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Kim Mayer with a dramatic cutback.

photo by Bob Island

WOMEN IN THE WATER

Monterey Bay nurtures world-class surfers

By DEBORAH HOPEWELL

Santa Cruz's claim to being "Surf City" will keep lawyers busy for years to come, but one thing can't be disputed: Santa Cruz is a unique place for women surfers.

You've seen them as you've strolled the path above Cowell Beach or Steamer Lane, cruised past Pleasure Point or the Hook, or sipped coffee on Capitola Beach. They surf the wide-open South County beaches and the rocky North Coast. They are doctors and teachers, mothers and daughters, artists and athletes.

Unlike their counterparts in Hawaii, Australia or even Southern California, surfers in Santa Cruz surf in frigid waters nearly year-round, often challenging huge swells that demand superior strength and endurance. Surfing without a wetsuit is rarely an op-

tion. In other words, it takes planning and commitment.

Yet generations of women have surfed these waves, forming friendships, competing, mentoring other women and girls. (Capitola is home to the first surf shop for women in Northern California, Paradise Surf Shop, which opened in 1997.) And they continue to make a name for themselves not only in their community, but around the world.

Here's a look at just a handful of the women surfers who call Santa Cruz home.

Kim Mayer

On one hand, says Soquel High and UC Santa Cruz grad Kim Mayer, she's a traveler at heart. But, she adds, "anything in an excessive amount can be draining. Not being in one spot for a long time – it's almost getting to the point where it's so nice to be home."

Her surfing has taken her to Indonesia, Panama, Mexico, England, France, South Africa ("that was amazing"), Australia ("every little nook and cranny has incredible waves"), and Brazil. "I loved Brazil. The people are so nice and there's such good energy – and beautiful, beautiful landscapes."

Mayer, 25, has been competing full time on the World Qualifying Series this past year, earning 28th place. Her goal is to move into the top 17, which would enable her to surf in the World Championship Tour, the sport's premier series.

She was 13 years old the day she got hooked on surfing. Kevin Miske, a well-known amateur longboarder and instructor at Shoreline Middle School, took Mayer and some friends to Cowell Beach for the first time. But it eventually meant giving up her first love, soccer, which she'd played since she was 6. "I played for Soquel High, but it got to the point where I'd be out surfing and then I'd be late for practice, and it got too hard to juggle both," she says. "But there's never been a day where I regretted making that choice."

While pursuing her degree in environmental studies at UCSC, Mayer began competing in National Scholastic Surfing Association events, surfing up and down the California coast and traveling a bit overseas. By graduation, she'd decided to give the pro circuit a shot.

Kim Mayer travels the world on the pro surfing circuit.

photo by Dan Coyro





Jane "The Lane" McKenzie surfing the 2007 Memorial Day Club Invitational at Steamer Lane.

Photo by Boots McGhee

"I'd like to do it maybe for another year and see if I can qualify for the WCT," says the bubbly, energetic Mayer, whose sponsors include Hotline, Sector 9 skateboards and Sunridge Farms. "But I might like to move into another direction with surfing, maybe environmentally friendly surf trips. I'd like to incorporate all the things I believe in about surfing – promoting environmental awareness and maybe not so much the competition."

Jane McKenzie

As a girl, nothing could keep Jane McKenzie out of the water, not even the fact that, for a while, her mother couldn't afford to buy her a wetsuit. The perpetually cold waters of the Monterey Bay did little to chill her determination to surf. "I didn't even feel it, I was so happy to be in the water."

Even today, says McKenzie, 52, "It's my drug of choice."

McKenzie was one of only a handful of women surfers in Santa Cruz when she started more than 40 years ago. It was rare to see women surfing, she says, partly because surfers hadn't yet figured out how to tether themselves to their board with leashes, which made surfing those heavy longboards that much more challenging. Innovations in

equipment have certainly helped get more women in the water; so have changing attitudes in what was once almost exclusively a male-dominated pursuit. "It's so much more acceptable to be a woman surfing now."

Over the years, McKenzie distinguished herself as a formidable amateur competitor and a well-respected fixture in the lineup at Steamer Lane, where to this day she is known by her nom de surf: Jane of the Lane.

