



Somewhere Boy

THE UNLIKELY ARRIVAL OF MORGAN CIBILIC.

Interviews by Sean Doherty

The young guy who came out of nowhere last year to qualify for the world tour didn't come out of nowhere. He came from somewhere... a surfing heartland. Two of them actually. Yamba and Merewether. But when Morgan Cibilic jumped exactly a hundred spots in a year to qualify – from 111 to 11 – he even caught out the WSL, who didn't even have a photo of him. But in this day of kids in nappies becoming superstars, kids who by the time they've finally made it have been famous for a decade, the sudden and unexpected arrival of a guy like Morgan is a win for grassroots surfing. And what made his arrival an even bigger win for the battlers was that he was riding One of Wills... he qualified riding the boards of the guy who'd shaped his very first board. Will Webber – of the free-thinking Webber clan, former tour surfer, former Mindcrack guitarist, half-reformed party boy – not only put good boards under his feet, but instilled some old school tour pride into him at the same time. – Sean Doherty



On one leg Morgan got the job done in Hawaii last year. Photo: Trent Mitchell

Will: “The first time I remember seeing Morgs surf was walking down back beach with my girlfriend. I was walking along and saw this kid on a wave and I said to her, ‘That kid just *navigated* that wave incredibly.’ And she said, ‘What a strange word to use for surfing.’ But he just knew where the power source was and I knew that’s really rare. He must’ve only been about five. He was miniature, and I was just going look at this kid thinking, he knows where to go. And the wave was two or three foot, quite solid, not a little push-in. And then my girlfriend said as we walked on, ‘You’ve got to get him on your boards one day.’ I waited for his dad, Alan to come in and I said, ‘Mate, your son just navigated that wave so well. That’s something you don’t see.’ He just seemed like a natural and you only see a few of those in your life.”

Morgan: “I was, like, three or something when I started surfing. I just loved the water. Dad’s a pretty decent surfer, just getting a bit old now. From there I never looked back. Lots of good learning places around Angourie. I feel like when I was younger the local crowd was a lot heavier too, so you definitely got put in your place. If you stepped out of line you definitely got put back in line. But, we had a really good crew when I was little, guys like Chris Zaffas. He’s two years older than me and a couple of the older guys were pushing me and my mates in bigger stuff, especially at like some of the ledges.”

Will: “He was just this little miniature grommet who was just too shy to even talk or look at me. He just came up with his dad, who said, ‘Oh look, we’d like to get him a board.’ I was stoked he came to me because I knew how good he was going to be. So I made him a little 4’9”. He was just a really quiet kid and super, super shy. You could tell he was really respectful, and just kept out of the adult conversation. Respectful to the point of a fault almost. We surfed a fair bit at the point, but a lot of times I was at other joints. Around town, you’d hear, ‘Morgan was ripping out of the point this morning,’ but then right as he was getting good they moved down to Merewether. At first he was just mortified having to leave here. Leaving Yamba and the waves here would be pretty heavy for a kid, but I said to him, ‘Okay, I’ll tell you, going down there is going to be a bloody blessing for ya.’ I said, ‘It’s got the hell club history, and you’re going to be up against different surfers, on different waves. It’s going to be really good for your surfing in the long run. Trust me.”

Morgan: “I’d been in Newcastle six months and I was too nervous to even really surf Merewether. I’d heard all these scary stories but eventually I went down to boardriders one day. I was pretty shy when I was younger. But I don’t think I’d be where I’m at in surfing if I hadn’t moved to Newcastle. Like, Angourie’s pretty good... but you don’t really go left too much. I also feel like the surf in Newcastle’s a lot more raw, and there’s a lot of good surfers around. I reckon it’s the best thing that could’ve happened to me.”

Will: “We stayed in touch and then one day I get a call and he just goes, ‘Hey, look, I’d like to know if I could try another board?’ And I went, ‘Yeah, man, for sure.’ He’d been riding big-name stock boards and because he was surfing contests he wanted to get a program going with his boards. I made him a little swallowtail to start and he just got back to me and goes, ‘Mate, this goes great, I’m stoked.’ It made me feel so good. Young guys are really finicky with their boards, you know, and they’re brutal with their bloody reviews of what you shape them, so I was like, hey shit, this is good. If my stuff’s sharp enough for Morgs then I’m on the right track. It was good for my ego.”
[Laughs]

Morgan: “I think I would’ve been like 10 or something when I got my first board off him. It had a yellow bottom on it, but then that was it for a fair while. When I was 13 I moved to Newcastle and I changed to riding boards of the bigger guys for five years. But I was only getting two boards a year off them and I couldn’t really afford to do much more, especially if I wanted to surf bigger waves and surf in contests. So I went back to Will’s boards cause I knew Will, and I knew we could work on boards together. I was just some random kid to the big guys.”

