



Surf Contest: Photographs by Ron Church

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While surfers may look more relaxed than most and may even be more relaxed, they are not exempt from the human desire to go higher, farther and faster. As the members of the developing surfing world of the early 1960s found themselves striving to surpass one another and looking to quantify their most accomplished riders, the first surf contests were organized. These loosely arranged affairs had, as Shirley Richards (Ron Church's former wife) recently remembered, silk-screened T-shirts as their prizes. Pretty innocent stuff. At 27, as Church strode forcefully into this arena, he had already accomplished a great deal, first as a jet, test photographer, then as an up-and-coming (and ultimately much-awarded) underwater photographer. In his ongoing quest for new material, he brought to surfing a headful of new ideas, camera angles and lighting techniques--at the very moment these earliest contests arose, at the moment that surfing, which had been considered a somewhat off-center activity, began to organize itself and enter the mainstream. Although Church only actively photographed surfing and its surrounding lifestyle for a few short years, he was there at the beginning of its transformation into something big, and as viewers will see, his documentation of its first contests--which were at once mundane and heroic--brought surf photography to another level. All but a few of these images are previously unpublished.

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