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THE CAPTAIN

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What does this have to do with Beer Paper? Nothing. Except I have often revered the quiet, unseen yet absolutely world class skill of a little if at all known brewer by the name of Dustin Kral. You see, much like Scottie Pippen was forever relegated to footnote status in the company Jordan, inarguably the greatest player to ever set two feet on and, well, above a basketball court, Kral plies his trade craft in the sprawling shadow of a brewmaster so phenomenal that his nickname is Merlin. That brewmaster is Matt Brynildson. There may well be no brewers on the entire planet who do not know Matt. And they certainly know the most award-winning brewery in the world...Firestone Walker.

But at well over 500,000 barrels of perfection per year, there is plenty of glory, or as their slogan says, BEER BEFORE GLORY, to go around. But at the helm of that brew ship, is THE CAPTAIN. One Dustin Kral.



Dustin Kral, Head Brewer, Firestone Walker

Photo Credit: Mike Bianchi

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COVER STORY

THE CAPTAIN

by Daniel Drennon



Dustin Kral, Head Brewer, Firestone Walker

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BEFORE GLORY, to go around. But at the helm of that brew ship, is THE CAPTAIN. One Dustin Kral.

DRENNON: *Where were you born and raised?*

KRAL: I was born and raised in Huntington Beach, California. I moved to Humboldt County after high school to study forestry and be in an environment with more nature.

DRENNON: *What were you into as a kid?*

KRAL: I was big into surfing! I was a member of the Huntington Beach High School surf team and me and a few good buddies would spend a lot of time in the water. We had a surf class for zero period which meant we met at the beach at 5 am, checked in with the coach, ran a mile, and paddled around the pier. After that, we had free surf for as long as we wanted. We didn't need to be at school until second period so that gave us ample time to get some waves. We would take off every weekend and go surf somewhere different, often times it

was Trestles, or Salt Creek, or the Wedge...where I did end up breaking my neck in 1993. Mixed in with all the surfing, was listening to heavy metal and skateboarding when the waves were flat.

DRENNON: *What, where and when was your first beer experience?*

KRAL: I was still living in H.B. when Captain Paul, my Mom's roommate at the time and who is now one of my best friends, had moved up to Humboldt to go to college. I decided to go up and visit him on a brutal bus – train – bus ride that took over 15 hours. I was young and excited to be going a trip on my own. When I showed up and got dropped off in Arcata, I went to the pay phone and called Paul, who was a bartender at Humboldt Brewing Company. He told me he was done working and he'd walk down to meet me. So, I sat in the dark, in an unfamiliar environment, completely different than anywhere I had ever been with streets lined with redwoods. A few minutes later, Paul came walking down, double fistfisted with pints of Red Nectar. It was on

that street by those redwoods that I had my very first micro beer. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted. It had a rich malty character, a hoppy finish, with a sort of spicy bite from their yeast. It was a moment I can still remember vividly. It was moments like this, on that trip, that led me to move up there to go to school myself. Ironically enough, Firestone Walker purchased the Humboldt Brewing Brand and when I rose to the rank of brewer in 2000, it was the first batch of beer I brewed independently. Needless to say, that Red Nectar played a role in my involvement in craft beer.

DRENNON: *How and when did you decide to become a brewer?*

KRAL: I am not sure the exact time I decided to be a brewer as it just kind of happened to me. I was an avid home brewer just out of high school and always enjoyed the craft and, of course, the results. I was working at Lost Coast Brewing Company in 1997 as a food server/bartender and I constantly asked the brewers questions and for tips to improve my beers. Occasionally they needed some help in the brewery and I always volunteered for those shifts. Usually it consisted of staging grain, doing spent grain removals, cleaning kegs, scrubbing floors and drains or other sanitation tasks. As a young man, any opportunity to work in and around beer was welcomed. After school, I moved to Marin County and immediately got a job at Moylan's Brewing Company again as a server/bartender but this time when I was asked to come in the back and help with the brewing process, I never looked back. My first real brewing mentor is Paddy Giffen. He took a lot of time to teach me how to become a good brewer and employee. I am still grateful for all his tutelage and patience with me. I would not have become who I am without his leadership. Thanks, Paddy!

