

South Jersey storms provide opportunity to surf, great photos

KRISTINE AUBLE For The Press

Professional surfer Rob Kelly knows the best waves in New Jersey aren't always in the summer.

The Ocean City native has been all over the world surfing, traveling to Hawaii and Nicaragua this October, but Kelly grew up paddling through snow and wind to catch the biggest and strongest waves in New Jersey.

"I think growing up here and just being forced to surf in what we have kind of got me comfortable doing it," Kelly said. "As I got older and got to travel, I think I realized that even though it's not as consistent as most places around the world, when we do have good days, it can rival any wave anywhere else in the world. But again, a lot of time the bad weather comes with it."

While most South Jersey residents prepared to stay inside during the recent nor'easters, local surfers think otherwise.

The forecast for low temperatures, high winds and snow didn't stop Kelly from braving the cold. Instead, he put on a 5-millimeter-thick wetsuit, gloves, hood and booties to charge the 6- to 8-foot waves the storms brought.

"Pretty much the only thing that's out in the open is our faces," Kelly said. "The wind was definitely a bit of a challenge because it was so strong, but I think that's also what made the waves so good. It just ended up being two days of just some of the best, longest waves that I've ever seen in New Jersey."

Kelly paddled out with fellow Ocean City native and two-time Cold War surf contest winner Andrew Gesler. The two have been surfing in the cold for years, and Gesler said for him, the work preparing for the storm is worth it for that perfect wave.

"There's things that you find that you love in life, and some things you have to work harder for," Gesler said. "Really it just takes one wave, I can get one wave in the middle of the blizzard, one memorable wave where everything comes together, and that's it. It's getting back to that youthful feeling of surfing for the first time."

Gesler said going out in winter storms creates a close bond among New Jersey surfers who share the experience of chasing waves in these conditions.

"It's the spirit of competition and the love of competition, too," Gesler said. "There's nothing better than seeing your friend get the wave of his winter and then getting yours. There's that brotherhood of people just conquering the elements to achieve the glory."

Alex DePhillipo, a Margate local, also surfed in the storm with Kelly and Gesler.

DePhillipo and Gesler are co-creators of Dark Fall Productions, a video production company that has created multiple surf movies.

During the recent storm, DePhillipo brought his video equipment to get footage for an upcoming Dark Fall project.

“It’s definitely a challenge, but I think that’s why I like it,” DePhillipo said of filming in the storm. “It’s a lot harder to get those shots, and to get them makes it really worth it. It’s a really good time. I mean, it’s fun because you feel like you’ve accomplished something.”

Kelly shares this sentiment and said the New Jersey waves he surfed last weekend and other winters are unlike any he has encountered in his travels around the world.

“If you went anywhere else in the world to surf waves like this, you’d be surfing with hundreds of people, but here you can go out and surf with just your friends, or even by yourself if you wanted to — and that’s pretty unique.”

With more storms likely to hit South Jersey, local surfers will continue to paddle out as long as the waves are pumping.