

News+Views

It was a hurricane swell in high summer off Long Island, New York. The storm was still hundreds of miles out to sea, but its emissaries—great, surging walls of water—were already pounding the beach. A half-dozen men sat on surfboards just beyond the point at which the waves began to break. A seventh surfer paddled out to where the men sat in the water. Her blond hair stood out against the dark seas and lowering sky. She nodded to a couple of the locals and sat up on her board to await the wave. When it came—a massive gray wall perhaps double her height—she spun her long-board around and took a few powerful strokes toward the shore. The other surfers lost sight of her as she leapt to her feet and disappeared behind a curtain of spray torn from the crest of the wave. Her towhead rose twice above the back of the collapsing wall as she drove the board through a series of S-turns on the face of the wave. The final turn sent her flying safely off the shoulder, 200 yards from where she'd started. One of the men turned to his wet-suited companion. "Hey," he said. "That girl can surf."

A similar scene is being played out from Montauk to Malibu as more and more women drop into that exclusive men's club, the fraternity of surfing. Although professional surfers like Lisa Andersen, Rochelle Ballard and Megan Abubo have increased the visibility of women's surfing, the

Rochelle Ballard



Ripping It

Move over Gidget. There's a new wave of surfer girls riding the tide. And these chix can surf. By Rob Cummings

real groundswell in the sport's popularity is being generated by ordinary women—women who are doing things with surfboards that Gidget never dreamed of.

Hollie Stillwell used a time-tested formula to learn the sport. "I hate to say it, but I had a boyfriend who surfed," she admits. Not that he was much help—he took her out on a day when the waves were fairly large and left her to drift in the channel while he surfed the main peak with his buddies.

But the Rhode Island native stuck with it, and in the six years she's been riding waves, Stillwell has even taught a few other women to surf. The

physical aspect of the sport isn't that hard, she says; the toughest part of learning is psychological. "I was afraid of being laughed at," she says. "The last thing you want to be is a kook. And when I started, there were only two or three women out surfing at Narragansett."

These days the crew of regulars who happen to be women has grown to about 30. "Now when I paddle out, it's like *Cheers*—everybody knows your name," Stillwell says.

The 26-year-old veterinary student thinks women will change the sport for the better. "It takes some of the machismo stuff out of it," Stillwell says, "and makes surfing what it is

supposed to be, which is fun."

Among the estimated 1.75 million surfers in the United States, some 250,000 now are women, according to the Surf Industry Manufacturers Association. The sudden rise in sales of women's surf gear hasn't gone unnoticed.

"We're taking this whole thing very seriously," says Mark Tinkess, vice president of sales and marketing at O'Neill, a major manufacturer of wet suits based in Santa Cruz, California. "The sales of women's products have been growing at about 10 to 15 percent per year." In the past six years, Tinkess estimates, sales of women's wet suits have quadrupled.



Ilona Wood-Rerucha didn't have to read a spreadsheet to get the drift. "I was always looking for surf gear for me or my daughter, and I guessed other people were looking for it, too," says Wood-Rerucha, 36. So in the spring of 1996, the former biologist opened Water Girl, the nation's first surf shop just for women, in Encinitas, California. "It's been received really, really well," she says.

Water Girl stocks boardshorts tailored for women, bathing suits that stay put in rough water and the new, lighter hybrid longboards favored by many female surfers. Business has been so good that Wood-Rerucha plans to print a catalog soon. Since Water Girl's initial splash, another shop, Inner Rhythms Surfer Girl, has opened in Vero Beach, Florida.

Surfers have always been an obscure tribe. They've developed their own legends, lore and language—and a standoffish reputation in the process. But the influx of women is changing surf culture in new and unpredictable ways. "We started *Wahine* on a hunch," explains Elizabeth Glazner, editor of the new surf magazine for women. "We thought, 'If we build it, they will come.'"

They have. Since the first issue of *Wahine* (pronounced wa-he-nee, the Hawaiian word for "woman of the sea")

debuted in August 1995, Glazner and publisher Marilyn Edwards have received letters from female surfers all over the globe lauding the magazine's work and asking for more gratuitous photos of scantily clad men. One enthusiastic woman's letter was typical: "Thanx so much for publishing a surfing magazine featuring women who do more than lay around on the beach in a butt thong! Chix rip!"

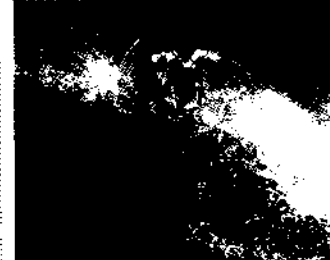
The magazine has struck a chord both with women who have been quietly surfing for decades and with a stoked young school of neophytes. To build on that sense of community, *Wahine* has launched a contest circuit called Waterwomen. The first two events this year, held in Santa Cruz and San Diego, featured heats for women of all ages and levels of experience competing on longboards, shortboards and bodyboards. Two more Waterwomen contests are scheduled for July and September on the southern California coast.

The younger generation of surfers in particular is helping to redefine the sport. "Surfing is not masculine and it's not feminine," says Jennifer Ramsay, the 22-year-old Web mistress of *SurferGirl*, a San Francisco-based Internet magazine that debuted last winter. "Your success is measured by your commitment, not by your gender.

"For a long time the sport of surfing was a boys' club that I was too intimidated to try to join. That might be one of the reasons why *SurferGirl* is so important to me. I think if I had seen images of the beautiful, strong women surfers who have always been out there, I would have joined them a lot sooner."

Ramsay's attitude may be new school, but her reasons for surfing are echoed by women of all ages. "The first time I stood up on a wave, I felt like I was flying on the water," she says. "When you paddle into the surf, you leave behind all the heavy weights of life and just focus on the water." How long has Ramsay been surfing? "Since I can remember," she answers. "About two years."

Lisa Andersen



Carolyn Zenk, an environmental lawyer from Long Island, started surfing when she was 12. As a teen, she would hitchhike to nearby Gilgo Beach with an old board she borrowed from her brother.

Zenk, who has ridden some big waves in her years, isn't scared of the ocean. "You could say I have a healthy respect for it," she says. Fear is as much a part of surfing as seawater. Stillwell's first time out at Rincon in Puerto Rico was "really, really big," she recalls. "It was 95 degrees and the water was 80 and my teeth were chattering. And I realized later that I was scared." But she trusts her instincts. "Fear has a reason," Stillwell says. "It's there to save your ass."

So what's a 39-year-old lawyer doing in what still is sometimes a young man's world? Zenk's reasons are simple. "I'm addicted," she says. "Surfing's right up there with lobster and butter, making love and playing guitar." wsr

Terms of the Tide