DRENNON: *How did you end up as a brewer with Firestone Walker and what was your path to become “Brew Captain” or as I like to say, Scottie Pippen to Matt Brynildson's Michael Jordan?*

KRAL: Haha! Well, after I spent some time in Marin, I realized that the area was not for me. It was a little fast-paced and too big of an area for me. I wanted to live somewhere that was slower than H.B. and Marin but a little faster than Humboldt, que San Luis Obispo County. I always knew I liked SLO and really wanted to live here so I just decided to move. I didn't have a job or a place to live but I came down and looked for both. I pulled out the yellow pages and searched "brewery." The first brewery I applied to was SLO Brewing Company. I showed up and it was brewer Steve Courier that I spoke with. He told me that unfortunately he runs a one man show and didn't need any help. He said that a brewery had just opened in Paso Robles called Firestone Walker Brewing Company, so I drove up to Paso with a resume in hand looking for "the Brewmaster." The taproom attendant went in the back to grab Matt. Out comes a short dude in a blue jump suit unbuttoned down to his chest, with cut off sleeves and brewing boots on, sweating from head to toe. He looked slightly perturbed that I bothered his brew day but did give me his time. He looked over my resume while occasionally staring me down, probably wondering what the heck kind of brewer comes to apply for work wearing a button up and tie, but whatever. Luckily, after a couple minutes he looked at me and said, "Well, your timing is impeccable. I am looking for some workers. Can you start 9 am tomorrow"? This was a Thursday and since I technically had no place to live and all my belongings were in Marin, I replied with, "Yes, I can. However, I do not live here and will need to find a residence and move. Would it be alright if I start Monday

morning"? Matt said, "See you at 8 am Monday morning. Don't wear a suit."

My path was a simple one. Work hard, pay attention, and do as you're told. I started out as a filler technician on the bottling line, I transitioned into running the keg line, moved into filling the Union Barrel Fermentation System, then to the Cellar, and eventually into the Brewhouse where I felt I really shined. I would shadow Matt on the floor as regularly as possible, constantly asking questions and improving my skill set. I would ask him to train me on tasks that I would then take over for him. Until I was trained by Matt on the proper way to do dry hops, he was the only one doing them. As I started to relieve Matt of specific tasks, I naturally became his protégé. He started to build trust in me, started offering me more responsibility, and eventually, he offered me the Head Brewer position which is essentially a dream job for any brewer. I know brewery owners and brewmasters that would give their left *** to come work with and for Matt Brynildson. I am truly honored in my role and proud to carry the torch of great brewers.

DRENNON: Super cool story! What then are Matt's responsibilities vis a vis your responsibilities and how do you guys work together as a team?

KRAL: How I explain it is that Matt is responsible for every single aspect of the brewery. He oversees and directs managers and team leaders to achieve the goals of the company. His hands and mind are on every nut and bolt in the brewery. With his direction and guidance, he has built and grown the teams that run the daily operations



Dustin Kral, Head Brewer, Firestone Walker

Courtesy of Firestone Walker

successfully. My main goals and responsibilities lie in beer production. I work closely with the brewing, cellar and lab teams to make sure we produce brands that excel in quality and consistency. I make sure our brew houses are running efficiently and effectively. I work with maintenance, fabrication, automation, and engineering on process optimizations and improvements. I make sure the staff is taken care of and their voices are heard.

There is a lot of collaborative work with Matt as well. We spend time analyzing and discussing beer formulation, practices, technique, style etc. We collectively work on selecting and securing the finest raw materials available. We have a lot of smart and passionate brewers here that all contribute to making great beer. One thing I have always admired about Matt's style is the ability to gain useful information by promoting an entrepreneurial work environment. We are all excited to share our opinions knowing they will be heard and potentially used.

