



Star of the sea

Jamilah Star conquers the world's monster waves

By Terri Morgan

Jamilah Star is one of the gutsiest people ever to walk the face of the planet. One of a handful of female surfers charging huge waves, the Santa Cruz native has won the Billabong XXL Big Wave award twice, and has been honored 10 times as the woman who rode the biggest wave at Waimea during the season. She is the only woman ever to win the Central America Longboard Circuit, competing against all men.

Photographs of Star riding gigantic waves have appeared on the covers of more than a dozen magazines, include *Surfer*, *Waves*, *Free Surfer* and *Surf Life for Women*. She's been featured on major television networks, including ESPN, National Geographic TV and the Discovery Channel. The fearless surfer — who says she changed her last name from Haje to Star when her surf career took off — is a major media darling, not just for her prowess on the waves, but also for her persona. With long blonde hair, a bubbly voice, teeny bikinis, and flashy outfits, she has the looks and confidence to draw people to her. And despite all the attention, Star, who says she doesn't keep track of her age, remains friendly, approachable and down to earth.

"She is one of the nicest, most genuine people I have ever

met," said Kristina Gallagher Marquez, former co-owner of Paradise Surf Shop.

"I can see how someone would be intimidated by her image," said Nikki Brooks, who has been friends with Star since they were children. "But she's really very sweet and very giving. She's got really good energy, and she's a soul surfer at heart."

Inspired by her father, Reve Fuse, who is an avid surfer, Star grew up in and around the water. She learned how to swim as a toddler and caught her first wave at the tender age of five. She honed her ocean skills as a junior lifeguard and later worked as a lifeguard for the City of Santa Cruz. A water polo player, Star was the only girl on the Santa Cruz High School wrestling team and is no stranger to the hard work it takes to be a successful athlete. After graduating from

(Top) Winner of the Billabong XXL Big Wave award in both 2005 and 2006, Jamilah Star drops into a Maverick's bomb on New Year's Eve 2008.

Photo: © Nikki Brooks 2013

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Photo: © Nikki Brooks 2013

After watching the February 13, 2010 Mavericks men's contest finals from the water, JamStar and a group of other women surfers charged the huge waves.



Photo: © Nikki Brooks 2013

SCHS in 1995, she played basketball at Cabrillo College, practiced jujitsu and dabbled in other sports.

Through all of that, Star's favorite sport is — and always has been — surfing. She stood up on her very first wave and was immediately hooked. So hooked that she'd try to swim out to the lineup and climb onto her dad's board when he left her on the beach. Surfing is much more than just a sport to Star. She considers it to be a gift from God and says she is honored to participate in the ancient and sacred Polynesian tradition of riding the oceans' waves.

"Being in the sea is bliss," she said, adding that surfers in particular have a duty to protect the environment. "Every day we should take action to respect and protect our incredible ocean and marine life."

Star really made a name for herself when she began tackling the waves at Maverick's, the formidable big-wave break off Half Moon Bay. Since then, she's successfully ridden enormous waves around the world.

"Everyone has so much respect for her," Marquez said. "Just to ride the waves she does is amazing."

Other surfers agree.

"She's pretty extreme," said Zack Wormhoudt, a regular at Maverick's. "She's very impressive."

Star took her first surf trip to Hawaii when she was six and immediately got hooked on traveling as well as surfing. While she considers Santa Cruz to be her hometown, she's also at home on beaches around the world.

"I live in Hanalei, Kauai, the north shore of Oahu, Paia Maui, Jaco Costa Rica, Puerto Escondido, Mexico, Santa Cruz and Tahiti," Star said. "We (her five-year-old son Waimea and herself) travel with swells and big wave seasons. We also love to travel beyond these home bases for competition, environmental work and global events."

Star's dedication to environmental work ranges from humble everyday tasks such as picking up trash from the beach on her daily training runs, to her more high-profile role as a World Surfing Reserve Ambassador. She currently is working with the Hanalei Reef Heritage Foundation on a video about surfing and reef protection. She hopes to use her prominence to draw attention to environmental issues and serve as a role model for young surfers, much like the hometown surf-

ers who inspired her when she was younger.

