

Why Are Surf Magazines Erasing Women?



DEEP DIVE

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BY JOANNA SCHROEDER

If you based your understanding of who surfs upon what you see in surf media, you'd think the sport was reserved for sun-drenched daredevil guys with six-pack abs and a pair of slouchy board shorts. You might also believe it involves a handful of thong-wearing beach bunnies who like to pose with their boards or wait for their boyfriends on the sand.

I'm here to say that these surf magazines are telling you a lie—a lie they know to be false, but that they continue to perpetuate.

Magazines like *Surfer* and *Surfing* are erasing women athletes from the landscape of the sport, and their editorial choices are not only harming women and girls—but the future of the whole industry.

More Women Are Surfing Than Ever Before

Despite what you might discern from surf media, women and girls are surfing more than they ever have before. It's hard to find data on just how many women are joining the sport, but the most reliable and oft-cited source is Matt Warsaw, author of *The Encyclopedia of Surfing*, in his *New York Times* article “[Surfing: A History](#).” Warsaw explains:

“Women accounted for an estimated 3 to 5 percent of the surfing population in 1990; a decade later the figure was thought to be between 10 and 15 percent. With a world surfing population thought to be anywhere between [5 million and 27 million](#), a lot of women athletes are being ignored.”

Tom Corliss, founder of California's [Malibu Makos Surf Camp](#), one of the most famous kids' surf camps in the U.S., says that there have never been more girls in the water than there are right now. In the 1990s and early 2000s, girls made up only about 15-20% of his camp's demographics. These days, girls are 50-60% of Corliss' campers. These girls come not just from surf-obsessed Malibu, but are shuttled in from as far away as Encino and the decidedly un-beachy town of Beverly Hills. Considering that Makos has around 200 kids on any given camp day, the number of girls learning to surf is significant.

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This is good news for girls—more options for sports and hobbies help create a richer childhood, and a girl doesn't need to strive to go pro to find a healthy outlet in the water. But Corliss notes that something ominous happens to girls around age 13—when they start dropping out of surfing in large numbers—while boys tend to stick with the sport much longer. For example, the local public school surf team, which includes middle and high school surfers, is about 25% girls and 75% boys.

I asked him why he thought this might be. What he's heard from his female lifeguards, as well as the girls themselves, is that they

start to feel self-conscious about their bodies around this age and are more prone to embarrassment. This attrition rate is tragic, especially considering that Corliss believes girls are easier to teach to surf compared to boys. “Just in general, they tend to be more focused. They’re better at asking for help, and really want to learn the skills.”

Curious about this drop-out rate, and what happens when girls turn 13, I sought out Soah Grace Franklin, a 14 year-old surfer who has been riding waves since she was 6 years-old, when her dad, also a lifelong surfer, started taking her out in the water with him. She later attended Malibu Makos and is still honing her skills.

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Soah told me that girls have to prioritize what’s most important in their lives. “I feel like the options for women’s surfing, at least competitively, for girls are limited.”

But what if it’s more than just the lack of options for competition? What if there’s something about the way the surf media portrays girls and women that fails to inspire young athletes to keep up with the sport? Soah tells me she has definitely noticed a problem with mainstream surf magazines, and she doesn’t like how rarely she sees images of women surfers.

“It makes me annoyed and frustrated, because although there are more men than women in the surfing world, the magazines make it feel like they are not there at all, or are not worth being featured.”

Let's take a moment to let Soah's words sink in. The message that a powerful, talented girl who has been surfing most of her life receives when she looks at surfing magazines isn't just "women don't belong here" but also "women and girls aren't worth our time and effort."

Exactly *how* bad is the representation of women and girls in surf media?

I picked up the latest issues of two of the most popular surf magazines on the market: *Surfer* (November 2015) and *Surfing* (issue #10, 2015), and sat down with a set of sticky flags to note how many images of women surfers were portrayed in each. I planned to write the number of photos of women on each page on the end of the flag, so I could tally them easily.

Turns out, I didn't need to waste my time with flags and a calculator. These magazines featured photos of only one woman surfing. One.



The closest was in *Surfer*, with a two-page spread featuring big wave surfer Keala Kennelly at Teahupoo, in Tahiti. There's also a story by associate editor Ashtyn Douglas, who

took part in a [biomechanics study](#) wherein she was hooked up to monitors and a mask to study her breathing while paddling, so researchers can learn the effects of surfing upon the body. The story and the photos of Douglas in the pool are great. There's even a photo of a surfer riding a wave—but it's not Ashtyn. It's not even a woman. It's [Marlon Gerber](#).