Her career as a financial planner with Smith Barney in Capitola, and raising her 7-year-old son, Quinn, mean surf sessions can sometimes be hard to come by. But even in her workaday life, thoughts of surfing are never far off: There's a beautiful, glossy 10-foot longboard mounted on her office wall. "My clients ask about my son and surfing before they ask about their investments."

And on those occasions when McKenzie is able to steal a couple of hours to herself, she can be found floating on her board just off Lighthouse Point, waiting for the next set of waves and drinking in the view that has sustained her for decades.

"Even without a wave in sight, just to be in the water and have that view looking back at Santa Cruz – it gives me pause to give thanks for everything I have, and am, and who I will be in the future."



Jane McKenzie, a financial planner, keeps a surfboard mounted on her office wall.

photo by Dan Coyro

Hailey and Sierra Partridge

Over three weeks in Europe last summer, Hailey and Sierra Partridge estimate they pushed 600 kids into waves for the first time – and probably made a few lifelong converts in the process. They were among five Santa Cruz surfers chosen by O'Neill Europe to be teachers and ambassadors, instructing young, aspiring board-riders in Spain and the Netherlands on the fundamentals of surfing. "I've never really taught lessons before. That was a cool experience to be able to share surfing," says Sierra.

It was just one stop on what has become a very busy schedule of traveling, work and school for these 19-year-old identical twin sisters. Their sponsorships with O'Neill, Hobie surfboards and Ocean Minded footwear mean they're often flown to one warm-water locale or another for photo shoots. (Their modeling career got a big boost in June when the pair was featured in a five-page spread in Allure magazine.) Early this year, when



photo by Dan Coyro

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Twin sisters
Sierra and Hailey Partidge
surfing in Ventura.

Photo by David Pu'u

classes go on break at Cabrillo College, they plan to head to the Caroline Islands for yet another shoot.

Growing up just a few blocks from Steamer Lane, the two may have eventually fallen into surfing on their own, but they give their parents the credit. Their father, Rym, is an accomplished amateur surfer and waterman, and mom Winnie would often accompany the young girls on their boogie boards at Cowell Beach.

Both girls played team sports growing up, but they eventually found that surfing suited them better. "You aren't depending on other people for the outcome," says Hailey. "And sometimes Sierra and I would end up on different teams. I liked that Sierra and I could (surf) together." As sisters and friends, the two encourage and push each other to improve – and occasionally give in to a healthy dose of sibling

competition. "If I notice she's getting better, I know I need to step up my game," says Hailey.

By the time they'd graduated from Santa Cruz High last spring, surfing for the women's team all four years, they'd both been named National Scholastic Surfing Association scholars.

Hailey would like to pursue a career in the surf industry, and Sierra is considering becoming a firefighter/EMT. "Out in the water, if anyone got in trouble, those are definitely good skills to have," she says. No matter what the future holds when it comes to adult responsibilities like work, there's little doubt that surfing will be part of their lives for years to come.

"It gives me peace," says Sierra. "I think a lot of surfers are escapists; you can escape your life on land. I'd be completely lost without it."

Sahara Ray

At 15, Santa Cruz High sophomore Sahara Ray has her eyes set on becoming a professional surfer – and she stands a very good chance, given her upbringing.

Her mom, Gretchen Edwards, who coaches the Santa Cruz High girls surf team, is a lifelong competitive surfer. Her dad, Australian Tony Ray, is a world-renowned professional big-wave surfer who would take Sahara surfing on his back when she was a little girl. "I don't think it would have happened like this if it hadn't been for them."

When at home in Santa Cruz, she loves hanging out with her friends, playing on the school's tennis team, and surfing as often as she can at the Lane or Pleasure Point – where she's found that being a girl has its upside. "Definitely when you are a girl you have an advantage, because guys won't be rude to you. If a guy picks on you, no one thinks it's OK."

She's also carved out a bi-continental schedule, traveling to Australia at least once a year to be with her dad. This year she'll spend from January until April there, doing independent study for school while doing more training and contests, under sponsorship from Roxy and Ocean Minded footwear.

After high school, she says she wants to start accumulating points on the World Qualifying Series circuit to secure a spot on the World Championship Tour, the top tier of the professional surfing world. "You have to work and train really hard," says Ray, who acknowledges it's difficult to be in college while on the tour.

