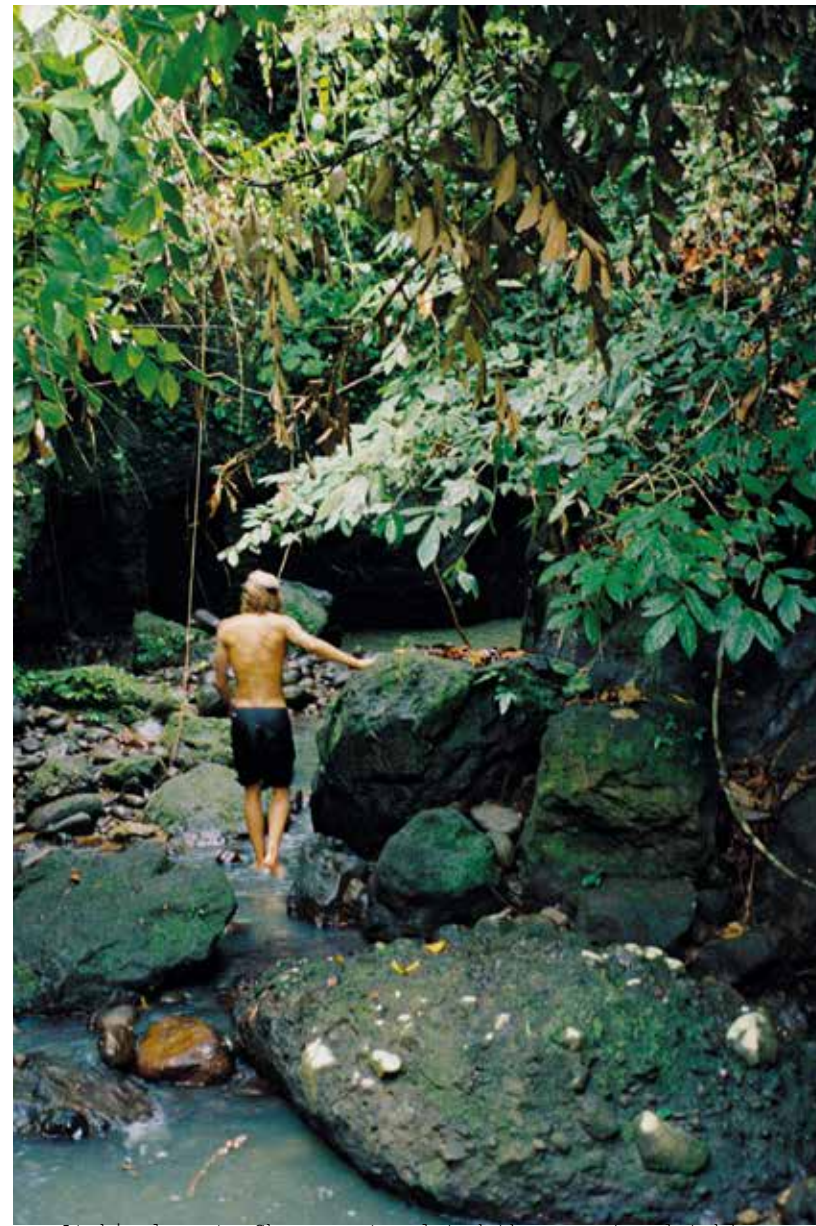
Creed drove Shaun to the clinic in the morning. The procedure was finished in five minutes and they drove home. Between trips filming, Shaun had been seeing a girl from Sydney. Down at the beach that afternoon, he realised he was at the spot he'd taken her on their first date. He felt an urge to be affectionate. He whipped out his phone, took a photo and sent it to her with the text, "First date vibes haha." She replied, "Are you alone? I need to talk to you." Nervous, he went back to Bangalow, sat on the veranda and called her. She explained in detail how she had been out drinking the night before and had hooked up with her ex. He hung up the phone, grabbed cigarettes from inside and began chain smoking.

He left the house in anger and walked down to the Bangalow Pub. As he was about to walk in the door his phone rang. It was Chris Prosser. "How did the injection go, mate?" he asked. "Aah yeah dunno... I'm about to walk into the pub." Shaun told him about the phone call with the girl, but Chris said he needed to go home immediately, and that's where the tears started flowing. Rock bottom. Pain, confusion, helplessness. No path out.

In the weeks that followed it became apparent the steroid hadn't worked, adding to the maelstrom of misery. He had been following a strict protein diet, no drinking, no smoking, almost no surfing, daily stretching and rehabilitation. Still there was no improvement to the pain in his hip, only deprivation from the things that made him happy.

