

Surf's up! (and it's not just for the men)

There was a time that only males ruled the waves. But the launch of a magazine aimed at female participants reflects the growing popularity of surfing among women

Emily Dugan reports, Tuesday, 6 May 2008

¹ Beth Mason was 12 years old when she got on her first surfboard. For years, she had watched in frustration as her older brother tore up the icy Swansea waves whilst she sat on the beach. It was clear that sitting on the sand would not be enough. She had to get surfing herself. And, by the age of 16, Beth had become Britain's number one women's surfer.

² Now twice national women's surfing champion, Beth, 18, who still holds the number one women's title, represents a new wave of British female surfers who, for the first time, are able to compete and secure the sponsorship deals that could lead to a full-time career in the sport.

³ Next year, Beth plans to go in search of some of the world's best waves to see if she can make a living from them. If she succeeds, she could be the first British girl to rival male surfers for prominence on the global surfing scene.

⁴ 'I'm going to spend most of the year surfing, and see how it goes.

If I keep improving, then I think I might be able to make this my career, which would be amazing,' she says. 'I'm not sure that could have happened before.

'Now more girls are learning to surf than boys'

⁵ Surfing in Britain has long been seen as a quintessentially male action sport, reserved for the hardy few who could brave the nation's glacial sea temperatures. But in the past five years, that has all changed.

⁶ Take a glance at any of Britain's major surfing spots now, and you will find the girls you see are just as likely to be standing on a board as catching some sun on the beach.

⁷ This month SurfGirl, the country's first stand-alone girls-only surf magazine, hits the newsstands, providing a clear sign that women are doing far more than just sticking their toes in the water.

⁸ It is a batch of highly talented young surfers from across England, Wales and Scotland who have braved the cold mornings to pioneer the change. Before 2005, it was rare to see British girls being entered into surfing's junior world games. But since then, Britain has consistently had enough talent for a full female squad.

⁹ Gwen Spurlock, who learnt to surf in Swansea alongside Beth Mason, is one of the youngest newcomers in this generation of aspiring professional surfers. The 16-year-old is still at school, but has already entered the World Junior Surfing Games three years in a row, and secured lucrative sponsorship from major brands, including Animal and Oakley.

¹⁰ She has no intention of treating surfing as a casual hobby, and regularly chases down some impressive waves. Her stoicism earned her headlines earlier this year when she sustained a serious head injury while training at Swansea's new synthetic wave machine. This year, she has been ➡

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➡ sent around the world surfing all the best big wave locations, including Brazil, California and the Dominican Republic, and she says the time has come that girls can be a success in the sport.

¹¹ 'About five years ago, there were very few girls doing it but now there's a whole gang of us who go out together,' she said. 'I'd like to be a professional surfer, and I think that's possible for a girl now, in a way that it wasn't a few years ago. The girls aren't being ignored anymore.'

¹² But the likes of Beth Mason and Gwen Spurlock are not the first to have braved our inclement waters. The way before them was paved by women such as 33-year-old Sarah Bentley, who pioneered the sport almost single-handedly when the water was still males-only territory. As one of the first British women to be sponsored, Ms Bentley says it still feels like yesterday that there were no women in the water at all.

¹³ 'I've been surfing for about 17 years and, when I first started, if you saw another girl in the water it would be such a novelty that you would paddle over and say hello,' she said. 'But now there are so many you don't notice; there's usually five or more in a line up of 20 surfers.'

¹⁴ 'I'd say it has gained momentum in the past five years. In the last two, there has been a really noticeable change. You used to get lots of boys with their mums driving them down and egging them on; now they're doing that for the girls too. I've been

sponsored by Roxy for 10 years, and it's gone from each sponsor having about one female rider to each one having a collection.

'more advanced wetsuits ... one of the key factors'

¹⁵ 'The standard is also increasing; we used to only see girls in the white water learning, but now they're out the back giving it some.'

¹⁶ But it is not just a competitive female elite who are changing the make-up of British surfing. Large numbers of women have also been signing up to beginner surf schools. Women now make up the majority of those applying for lessons, with only 45 per cent of those attending classes being men.