DRENNON: What is the most important lesson you have learned from Matt over the years?

KRAL: Matt has taught me many lessons. I guess one of the most important lesson is that you absolutely never stand down to quality. We do not and will not send beer out that is subpar. We would rather lose some money and send beer down a drain than present it to our customers who have known, loved, and respected our beers because they are all

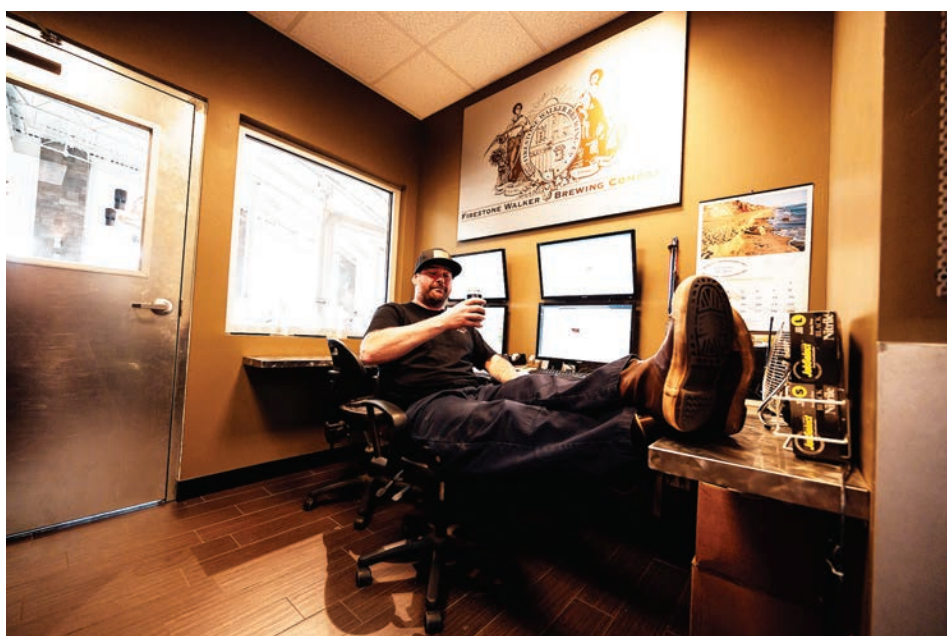
quality driven. You only get one first impression and it has always been the stance of Matt, David (Walker), Adam (Firestone), and the FW brewing team that that impression needs to be memorable. When you hold those standards in mind, your work is done with detail and diligence. It almost makes it easier because you know there is only one way to do things, the right way.

DRENNON: To give our readers a sense of the size of the brewery, how many brewers and other staff report to you?

KRAL: I currently have 23 reports. Our team consists of operators that are cross trained throughout the brewery from grain to Brite. We take pride in having a diverse and well-rounded brewing team that can complete any required task in the brewhouse, cellar, filtration, clarification, barrel aging and fermentation, yeast management and general cleaning and sanitation. Having that depth offers so much flexibility with personnel and scheduling. Also, it breaks up any monotonous tasks and gives the team more tools in their bag to better improve their skill set. The training program for our team can take quite a bit of time but the results speak for themselves. We have an extremely low turn rate because our brewers are happy and like working here. That is something I take tremendous pride in, the team. I love every one of them.

DRENNON: Between work ethic and talent, which do you think is more important?

(COVER STORY continued on page 4)



Dustin Kral, Head Brewer, Firestone Walker

Courtesy of Firestone Walker

(COVER STORY continued)

KRAL: Easy, work ethic. I think if you have a strong work ethic and a desire to learn and excel, you can do just about anything. I consider myself someone who started in the industry with no talent, but a strong work ethic and it is with that I gained the trust of my mentors whose work improved my talent.