In the space of only a few months, Shaun's life had flipped. He had gone from a golden feeling of invincibility, glowing with love for his life and taking ground in his career with ease, to house-ridden heartbreak with a mysterious and crippling hip injury, a whole lot of doubt, and questions he had no answers for.

Filming for *RAGE 3* wrapped up in October 2019. Shaun had banked some quality surfing footage before he injured himself and managed well-enough to push



At his lowest, Shaun contemplated the uncontentable. "After I realised I couldn't do it, I was like, 'If I can't do it abruptly, I'm gonna do it slowly.' But it got more twisted because I would drink and get more spirally and more panic attacks would happen."

through the pain to bank some more after. He'd gathered enough footage to compile a section he could be proud of. He had no answers for his injury but for the time being he had the film release to look forward to. A premiere tour of Australia and the US was due to kick off in April 2020.

The pandemic broke, the tour never happened. The film was released online instead. With the world's surfing population unable to travel, it provided a lens to live vicariously through. There was the boat trip to the Mentawais, road trips down the coast, beer drinking escapades, impressive surfing in all kinds of waves and through it all a thread of good times with good friends. Shaun's surfing and demeanour stood tall. He was happy with the reception but angry at his inability to heal and get back in the water.

Shaun decided to shake things up with a move down to Wollongong. The borders between New South Wales and Western Australia were shut, but he was eyeing a potential move west and figured Wollongong would be a good place to lie in wait. He had mates there and the waves suited his surfing. Little did he know the intended short stay would blow out into almost a year.

Living in Wollongong, a sense of disenchantment grew and his adherence to a healthy structure started to fall away. He returned to bad habits; partying, sleeping on couches, not surfing. He'd then take solo trips away from the coast to camp, reflect alone and recover. He would pack his car, drive up to a secluded spot in the Blue Mountains and set up for a few days. Playing guitar, writing down thoughts, drinking beer and whisky, smoking and thinking about anything except for surfing. Once he felt he had cleared his head he'd roll back into town and do it all again, burning the candle at both ends until the flames met in the middle. The pain in his hip, the mental toll of dashed hopes and his destructive lifestyle plunged him into depression. His career in surfing was over before it had really got going. In his mind, all he was capable of moving forward was to work at a petrol station. He was done. Dark and done.

His first panic attack sent him to hospital, hallucinating. Another unhealthy relationship with a girl isolated him further. More panic attacks followed. There was no improvement in his hip, nor was he now looking for any. He was strung out, hardly surfing and not knowing when – or if – he would surf again. In low moments he harboured dark thoughts of ending it all. "After I realised I couldn't do it, I was like, 'If I can't do it abruptly, I'm gonna do it slowly.' But it got more twisted because I would drink and get more spirally and more panic attacks would happen."

This was late 2020.

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In the middle of all of this, Shaun's contract with Billabong was up for renegotiation. During this time, Globe team manager, Beren Hall, approached him and said they were looking to add another surfer to their team. They already had Taj Burrow and Dion Agius and were looking for someone young to fill it out. Globe appealed to Shaun. He went back to Billabong and filled them in on the approach. Neither company knew he was injured. He'd hidden it completely. Neither knew about his state of mind.

Billabong had seen his potential for a long time. Ten years he'd ridden for them, and that potential was starting to pay off. They backed his surfing and his character, drastically upping their contract offer. Shaun was appreciative of the time and money Billabong had invested in him over the past decade, but he had an irrepressible feeling that to recover from his injury he needed a fresh start. He thanked Billabong for their offer and expressed his gratitude for their support over the years, then signed the contract with Globe.

The industry had faith in him, although he struggled to see it given his current state. Instead of elation, he felt a momentary and hollow reprieve. "I was having panic attacks while I was signing over that Christmas. That's when the panic attacks were at their worst, while that was all going on."

