

one step beyond...

The Legend of Spyder Wills



Who is Spyder Wills? You don't know, do you? Well, he's probably never heard of you, either. The fact that he is the best Frizbee thrower in Laguna Beach might not excite you . . . but that's only because you haven't been watching him. So listen closely: With his flexible plastic Pluto Platters, Wills is probing into the outer limits of Frizbee performance as yet undreamed of by the High Performers on their conventional surfboards. And these are not simply the outer limits of Frizbee performance. What Spyder Wills dreams today may one day affect us all!

Wow!

by **Drew Kampion**

Photos: Brad Barrett



"...aerial ballet with a plastic butterfly."

Spyder Wills uses a \$30-a-month room in Laguna Beach as his knapsack. The room is tucked away very inconspicuously at the rear of an art studio that opens onto the Coast Highway. It's wedged into the recess between two larger protrusions in the building's architecture, and is easy to pass without notice. Nestled discreetly in the ivy shrubbery opposite the door to the room is a convex mirror with which Spyder can scrutinize approaching bodies from his lair.

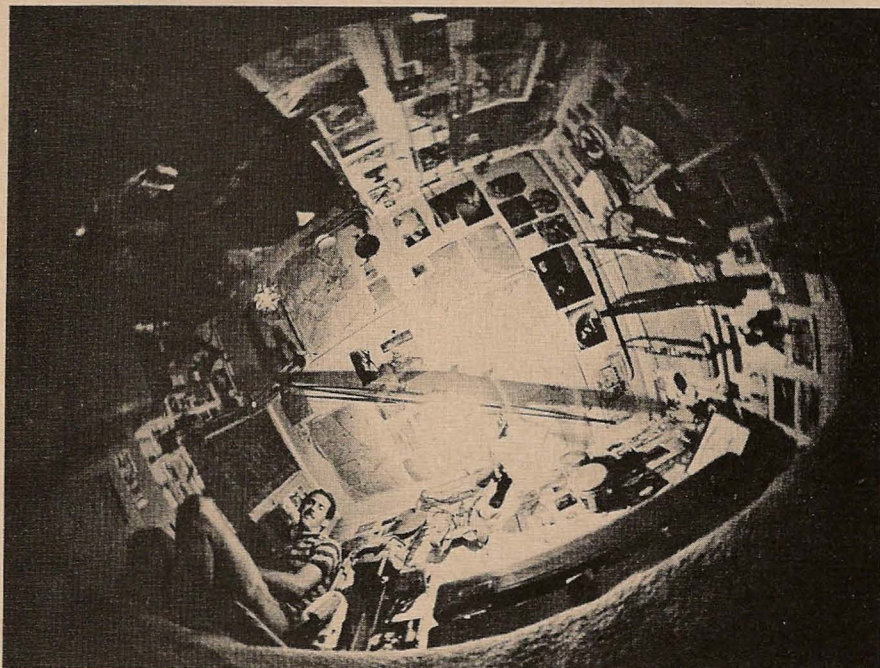
The outside of the room is camouflaged in the flat grays and tans of World War II combat aircraft. An eight-millimeter camera scans the area around the doorway; the door itself is a maze of decals, posters, souvenirs, warnings, street signs and the like, as well as a pad and pencil with which visitors can leave word of their visits.

The \$30-a-month room is low, crowded and neat. It is also very small: six feet by nine feet. With the maybe six-and-a-half feet of height, the room adds up to three hundred and fifty cubic feet of visual assault. Posters, maps, calendars, discharge papers from the Air Force, photographs of Spyder and friends, his flute, bongos, a bombsight from a B-24, skis and magazine clippings. Everything is packed into the room the way equipment is packed into a knapsack: "It has to be neat. I clean the place every day," Spyder says, "otherwise it'd get out of control, and I wouldn't be able to handle it." The room is so packed with stack after stack of neatly organized items that the only convenient place for Spyder's paipo board is behind the window. To get it out he unlocks the window from the outside and takes the board down from where it hangs. Even with the board gone, you still can't see through the window because the pile on the inside fills the entire wall.