¹⁷ According to the British Surfing Association, there has been a 9 per cent increase in the number of women who are taking part in the sport at all levels in the past two years alone.

¹⁸ Just as the number of women surfers has grown in Britain, so has the female surfing industry behind it. Previously, SurfGirl magazine was only available as an occasional free-of-charge supplement to the men's magazine Carve, simply because there was not the market for women.

¹⁹ Louise Searle, editor of SurfGirl, says its publishers realised last year

that the market was finally ready for a girls-only publication. 'The growth of women's surfing in the UK meant that it was the right time to launch. In the past two years there's been a big change. Now more girls are learning to surf than boys, and the women's surfing industry is huge.'

²⁰ She says the signs are already there that women are finally taking it up seriously as a sport, instead of just buying surf clothes as a style statement for wearing on the beach.

²¹ 'More women-specific wetsuits and boards are being sold than ever before, and that's great. That shows the real growth, rather than just surf T-shirts sales.'

²² But fashion has also played a major part in the sport's renaissance for women in this country. Brands such as Quicksilver, Rip Curl and Billabong have been designing women's beach clothes for almost as long as they have been for the men. However, until recently, most of the women's ranges were for looking the part, rather than taking part.

²³ When Quicksilver's girls-only brand Roxy brought out the first women's 'boardshorts' in the late 1980s, it sent a message that women were no longer prepared to look on in scantily-clad admiration: they would be joining in.

²⁴ The specially-designed shorts, which are now made by all the major surf companies, meant that it was fashionable for women to be in the water in more than a bikini, paving the way for them to take on tougher, bigger waves uninhibited.

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²⁵ 'It still is the case that almost the only time you ever have a woman in the men's surf magazines is walking on the beach or sunbathing in a bikini,' explains Ms Searle.

²⁶ 'So when Roxy brought out the first girl's boardshorts it became cool to be in the water, instead of just sitting on the beach. It was a liberating moment.'

²⁷ Searle says her magazine was needed 'to represent the enormous talent on our shores', but it was economics that really meant such a publication was a feasible product. With a crop of surfers being backed by major sponsors, and the increasing popularity of the surfing fashion industry, what might have once been a minority sport (with an accompanying minority budget), was attracting the big advertising brands.

²⁸ Surf fashion is not the only business that has been swept up by the recent boom in female surfers. Rhona Gardner, who runs the surf weekend company Big Friday, says there was such interest from women wanting to come on their trips

that, five years ago, she realised the market for girls-only breaks.

²⁹ 'We began Oakley Surf Diva girls' weekends in 2003. That first year we ran three but they proved so popular that now we run one for every month of the season. I think more girls are doing extreme sports in general but I think surf fashion has also made it a trend.'

³⁰ In America, of course, female surfing is long established with celebrities such as Cameron Diaz and Jennifer Aniston often spotted gliding along the California coast on dinky, untaxing waves.

³¹ And surfing experts say it is not surprising that Britain has lagged behind. With water temperatures rarely reaching above 15C – even in the height of summer – and frequently dipping to single figures, the likes of Newquay and Croyde – two popular UK surfing destinations, were never going to have the lure of Hawaii or California.

³² Ms Gardner believes that staying warm has a lot to do with the initial lack of interest from British

women, and cites the arrival of more advanced wetsuits as one of the key factors that has encouraged more British women into the water. 'Wetsuit technology has improved loads, which has helped enormously', she said. 'Now when girls get in the water they realise it's not that freezing, so it's more enjoyable.'

³³ Perhaps because of its better weather, the US is one of the few countries to have already produced female surfers that truly rival their male counterparts. In 1995, the Californian Lisa Anderson became the first and only woman to grace the cover of Surfer, America's leading surf magazine. The headline read 'She Surfs Better Than You'.

³⁴ With its unreliable waves, freezing water and terrible weather, it was never going to be easy for Britain to produce a Lisa Anderson. But as Beth Mason heads out for her world wave tour this summer, perhaps there is hope yet for Britain's very own surf girl. Even, if the water back in Britain will always be a bit cold. ■