And that's it. One woman surfing. The other photo of a woman is of a surfer's mom. Knowing that at least [10% of surfers](#) in America are women, with even higher rates among girls and young women, I cannot fathom how the editors of these magazines can, in good conscience, misrepresent their population so dramatically. Do they just not know the emerging importance of women in surfing today?

As it turns out, they do know. In 2012, *Surfer* published a gorgeous magazine called *Salted*, featuring women surfers. Not only did *Salted* win multiple awards, the first had the highest sell-through

rate of any of their issues. Publisher Tony Perez was [quoted](#) as saying, “The caliber of female athletes has never been this high, and their performances have never been better.”

If *Surfer*’s publishers know the caliber of female athletes and the importance of covering women surfers, why are there almost no women featured in *Surfer* or *Surfing*, which are both published by [The Enthusiast Network](#), where Tony Perez still works? And why, despite the valiant and highly praised effort to produce *Salted*, has the publication since seemingly been abandoned?

Salted ran three annual issues, but their 2015 magazine appears to have been scrapped. Though there are rumors that it may return in some form, it seems that after Janna Irons, the Editor-in-Chief of *Salted*, left *Surfer*, the women’s magazine lost steam. Without someone to push for the special issues, it seems to have just fizzled (neither *Surfer* nor The Enthusiast Network answered my request by press time). But even if magazines dedicated solely to women weren’t selling, you’d think they would’ve absorbed some of that awesome editorial into their other magazines.

Instead they’ve gone right back to pretending women surfers are some sort of freak occurrence, which is a myth further propagated by the largest surf forecasting and video site on the Internet, [Surflife](#). On any given day, Surflife’s massive readership sees almost no images of women surfing. And yet, they seem to always save room for a thong-clad pair of pretty butt cheeks courtesy of the ghastly [Reef Girl](#) campaigns.

Surflife did at one time devote a special section of the site to women, but it was quietly shut down. Even as far back as 2006, [Surflife served 100,000 women](#) monthly, but apparently that wasn’t enough for them to keep up the women’s category.

Myths About Women Who Surf

How does this lack of representation affect real women who surf? Competitive surfer Camille Brady, who grew up on Kauai, explains that surfing has always been a part of who she is. She and her sister even started a [swimwear company](#) to create swimsuits for women who want to be able surf huge waves and keep everything in place, while still looking fashionable.

Despite dominating in the water, when Camille looks at these magazines, she doesn’t feel represented:

“Personally, I am tired of seeing the same top guys in the surfing magazines. It’s getting boring. I want to start seeing more features of women that capture our strength and power and skill . . . If the media would feature women more often, then I think it would push a lot more girls to start surfing.”

Lauren Blickley, who started surfing in her home state of Florida and now lives in Hawaii, agrees that there is a major problem of representation of women in magazines, and thinks some are downright offensive in how they portray women. Despite being an advanced-intermediate surfer, she just can’t relate. “I honestly haven’t picked up any surfing magazine in a long, long time,” she says. “There are some nice stories and pretty pictures, but really there is little connection to me as a surfer.”

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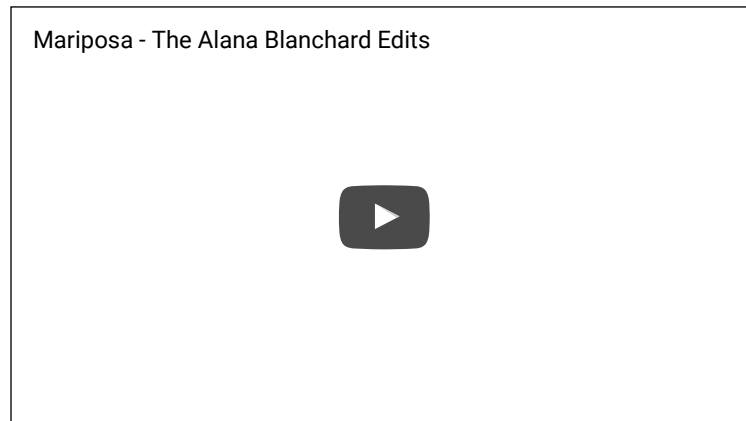
I asked a few guy surfers why they think women are so underrepresented in surf magazines, and many thought that women just don’t do the tricks they want to see featured. One man, a 51 year-old who has been surfing since he was 10, said, “To be blunt, guys want to see ‘rad shit’ [like] surfing dangerous slabs [and] throwing big airs, and like it or not, guy surfers are more likely to get the shot.”