Will: “Adam Robertson called me a few years ago. We didn’t know each other at the time. He called me out of the blue and goes, ‘I seen this young guy on your boards and he’s shredding.’ He goes, ‘I’m going to let a few people know about him and get him some support.’ He wasn’t just not on the radar at that point. He was out near Pluto. No one even knew him. They couldn’t even say his surname. And you know the last surfing surname people couldn’t say properly? Occhilupo.”

Will: “I remember seeing photos of him in South Sumatra. I know this place and it was really big, and I’m looking at these shots and thinking, I didn’t shape him a 7’2”... and then I look closely and he was on the 5’8” I shaped him! I went, okay, he has a dig. Hawaii will be interesting. I remember when he went to Hawaii for his first time and I was trying to set him up with the McNamaras. He says to me, ‘That’s okay, I’m good.’ I said, ‘Mate, you’ve got to get with these guys. You’ll never get a wave at Pipe if you don’t. I’m getting you hooked up.’ And he goes, ‘Nah, thanks anyway, I’ll be right.’ I called him the first day he’s there and I went, ‘Where are ya?’ He goes, ‘I just surfed Pipe for four hours.’ Straight off the plane and out to Pipe. I thought, he’ll be right. This year I asked, ‘Do you want any advice about Haleiwa?’ And he goes, ‘It’s cool. It’s just another wave.’

Will: “It’s funny because I was going to back to Indo for the first time in 17 years, and I had one board left to shape to take with me. So what am I shaping? I had two choices. I had this blank that was cut for my brother, John, a 6’8”. This would be a pretty standard single-to-double thruster with a round tail. But I also had this board I designed called the Hot Tub with a huge deck concave, big double-roll bottom, but the machine freaked out and cut the nose off. I’m looking at this thing the machine didn’t even like, and I thought, fucking hell, I’m taking The Hot Tub! I sawed the nose off square. Let’s go. I just wanted to shape something bloody different and that’s my style. I’ve got good friends and clients who want to try different things. If you look at each one of my boards, it’s like they’re 20 years apart. I don’t know whether they’re from the past or the future. It’s like, what happened between this one and that one? Ten years ago I wanted to go to a certain rich person around here and say, man, if you fund me I’ll take boards 20 years into the future. That didn’t happen of course.”

Above: Will on his last trip to G-Land. Will’s brother, Mont was in the camp during the 1993 G-Land tsunami.

Right: It was a long two weeks for Morgan between Sunset and Pipe last year, waiting to find out if he’d qualified for the tour. Photo: Trent Mitchell



Will: “There was no real plan last year when Morgs qualified. I was just into him, come on, let’s just farm some points. Let’s do it. I always knew he could do it, but I didn’t see the way it turned out. I don’t think anyone did. The big change happened in Ballito, South Africa. He wasn’t even going originally but he did it and made a few heats and got a thousand points. We got on the phone afterward and he said, ‘I got a thousand points for that!’ And I could tell that was like tasting blood. He booked a ticket to the USA and surfed Huntington and had a good run there. But I think sitting there watching a young guy like Liam O’Brien get second really pumped him up.”

Morgan: “I’m pretty sure in Japan last year in May I said to one of my mates, this will be one of my last comps. It was costing a fair bit of money, and up till Japan I’d lost in the first round of every single event. It was like, I’m probably done here if I don’t do well on these next two comps... and my Rippy contract won’t be looking too good either [laughing]. I just scraped into the two primes – Ballito and the US Open. I made a few heats in Ballito, which was 1000 points, then I got a call up before the US Open. I couldn’t afford my flights to America but Rip Curl helped me out. I kinda got the talk from Rippy that there’s no pressure riding on this event... which I knew probably meant there was! [Laughs]. But then I went to the US Open and made the round of 24. That was the round I needed to get into the top 100 for Europe. So I was like just scraping in every time.”

Will: “He called me up in Europe last year and he goes, ‘Mate, I’m loving the boards.’ I think he might’ve had a big night out. But he goes, a guy offered to shape me boards in Hawaii but I’m staying with you.’ I hung up the phone and thought, I needed to hear that so much. I’m just shaping on my own and I’m up against big production shapers who can roll out as many boards as he needs and even go, here’s your cheque. I can’t do that.

Morgan: “I was just stoked to go back to Europe. It’s the best place. Pantin in Spain kind of feels like I’m at home. Pantin turned into a three-foot left, which is kind of like my go-to. I just kept making heats and got to the semis, and I beat guys I never thought I could ever beat. In the US Open I beat Wilko and I beat him at Pantin as well. I moved into the top 20 and made more heats at Ericeira and it was all looking good. That’s when I did my knee. I was just staying by myself at Supertubes for a couple of weeks, just hanging out in Portugal solo. I did a huge air and my back foot slipped off and I just heard the loudest crack. I thought I broke my leg. It snapped pretty loud and I was like, fuck, I’m done here. I couldn’t walk. I was like, fuck, I’m out for the year.”