In the midst of his own depression, a tragedy hit. Back home, one of his childhood friends took his own life. Shaun felt immense guilt. Struggling with depression himself it pained him to think his mate had been experiencing a similar darkness, but they hadn't spoken about it. He couldn't help but wonder if sharing



"Fuck, this is pretty big, I don't think I'm going to get into it," Shaun remembers his iconic Tombstone air-drop from 2018 (not this wave, for the record).  
"When the bigger waves comes though out there the whole fucking horizon goes dark. Just a huge wall. That's when I knew it was a good wave. I was in one of those crazy realms where I was just waiting for it. The wave came through and the old boy next to me said, 'Woah this ones ugly,' so I started paddling for it just to freak him out." Photo: Driftwood

When asked how living on the east coast for four years changed his surfing, Shaun replies: "Not really the way I surf, but I surf more now because the waves are pretty shit in Byron most of the time, and when they're good it makes you think, 'Fuck! I've gotta go surfing!'" And then when I'm back home in West Oz, I just go nuts because you're spoiled for choice over there. Now I've learned to appreciate where I grew up." Photo Kim Feast



their experiences might have prevented the loss of such a cherished and radiant life.

Shaun flew home west. The Margaret River community was united in their grief, and they were there for each other. After a week at home it dawned on Shaun that was where he needed to heal. Though he didn't know what healing entailed yet, he was in a place where he could quietly assert discipline in his life. He sensed that discipline was the foundation he needed if he was going to get better.

Before he could move back home, he had to return to Bangalow to tie up loose ends. As he was doing so, NSW went into a pandemic lockdown and Western Australia closed its borders. Shaun spent six weeks in limbo, tantalisingly delayed from moving forward. The situation settled and in October 2021 he put his Land Cruiser on a truck and himself on a flight.

Once he was set up at home he saw one of the state's leading sports doctors, who referred him to get an MRI. Shaun took the images back to the doctor, who first accused him of lying about the pain. Photographer and friend, Kim Feast then suggested Shaun consult physiotherapist Tim Mitchell in Perth. At the first appointment Mitchell drew a circle on a piece of paper and listed all the possible causes of Shaun's ongoing pain around it, suggesting they run tests to eliminate possibilities until they narrowed it down. For one of the tests, Mitchell poked a toothpick into the same points on opposite sides of Shaun's body. When the right forearm was poked, it felt typical. When the left forearm was poked, it felt uncomfortable. The same pattern emerged around his shoulders, hips and legs. When the left hip was poked, Shaun felt a wave of negative emotion and "all sorts of shit."

Mitchell didn't say too much, except that treating this sensitivity was likely the road they would end up going down. Mitchell advised Shaun to book in for an anaesthetic injection, as a way of eliminating physical sources. If the pain was in the hip joint, the injection would provide clear relief within 15 minutes. He had the injection on the last day of 2021. It had no effect on the pain whatsoever.

At the next appointment with Mitchell, Shaun was asked to close his eyes and visualise his right hand. He imagined a perfectly normal picture of his right hand. Asked to do the same for his left, he saw only a vague fuzzy blur of red. Mitchell was gently introducing the notion that his pain was more than just physical. He might have landed awkwardly or there could have been some impact to his hip in Texas that caused a musculoskeletal sprain, but it was the associated emotional anxiety that was causing the pain to take on a life of its own. Shaun felt the mental component had come from the pressure he'd put on himself leading up to, and after, Texas. "If I didn't stress so much about being injured at the start it wouldn't have manifested into that." Long after the physical damage had healed, his mind was carrying the pain forward.

After this second appointment, Shaun had a three-hour drive home from Perth to Margaret River. While driving, he tried something. He imagined he felt no pain in his left side. He told himself he was fine. Concentrating on this he felt momentary relief but could not sustain it. The pain

rushed back. Though it returned as viscerally as ever, it was now accompanied by a feeling that had been foreign for over two years. The feeling was of progress, of hope, of a tiny gap in the clouds.

It took him a while to believe, but he began finding resources on the relatively uncharted approach to chronic pain management that Mitchell had put him on to. "It's crazy how fugazi the whole thing is, how airy-fairy the whole fucking thing is." Still, he absorbed podcasts, books, talks and studies with fervour, practising and honing visualisation techniques as he learned them.

Mitchell highlighted our plasticity and its application to pain. "Our bodies are really efficient. We can get good at riding a bike or playing a piano and when you do, you don't have to think hard. Our pain system also gets very efficient at times," Mitchell said. When misfiring, the mind's powerful ability to adapt can be harmful. "Shaun had gotten so used to being tuned in to this hip problem that his system did it subconsciously. It often makes assumptions and leaps on things and fires up or gives him pain when there's no relevance to it," Mitchell said. "So you have got to actually cognitively or consciously unwind that by understanding what pain does or does not mean, and then physically loading the leg. You are essentially violating your own system's assumptions by showing the body it can do more than it expects."