Tall, thin, affectionate, mustached and sinister in a benevolent kind of way, Spyder is one of the best paipo boarders in California, but paipo boarding itself is so unobtrusive that reputations are seldom made using the stubby little board as a vehicle of expression. Yet he is a much better body surfer than he is a paipo



B. Barrett's famous in-the-tube shot of S. Wills.



A man-hole view of Spyder's nest.

boarder, probably one of the best anywhere. But body surfing, though popular, is so obscure that a criterion of good and bad hasn't really been established on a large scale.

Wills is also one of the best photographers in surfing, though he's never done a surfing movie for the tour circuit and doesn't even own a 16mm camera. He uses an 8mm Bolex, and keeps exactly one reel of film in his collection. The reel is called "Odds and Ends;" and, says Spyder, "It's always changing. When

I get a new shot that I like, I cut out one that I've gotten tired of and put the new one in. It's always the same length, but it's always changing." "Odds and Ends" is a collection of some of the best 8mm photography you'll ever see. There are shots of Sunset Beach and the Pipeline that are every bit as good as the best 16mm shots. The film also includes hundreds of Spyder's surreptitiously filmed movies of the Laguna Beach subculture through the medium of telephoto subterfuge.

"...smoothness, motion, focus, and color..."



Spyder, the man from neon, lurks in the web at positively Brooks Street.

Like his paipo boarding and body surfing, Wills' photography went unnoticed for quite a while. He shot pictures of Corky Carroll for Hobie Surfboards, and put together an 8mm promotional film. But besides this, his photography was all in fun. Until Greg MacGillivray needed some help in the filming of TV coverage of surfing:

"We needed a photographer," MacGillivray recalls, "and Spyder had past experience with telephoto lenses and surfing. Besides that, he's easy to work with and technically his stuff was near to perfect."

MacGillivray first lined Spyder up to cover the local surf in California while he and Freeman split to France to work on the new movie. "He didn't shoot anything," Greg remembers, "because he didn't want to shoot anything that wasn't perfect." So that the first time Spyder saw commercial action was actually in Puerto Rico. "He did a great job," Greg says, "but he really freaked-out the guys from ABC. He can't work with crowds around, and kept moving off down the beach by himself.

When we finally got him situated on the judges' platform for the finals, the director of the ABC thing was sitting right next to him and kept trying to run Spyder's camera for him."

"What are you *doing*???" the ABC chief exclaimed at one point during the Rincon finals.

"Oh, I'm just freakin' out," Spyder smiled. Through the rest of the finals, Wills just smiled and nodded at everything the director said. "The people at ABC really hate our guts now," MacGillivray notes with some remorse.

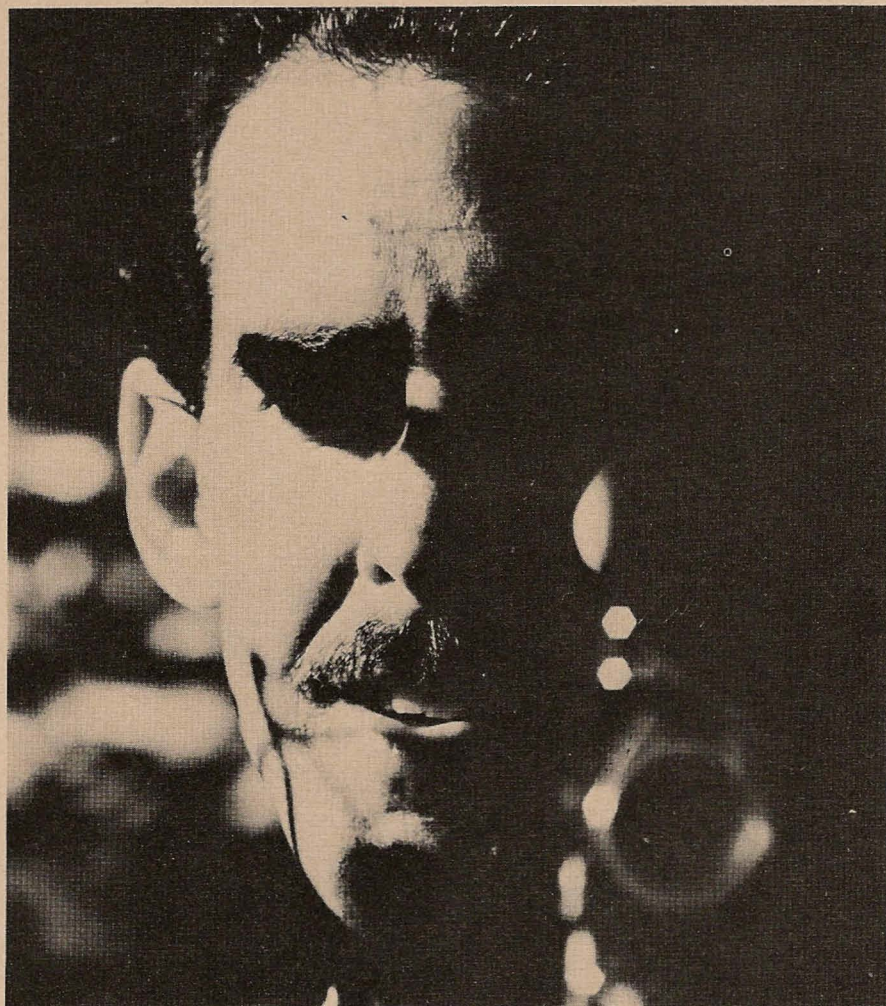
A two-and-a-half year veteran, Spyder "learned a lot about people in the Air Force." They also taught him "to be neat, to be clean, and to be on time. If you say you're gonna do something, do it, or have a good excuse. I got away with a lot of things because I was always on time: mixed uniforms, clothes never pressed, unshined shoes. After two-and-a-half years, they decided I was a freak and let me go."