Morgan: “I’d done my MCL. At home I just let it rest and then started building up all the muscles around it. My physio has worked with the Olympic ski team and deals with knees. But I went to Hawaii and I was still unsure. I hadn’t surfed in over a month. My first surfs were heats at Haleiwa. I knew exactly what I needed to get into the top 10 as well. I crunched all the numbers cause I’d been out of the water and had nothing else to do. I got to the round of 32 at Haleiwa, which I think got me 2000-something points. That meant I was still a long shot at Sunset because I needed to make the quarters. This was only my second time in Hawaii and my first time in the Sunset contest, but at least my leg was feeling solid by then. I also had Bam [Kekoa Bacalso] working with me and he’s a beast at Sunset. He set me up with the markers and if he wasn’t there, I would’ve been pretty fucked out there. The day it all went down Sunset was huge and I was kinda freaking. I know how to hit the lip out there at least and got an eight to kind of build my confidence. Then in my next heat I got a barrel for a nine. That was the heat I thought mathematically got me into the top 10, and I got the nine but couldn’t find another wave. I did a huge carve on a section and fell and I remember I got smoked. I was swearing my head off. I was rattled but in the end I got through with a nine and a one.”

Morgan: “But then I had to wait a couple of weeks to know for sure. I didn’t know what I was feeling really. I was feeling everything. I was in, but I could also get bumped. Then that morning when it finally was official they came up with the camera and shit. Not even sure they knew who I was. But I had like three bottles of champagne popped on my head.

Above: The benefit of moving away from Angourie? A short list... but the development of a slammin’ backhand might be one. Photo: Trent Mitchell









It was like 10 in the morning or something. Somebody gave me a Modelo. I called Will, my parents, all the boys. And after that I was just celebrating. Not in my wildest dreams did I think I'd end up on the world tour."

Will: "When we had to wait to know whether he'd qualified or not I was a mess. I almost needed the Riverland the detox centre. Walt [*Jeremy Walters*] and I were following it closely. I said, 'Walt, I really hope this doesn't drag out to Pipe cause I don't think I can take it.' He's just torturing us. He'd been such a long shot, especially after doing his knee. But then finally that morning at Pipe it was official. It was like, it's fucking done. I think I cracked a beer 10 in the morning. Fuck yeah, I was just so proud of him. Me and my girl haven't got kids, but you look around the place and you'd think we do. The table is covered in photos of Morgs and stats. It's just a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me. He's such a legend and I just agree with his type of surfing. I love the lines. I love the power and I love how he's improved. That's what I say to him. I tell him, 'These guys, that's as good as they get. I know that kind of surfer and that's as good as they get. That's where they level out. You're on a different trajectory.'"

Will: "He rode Live Wires last year, and the challenge for me with making Morgan's boards for the tour this year was not just making good boards, but replicating them. He's come in early this year and ordered 18 boards, and I've gone, okay all these boards need to look the same. I think I might have to get the ruler out for this. [*Laughs*] After I made the 18 boards I then I designed these two new boards. Morgs rides one and goes, 'This might be the one!' I go, okay... thinking I've got to do another 18 of them!"

Morgan: "I think coming out of nowhere helped me last year, and it'll probably help me this year. People get kind of bored of your surfing. The judges get bored of surfing they see all the time. My surfing isn't the most crazy. I can get it done. I'm not afraid to hit a section and I know I'm striving to keep getting better every day, so hopefully in a few years I'll be up there. But yeah, I think it definitely helped coming out of nowhere and just being a fresh face in the crowd."

Will: "It's a very different tour to when I was doing it. We didn't even dream of that. But I watch all the WSL events – actually Chud Spivens watches them [*Will's surffan alter-ego*] – and to think I'll have a horse in the race is just going to be the best. And especially the waves, you know, just the chance to see him in those waves. I couldn't pay for that. And I just know that if he gets that taste of blood and just blows up, he could have a really good comp somewhere. Winning heats is one thing, but I wanna see good surfing. Like Hoyo winning Bells or something. I want to see a performance and I reckon that's what he'll do."

Morgan: "Don't know how I feel about the new season. We'll have to see if it happens first. It's hard to go past pumping J-Bay though. That'd be pretty rad. Even if I don't even do a turn there, just race the whole thing and claim it. And then G-Land I'd be frothing for. I got Supertubes as good as it gets in Portugal last year so that'd be epic. My style isn't really suited to small whippy waves. I like it when it's bigger so I can go up to a section and just go for it. And if I make, I'm making it."

Left: Morgan hadn't even surfed in six weeks when he turned up to Hawaii last year. By the time he left the knee was fine. Photo: Trent Mitchell

Above: Will, riding One of Wills.