

PURSUIITS & RETREATS

SPORT

A Generation of Gidgets

Female surfers are back in the lineup, in droves
by Jeff Spurrier

•••••

Probably few people remember that in the late 1950s it was a fifteen-year-old girl, Kathy Kohner, who introduced the southern-California surf culture to the American mainstream. Her father, a screenwriter, wrote a quickie novel based on Kathy's stories of a summer she spent surfing at Malibu. The novel was *Gidget*, which sold half a million copies and was spun off by Hollywood into three feature films, three made-for-TV movies, and a TV series. Surfing exploded in popularity. During the 1970s and 1980s teenage boys came to dominate the sport, and demand surged for shorter, faster surfboards—"pocket rockets." What had already become a fairly macho cult became more so.

In the 1980s, at my urging (I wanted company), my wife, Ann, tried surfing. She was starting to get the hang of it when, one morning at Huntington Beach, just south of Los Angeles, a kid on a shortboard dropped in on her as she was taking off. He sprayed her in the face with his wake while yelling "My wave, kook!" Some Huntington Beach locals proudly called themselves Surf Nazis, and Ann did not enjoy getting to know them. She sold her board.

I continued to surf—a bit sadly without Ann. And then, about half a dozen years ago, I noticed the pendulum swinging back the other way. I began to see longboards again, and more and more women in the water. By now *Gidget* is definitely back in style. Berkley Books has just reissued the forty-five-year-old novel; Francis Ford Coppola is reworking the story as a stage musical—and Kathy Kohner Zuckerman, now sixty-one, has started surfing again. "My husband became sick with Guillain-Barré syndrome, an auto-immune disease," Kohner told me recently. "Getting back in the water was a way to work out my feelings of sadness and helplessness. Catching that Malibu wave again was like a rebirthing, a way to connect with my soul. So much of my life was about Malibu. It was a dream of mine to surf on my sixtieth birthday—and I did."

From the chilly, kelp-filled swells of Santa Cruz's Steamer Lane to the near perfect right-angled waves that wrap around the point at Malibu's Surfrider Beach, female surfers are taking their places in the lineup outside the wave zone. They are lawyers, grocery clerks, grandmothers, single moms, college students with surfing scholarships, pre-teens mixing ballet and shooting-the-curl lessons, Girl Scouts working toward earning the new surfing

badge. They're riding boards and wearing wetsuits designed by women for women, taking lessons at all-female surfing schools, going on all-women surfing trips to Mexico and Costa Rica and Indonesia, logging on to the niche Web site wahinemagazine.com; many even subscribed to *Wahine* magazine itself, which was affiliated with the site until the recent economic downturn forced it to suspend publication. A select few are surfing the legendary big-wave breaks, such as Sunset Beach, in Hawaii, and Maverick's, near the town of Half Moon Bay, California. According to some sources, surfing, along with golf, is one of the two fastest-growing sports among women in the United States.

At first it was aging male Baby Boomers who brought the longboard back, as they found they no longer had the upper-body strength for shortboard surfing. Longboards, measuring eight feet and up, have wide, fat front profiles for nose riding. They are easy to paddle and ideal for small waves, broken or not. Beginners love them, because they are very forgiving when surfers are just learning to stand. Where shortboarders slash the waves to gain maximum speed, longboarders glide and make graceful banking turns, trimming rather than lunging. Although longboards typically cost two to three times as much as shortboards, they now account for nearly two thirds of all board sales. And women, according to various estimates, make up 15 to 25 percent of the current surfing population.

A man couldn't get away with saying this, but surely Elizabeth Glazner, thirty-eight years old, who until January was the editor of *Wahine*, can: longboard surfing is all about grace and beauty and balance, and as such it is the perfect sport for a woman. I interviewed Glazner late last year at the magazine's offices, in Long Beach, California. "Surfing is this gift from feminism, a lifestyle that has allowed the generation of women between bra-burning and Title Nine to rediscover a part of themselves," she told me. "It's at your own pace and meditative. It can be holistic and spiritual. If you have disposable income, you can travel to some of the most exotic places in the world to surf—Costa Rica to Indonesia to Tahiti and Fiji."

During its seven-year run *Wahine* became the bible for female surfers. It presented a unique G-rated blend of soft-pedal feminism, ecology, waterwomen's history, and *Endless Summer* schmaltz, appealing both to mature women surfers and to pre-teens getting their toes on the nose for the first time. Thanks to *Wahine*, a generation of surfers came into the water unaware that "surfing like a girl" could be pejorative.