With his understanding growing, Shaun set about untangling the emotional interactions from the pain in his hip. The motivation to get better returned. After nearly three years of spiralling darkness and confusion there was semi-linear improvement and he went at it wholeheartedly. Mitchell created a routine for him, but one without the strict standards Shaun previously thought he had to hold himself to.

He didn't drink in the early stages, nor did he surf, but those pillars of his life were incrementally reintroduced. As his visualisations improved so too did the pain. It was less prominent, and he could subdue it for meaningful periods. After four weeks of practice he could sit down in the same position for longer than ten minutes, then longer than half an hour. This meant he could play guitar, sit in a sauna or drive the coast checking the waves. These actions brought joy. As he retrained the pathways in his brain, likening them to water flowing through new tributaries, his mind slowly came back to him. There were times when the pain threatened to flood back, but he'd learned how to slow it.

Initially he returned to surfing on longer boards in mellower waves. He was hesitant to go huge, easing his way back through flowing carves and slow, rhythmic surfing. Initially, when he would drink it would bring back the pain. Mitchell reshaped it, suggesting he use beer to reward himself instead of punishing himself. After a good week's work he could have a few, and he did. As the healed pathways in his brain became more worn-in the old, injured pathways withered away. He was able to drink whisky and beer until he was drunk, then wake up with a bit of a hangover but no resurgence in hip pain. Progressing cautiously but quickly he forged back to full health in a matter of months, surfing shorter boards in punchier waves and throwing airs again.

Having his great love of surfing stripped away from him for nearly three years shook his bones and



"... on the other side now, he wants to get the most out of life. He wants to be himself with his mates. He wants to be equipped to handle life's less-than-pleasant moments. He wants to buy a house, provide guidance to young surfers, and to 'keep whackin' it until I'm 70.'" [Photo Kim Feast](#)

brought his existence into question. "I didn't really know what I was living for, from 17 through to 23 when I started figuring out the injury. The whole injury was a big perspective shift. I took it all for granted, lost my identity. All that chaos was controlled by surfing. When I couldn't have surfing as that anchor it scared me. Now it's some sort of blessing to be able to surf all the time. I love it way more than I ever did."

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Three months after our initial conversation we caught up for another coffee. This time at Shaun's studio nestled into the back of his dad's shaping factory. We sit on the tailgate of his Subaru Brumby in the shed's laneway. An old radiator, a milk crate, a wooden pallet, rusty rims, old tyres and a stack of bricks lie along the bottom of a chain link fence. His wetsuit and towel are hung over the top of it.

Shaun has been busy. He has just returned from the latest iteration of Stab High, this time in Lakey Peak. It was his first event since the one in Texas three years ago. "On the first day my whole left leg got stiff again. It was just because I was nervous. There was nothing wrong with my hip. As soon as I got on my board I knew it would go away and it did. It was good to exercise that feeling of jumping in the water, being at home and being able to shut the world out." Shaun made the final and finished second, just missing out on 20 grand. It was validation of his newfound ability to

keep stride while traversing wobbly terrain. Three years on it was closure.

As he reflects on the path he's been down he has a calm and impartial delivery. It doesn't feel like he is trying to prove anything or has any agenda. He speaks honestly and what happens after that he doesn't care. His legs are crossed and he taps his front foot. His hands shift slowly from one shape to another, arms barely moving in a calm rhythm in front of him. Sitting on the tailgate of his car, the energy and clarity he feels now has him questioning if the previous three years were even real, even possible. He has to be careful not to be too dismissive. During those three years he saw the world through a dark lens and attracted dark events with dark behaviour. But on the other side now, he wants to get the most out of life. He wants to be himself with his mates. He wants to be equipped to handle life's less-than-pleasant moments. He wants to buy a house, provide guidance to young surfers, and to "keep whackin' it until I'm 70."

He hops up, grabs his wetsuit and towel from the fence, throws them in the back of the ute and shuts the tailgate. This time of year it's rare for the wind to be as light as it is. There will be decent waves somewhere on the Margaret River coastline. He has one more week at home before he leaves until Christmas. All surf trips. We say goodbye with a firm embrace and he gets in his car, healthy, free and a hell of a lot wiser than he used to be.





This North Coast corner has a sharky rep, and quiet days like this bring Julian's J-Bay experience back to the surface. "Ever since then, I've been more sensitive to spooky situations, for sure. But the moment itself? I think still to this day, I wouldn't be able to go, "Oh, you know, if that happens again tomorrow, I'd do exactly the same thing. I'm going to react the same way." I still don't even understand why I did it." Photo Woody Gooch