Training and competing not only takes dedication and focus, but a genuine love of the sport. "You get really pumped up when you get a good wave. It's just a different feeling, like flying," says Ray. "It's a feeling most people haven't had because they haven't ridden a wave."



Sahara Ray grew up in a surfing family.

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Sahara Ray surfed to a second-place finish in the NSSA contest at Steamer Lane Dec. 9, 2007.

photo by Dan Coyro

Sarah Gerhardt

When Sarah Gerhardt was growing up in Pismo Beach, her mother would often come along to watch her surf. Sarah would bundle her mother up at 5:30 a.m. and bring her to the pier, where she could watch from her wheelchair as her daughter, her caregiver, surfed the waves below.

Gerhardt's mother didn't live to see her daughter become the first woman, in 1999, to surf the famed big-wave break near Half Moon Bay called Maverick's.

Gerhardt, who was featured in the 2004 film "Riding Giants," is the subject of a new documentary called "One Winter Story." After winning fistfuls of awards at film festivals around the world, it has now been translated into French and Spanish, and is available on DVD. It traces the life of a young woman who grew up poor and sometimes in poor health, taking care of her quadriplegic mother. Gerhardt went on to earn a doctorate in chemistry, marry a fellow big-wave surfer, and conquer one of the most fearsome waves on the planet.

After graduating from Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo with a degree in chemistry, Gerhardt moved to Hawaii to surf for a few months before starting grad school. She'd spent several winters surfing there and had fallen in with the big-wave

photo by Bill Lovejoy

crowd, and this time when she returned to California to attend grad school at UCSC, she was married to her husband and big-wave partner, Mike.

"Right away when we moved here in 1998, there was a pretty decent-sized swell," recalls Gerhardt. "My husband was friends with Jay Moriarty, so we went up there (to Maverick's). I got my butt kicked and sat on the shoulder."

"I went out a month or two later, and I still didn't have my own board so I borrowed a board from Mike but didn't catch a wave." The third time was a charm, and Sarah became the first woman to ride a wave at Mav's.

Now a teacher at Cabrillo, with two young children, Noah, 2, and Naomi, 1, Sarah finds her opportunities to surf Maverick's are limited.

"I'm still obsessed about surfing up there – sometimes I wish that that passion wasn't there. Finding a babysitter for six hours to pursue that is next to impossible," so she and her husband often surf in shifts, says Gerhardt. "But I do have that passion." On Thanksgiving, Sarah and Mike surfed Maverick's together for the first time in four years. "We finally finagled it."

Yet despite all she has accomplished – or maybe because of it – Gerhardt has come to realize her work isn't over yet.

"I'd like to write a memoir. It's about coming into this wonderful place of redemption, and I wasn't always here," says Gerhardt. "Just like surfing Maverick's seemed to be an impossible dream, writing a book and doing motivational speaking also seems like an impossible dream."

And you can bet Gerhardt will write the next chapter to her story. ♣

Sarah Gerhardt, below, and with husband Mike, who is also a big-wave surfer.

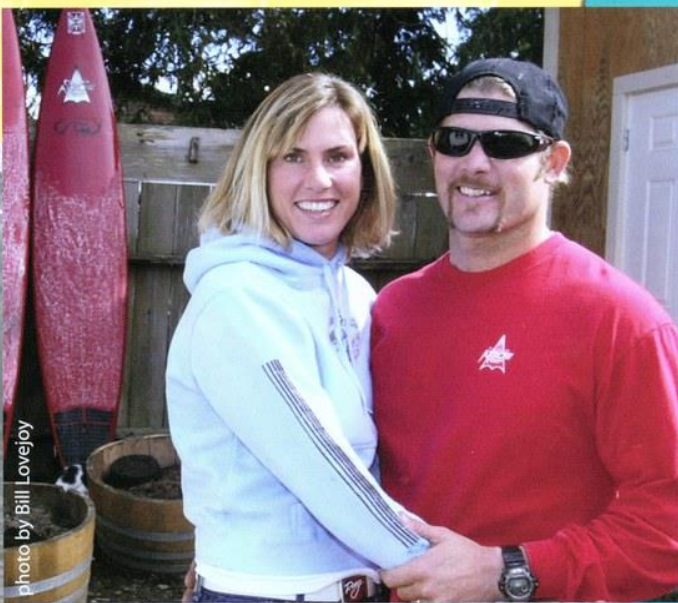


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