Spyder started body surfing seriously in 1959, and really got into it heavily in '65 after his discharge. He

discovered the paipoboard in '63, and has become one of the most advanced practitioners anywhere. "But," Spyder muses, "I enjoy body-surfing more than anything else in the water because you're right in with it. It's a beautiful blend of timing and total cooperation with the water. Fantastic sensations! Very pure, very independent, very stoney!"

"I like it best," he adds, "when the waves are so good that you're just giggling. You ride inside laughing and cackling like a turkey laying eggs."

"The only time I go in the water now is when the surf is really good. If you go out when the surf is crummy and you don't do well, you wonder why. It's the waves. So when it's junky, I take an eight-mile walk back in the greenery: do a twelve or fifteen-hour thing." The greenery that Spyder is referring to is the hills and mountains behind Laguna. Partially as a carryover from his "war days," partly as an expression of his individuality, Spyder enjoys to get away as much as possible, yet under the optimum conditions. "Actually,"



Spyder and his fluidhead.


he points out, "for me it's not just the ocean, but the total natural environment. Both the mountains and the ocean are powerful influences on me."

Besides his definite aquatic talents, Spyder is also the top Frizbee thrower in all of Laguna Beach and a member of the Frizbee competition-demonstration team. "The Frizbee," says Wills, "is an intermediary between the ocean and the hills. I use one set of muscles in the sea and another set when I'm hiking in the mountains. The Frizbee throwing keeps both sets of muscles coordinated and working together. It's really helped me out, too. Before I started on the Frizbee, I'd have a heck of a time in the hills. This is besides what it really is in itself: aerial ballet with a plastic butterfly. It's hypnotic: an independent thing riding on the wind like a surfer rides a wave."

On off-days, when the hills are far away and the surf is poor, Spyder "keeps my records straight, and when the camera's working and the color's good (and everything's per-

fect?), I shoot pictures. I spend a lot of time watching the town with binoculars mounted on my fluid head tripod. Then I go out with a friend of mine who flies falcons: automatic Frizbees. They go so fast you can hear the wind whistle off them."

It is appropriate that Spyder Wills is a photographer as well as a body-paipo-Frizbee surfer. All that he does is influenced through a peculiarly perceptive and specially photographically oriented mind. "Photography has taught me about smoothness, motion, focus and color," he summarizes. These have combined in his crowded (though organized) head to produce a distillation of a constantly metamorphosing vision of reality and life: a life that is not preoccupied with survival, but survival that is preoccupied with life.

Now, with a Hawaiian filming season behind him and the long, hot summer ahead, Spyder has found employment at Laguna's Burger Nook where he is duly compensated for his variegated talents. "I'm paid," he sighs, "in hamburgers." 

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