"My dad is my number one surf buddy and surf hero," Star said, adding she was also inspired by a number of Santa Cruz surfing legends. "I always looked up to all the boys at the Lane. Flea, Barney, Skindog, Richard Schmidt, my dad and Wally — so many rippers. I also studied the Duke and was so inspired by his life and accomplishments."

That list from her childhood was a roster of surf legends: Darryl (Flea) Virostko, Shawn (Barney) Barron, Ken (Skindog) Collins, Robert (Wally) Waldemar and Duke Kahanamoku. Star also was inspired by her immediate peers.

"When I started Junior Guards my best surf buddies were Beth Pitts and Joanne Huston," Star said. "We all lived and surfed on the West Side, all day, every day. We called our self SX3: Studly Surf Sisters." Along with Star, Santa Cruz has inspired a handful of other women such as Sarah Gerhardt, Jenny Useldinger and Savannah Shaughnessy to charge the world's

(Top) JamStar (left) leads the way on a massive wave at Jaws on Maui's north shore. Waves there can reach 60 feet.



Jamilah Star returns from a surf session in Maui. Jamilah calls "Hana- lei, Kauai, the north shore of Oahu, Paia Maui, Jaco Costa Rica, Puerto Escondido Mexico, Santa Cruz, and Tahiti" home.

most extreme breaks.

Although Star now spends most of her time traveling and seeking out the world's most extreme surf, she returns home regularly.

"We come to Santa Cruz almost every time Maverick's breaks and also for every holiday and my dad's birthday," Star said. "We love so many aspects of my incredible hometown. Skate parks, sick waves, museums, redwoods and friends. Santa Cruz really has everything to offer."

Family is extremely important to Star.

"Surfing with my dad and my son is my favorite thing in life," she said. 🌊

Nikki Brooks: Catching waves with her camera

With a surfing father who introduced her to the ocean, and a great-uncle who was a photographer, it's not surprising that Nikki Brooks has become one of the few females who have made their name as a professional surf photographer.

"I wouldn't have an appreciation for the ocean if it wasn't for my dad (Denny Dederick)," Brooks said. "And my great-uncle Ted (Nicholson) was the first person who showed me a camera."

While enthralled with photography as a child, Brooks didn't own a camera until she went off to college. A marine biology major at UC-San Diego, Brooks decided to minor in photography. Although she loved taking pictures, it remained just a hobby for several years. With the encouragement of her husband, Narayan, Brooks decided to commit herself to become a professional photographer.

"I started shooting everything I could," Brooks said. "Surfing, friends, even weddings."

One of those surfing friends she pointed her lens at was Jamilah Star, whom she'd known for years. The two share a love of the ocean, and for participating in aquatics.

"Nikki was a Capitola Junior Guard and I competed for Santa Cruz," Star recalls. "We went neck and neck in many events, including flags, paddles, runs and swims. Over the years we became friends and have had so many fabulous experiences."

Those experiences include photographing Star surfing at Maverick's, and seeing her work published in *National Geographic Adventure* magazine, *Surfer's Journal*, *Popular Photography* and more than a dozen other national magazines.

The Soquel resident said she prefers to shoot action photos from the water whenever possible. She'll put on a pair of swim fins and a helmet, and swim out to a break with her camera. She's also shot from a paddle board, boat and jetski.

On land Brooks tends to focus on lifestyle portraits of active people participating in active sports. While her specialty is surf photography, Brooks, like many other photographers, has branched out to other subjects. Although it's been years since she photographed a wedding, Brooks has provided a long list of large surfing businesses and small local companies with images. Clients include the Monterey Bay Aquarium, Paradise Surf Shop, Girls for Sports, Newman's Own Organics, Hotline Wetsuits, Betty Belts and 831 Clothing, to name just a few. In July, she photographed the U.S. Surfing Open in Huntington Beach. While in Southern California she also shot the Joel Tudor Duck Tape Invitations, a longboard contest sponsored by a company that specializes in shoes and apparel for surfers and skateboarders.

The mother of two young daughters; Linnea, 8, and Waverly, 6, Brooks schedules her assignments around her family.

"She's the best mom," Star says, adding that

Brooks is also a top photographer and a great person.

"I see Nikki Brooks as the number one women's photographer for big waves," said Star, who knows a thing or two monstrous surf. "She's so wonderful, funny, incredible and kind."