For example, Sarah Nowland, a twelve-year-old surfer from San Clemente, told me that the boys at her school think it's "cool" that she's on the surfing team. They give her advice and "never say anything mean." She does get cut out of waves sometimes, she added ruefully. "Usually it's older men surfers." Like me.

arly on summer mornings women in wetsuits park their Saabs and Volvos and BMWs just north of the main lifeguard tower at La Jolla Shores, near San Diego. They know the beach here, because it's where many of them learned to surf as students at Surf Diva, a pioneering women-only surfing school. Since Surf Diva began operation, in 1996, it has trained tens of thousands of girls and women, aged six to sixty-eight. The instructors are teachers, nurses, firefighters, paramedics, lawyers, and aspiring pro surfers. The school offers weekend surfing camps throughout the year, with week-long camps during the summer; these are sold out months in advance. Surf Diva also helped to develop the program behind the surfing badge, which the San Diego council of the Girl Scouts began offering in 2000. And for that woman surfer with disposable income it promotes the Las Olas Surf Safari, in a small town about an hour north of Puerto Vallarta, where five days of tropical waves, spa

treatments, and surfing lessons runs \$1,900 and up.

Izzy Tihanyi, of Surf Diva, is a role model in many ways. The school's founder, she is also a pro surfer—and a size 16. Tihanyi told me, "You can be any size and enjoy the ocean. I feel weightless. It's okay to be a big strong girl and surf."

That message is echoed by twenty-seven-year-old Sarah Gerhardt, the newest recruit to the nation's leading female surfing team, sponsored by the surfwear line Roxy. (In women's surfing circles Roxy is loved almost as fervently as the team it sponsors. It introduced revolutionary trunks-style boardshorts in 1993 and has since grown into a \$175-million-a-year line that is the subject of fan Web sites, clubs, and contests.) Gerhardt, who is studying for a doctorate in physical chemistry at the University of California at Santa Cruz, is also one of the most famous female big-wave surfers—the only woman to have "charged" Maverick's. Charging Maverick's, a thirty-foot-plus break, is the surfing equivalent of climbing Mount Everest but without oxygen or Sherpas. During a storm this past November one deepwater buoy measured incoming swells of sixty-five feet. Gerhardt, unlike the rest of the Roxy team, doesn't compete or model. She goes to amateur meets to deliver a twofold message: muscles on women are good, and nothing is impossible.

Until Sarah Gerhardt came along, big-wave riding was mainly a male extreme sport. Most of the famous—or would that be notorious?—places to practice it are in Hawaii: Waimea Bay, Sunset Beach, Alligator's, and the outer reefs of Maui and Oahu. These spots are the stomping grounds of contemporary surfing icons such as Ken Bradshaw and Darrick Doerner. Bradshaw himself introduced Gerhardt to power surfing on the north shore of Hawaii, and also shaped her a custom-made series of pointed, front-weighted longboards—"guns," in surfing parlance. In 1999 Gerhardt paddled out and rode Maverick's into surfing history.

Not long ago she told me, "Almost everywhere I went it was 'You stupid chick! Stupid kook! Get out of the water!' I've had that. The bigger the waves got, the less there was of that, because those guys were all on the beach. It was my own little world."

Gerhardt is convinced that it won't be hers alone for long. She told me that it takes about five years to get comfortable surfing and be able to apply one's wave knowledge effectively. That's about the same amount of time the resurgence in women's surfing has been going on. "I think we'll be seeing a lot more women surfing big waves," she said. "Women of all ages are starting to surf now. It's not a fad, not anymore. It's in their blood."

I'm definitely looking forward to about four and a half years from now. Last summer, with hope in my heart, I gave Ann a gift certificate for a lesson from Surf Diva. Two months later, on a warm, windless August morning at Doheny State Beach, she had her first surfing epiphany. I was out in the lineup too that day. I watched as Ann caught an unbroken wave, stood, turned her board, and angled across the face to the shoulder. Still riding the curl and still in control, she caught my eye over the back of the wave. Raising her arms triumphantly, she yelled "Whoo-hooo!!!"

The URL for this page is <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200204/spurrier>.
All material copyright The Atlantic Monthly Group. All rights reserved.