DRENNON: What do you see as your biggest daily challenges (pre-COVID)?

KRAL: One thing about brewing is that your challenges can change from one day to another. It could be a small stainless steel bolt that ran through your mill that brings you the biggest headache of the year. It could be that recent load of barley that is off the charts in beta glucans. It could be something lurking right now and hasn't revealed itself yet. Regardless of the challenge, the goal always remains the same. Making consistent beer is the goal and everything that relies on or supports that is the challenge.

DRENNON: What have they been during the COVID crisis, if different?

KRAL: The biggest challenge during the Covid-19 crisis is the unknown. It is hard to predict where we will be in 6 months, 1 year, 2 years from now. It is apparent that we will need to be limber and nimble during these times. Obviously, like every brewery, we cannot currently rely on any draft sales. Fortunately, we were prepared to ramp up production with cans and bottles, but it still leaves a large void in volumes. We don't know when people will be able to go out and have a pint. We don't know if they will go have one even once they can. What we do know is that we have spent two decades supporting our communities and have provided them with what they want and what they know, and we will continue to do so for as long as they desire it. We have been extremely safe at the brewery and social distancing, sanitary practices, and isolation have been the new normal. We are pleased that our community is as healthy as it is and certainly look forward to the next phase of interactions and openings.

DRENNON: Do you have a favorite Firestone Walker beer or beers?

KRAL: I love all our beers, of course, but a couple of my all-time favorite FW beers are Pivo Pils and Easy Jack.



Dustin Kral, Head Brewer, Firestone Walker

Photo Credit: Mike Bianchi

I can really get down with a couple lower ABV beers with great hop intensity and aroma, a dry and crisp finish, that is as clean as a whistle. These two certainly fit the bill.

DRENNON: Your wife Veronica and your brother Shane also work for Firestone Walker. Can you tell folks what they do and how it is being a family working for a family?

KRAL: My older brother Shane Kral is a Sales Representative for Firestone Walker in Orange County. My wife Veronica is our Retail Sales and Events Manager in Paso Robles. Although I started working here first, they each earned and got their own jobs. In fact, I met my wife after she started working here in the Visitors Center. I've never made so many visits to the VC as I did when she started working there! Whenever I visit my brother in OC, he always likes to take me to some of his key accounts. He introduces me to customers and uses the same line that I laugh at all the time, "This is my brother Dustin, he's the head brewer at Firestone Walker. He makes it, I sell it, and you drink it!"

It is awesome that we all work for the same company. No so much because I get to see them more or because we are at common functions together. More because my family gets to work for a company that takes pride in their employees. Because I know they are being thought of and taken care of. Because we all get to make, sell, and promote products and a company that we take pride in. I am grateful that my family and I work for the same company because that company is Firestone Walker Brewing Company.

DRENNON: Let's talk about something else near and dear to your heart.

KRAL: What's that?

DRENNON: (grinning) Fishing! Tell us about that.

KRAL: I LOVE FISHING!!! I am an avid ocean fisherman and catch anything from Rock Cod, Salmon, Halibut, Tuna, Wahoo, Shark, or whatever is biting and tastes good. I have a small boat and when weather is nice you can find me on it.

DRENNON: If your fishing boat got marooned on Gilligan's Island, and you could only have three beers, what would they be?

KRAL: If there is cold Easy Jack and Pivo on the island with biting fish, just leave me there!

DRENNON: If you weren't a brewer, what would you be? And if your answer is fisherman, what other than that?

KRAL: Well you guessed that! I'd be a fisherman. Yup, that's what I'd do. Now if you're saying I can't be a brewer or a fisherman, then just go ahead and leave me on Gilligan's Island! Actually, I did go to school to study forestry and environmental science, so I guess I would like to be a park ranger. Really, anything that has to do with the trees or ocean would be cool.

DRENNON: If you had to describe yourself in one word or phrase, what would it be?

KRAL: Captain!