

Surf contest reminds bystanders of sea's power

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Bystanders scramble as a rogue wave washes over the beach during the Mavericks Surfing Contest on Saturday Feb. 13, 2010 in Pillar Point, Calif. (AP Photo/Chad Ziemendorf) NO SALES

(AP) -- The Mavericks Surf Contest was no day at the beach for participants or spectators. Unexpected waves breaking on shore Saturday swept dozens of spectators from their perches on the man-made jetty at the southern tip of Mavericks beach.

Most escaped with minor injuries but three were hospitalized with broken bones. Others needed plucking from the water. The near tragedy stood as a reminder of how dangerous the sea can be.

Authorities spent the rest of the day warning the thousands attending the event of the difference between the ocean front and a walk in the park.

They closed off vast portions of the beach, ushered people from the edges of nearby cliffs and shook their heads at what might have of been.

While, the debate over spectator safety raged on shore, South African Chris Bertish beat 23 other surfers and carried home the \$50,000 first-place prize.

"It's hard to explain how much water was moving around out there," said the champion Chris Bertish, who spent 36 hours traveling from South Africa to Half Moon Bay. "I took the worse beating of my life out there."

He said he will spend part of the prize money paying back his brother and two friends, who loaned him money to buy his airplane ticket.

Many of the spectators who brought their children, pets and coolers with plans to pass a sunny Saturday watching elite surfers compete atop [monster waves](#) one-half mile from shore.

"We were very lucky that nobody was swept out to sea," said California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection Battalion Chief Scott Jalbert, who's department tended to most of the wounded.

A shaky and wet Pamela Massette left the contest almost immediately after arriving from her Corte Madera home 50 miles away.

"It just came out of nowhere and wiped us all out," she said, showing her bloody left hand and left knee. Her Nikon camera was destroyed. Many other spectators lost cameras, cell phones and backpacks as the waves swept the seawall.

Attendees and some competitors questioned the wisdom of allowing people so close to the waterline when high tides and epic surf were

predicted.

"It was stupid," said Grant Washburn, a big-wave veteran and an original Mavericks surfer. "It was totally predictable and anyone who knows the spot knows not to put anything on the jetty.

Keir Beadling, chief executive of the company that manages the event, did not return several telephone and e-mail messages Saturday seeking comment.

Others said that no one could have predicted that several waves would have jumped over the jetty and injured people.

"It's a force of nature that can't be predicted," said the fire chief Jalbert.

The dangerous situation was recognized, but too late. Additional firefighters had been on the way to clear the beach when the waves washed over spectators, he said.

Only after the unexpected large waves swept in during high tide did the National Weather Service post a high surf warning until 10 p.m. Saturday. The agency previously posted a less severe high surf advisory.

The surfing contest offers a \$150,000 purse, making it the most lucrative big-wave contest in the world, even though it is held only when conditions are prime.

Competitors voted to schedule it because forecasts called for record-breaking waves, despite warnings that strong winds could make those breakers dangerously unpredictable.

Finishing behind Bertish were: Shane Desmond, Santa Cruz, second place; Anthony Tashnick, Santa Cruz; third place; Dave Wessel, Kailua,

Hawaii, fourth; Carlos Burle, Brazil, fifth; and Kenny Collins, Santa Cruz, sixth.

The surf in the lineup reached 40-foot faces, and a shore-break of five to six feet washed over the beach and a seawall.

Two surprise waves knocked out barricades, a spectator platform and a large scaffold holding speakers broadcasting the contest, held in this tiny harbor town 25 miles south of San Francisco along Highway 1.

Marsha Poulin, of nearby El Granada, was at the water's edge minutes before the first rogue wave struck. She said she was concerned that organizers were letting spectators get so close to the ocean, given the conditions.

"Just because they were letting us be here doesn't mean it was safe," said Poulin, who left for higher ground just in time.

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