But is that really true? Are women playing it safe out there and taking fewer risks? It is true that, to some degree, women’s surfing is different. As Camille Brady says, “The beauty and grace women carry while surfing is undeniable.” Lauren Blickley agrees, explaining that there’s nothing wrong with “**surfing like a girl**.”

But this grace doesn’t negate the fact that women are also taking huge risks, and have been charging big waves for decades. Even Mavericks, in Half Moon Bay, California—generally considered the most dangerous wave in the world—was conquered by a woman surfer, Sarah Gerhardt, in 1999. Sixteen years later, Gerhardt is far from the only woman to tackle that wave. She and Savannah Shaughnessy were chosen for Round One of the Titans of Mavericks competition, and Shaughnessy even made it to Round Two, beating out more than a dozen men.

And these two are hardly aberrations. In December of 2014, the first [WickrX Super Sessions](#) brought together 15 women who are big wave riders to battle that mountain of water.

So we know women are taking risks, but what about their technical skills? When one of my guy friends doubted that women could put on as good of a show while surfing as men could, I showed him the video below of Alana Blanchard in Mexico:



Once he got past the fact that this surfer-slash-model was ripping in a thong, he admitted that what he thinks he knows about women's surfing skills might be a bit behind the times.

So why didn't he know that Alana Blanchard is a really talented surfer? That's complicated.

How Surf Magazines Harm Women

The problem with the portrayal of female surfers in the media goes beyond a lack of representation. There's also the issue of surfers like Blanchard becoming better known for their sex appeal than their surfing skills—even when those skills are incredibly impressive.

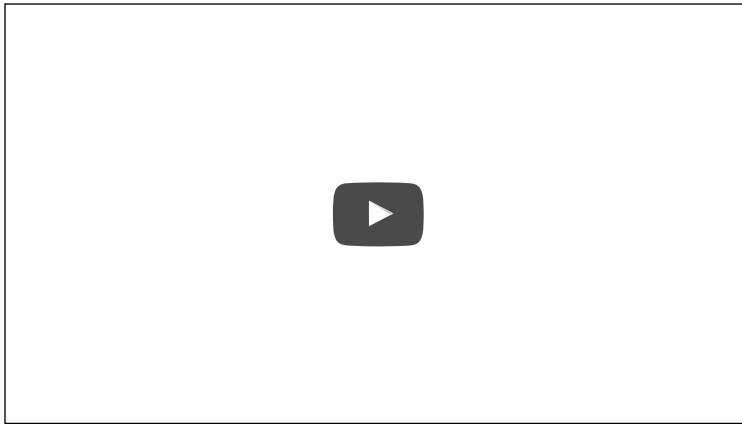
While there's nothing wrong with being sexy, wearing a thong, or doing fashion spreads, women who fit the mold of the sexy surf kitten often find more sponsorships, and therefore are more likely to appear on tour. So women often consent to beauty shoots, rather than demanding to have their skills represented.

Keala Kennelly, a surfer who is known for being unafraid of upsetting the mainstream, [explained](#) to Tetsuhiko Endo what happens when being sexy matters more than being ferocious in the water:

“Sometimes, women pro surfers that are more attractive get more sponsor dollars thrown their way over women that are better surfers who are not as physically attractive. What that keeps reinforcing in women is that it is more important to be beautiful than it is to have talent or skill or to be accomplished.”

Endo agrees, noting that as the cute surfer chicks (like the ones featured in movies such as *Blue Crush*) grow up, they become better surfers, but also more invisible in the media:

“ . . . they are calling guys off their waves and busting airs and towing in and doing a lot of other things that little girls don’t, or aren’t supposed to do. In theory, everyone supports it, but words mean little without power or money to back them up.”



Flipping through *Surfing* magazine’s #10 issue from 2015, the message that beauty trumps skill is all too clear. The *only* editorial photograph of a woman in the issue is of a model in a thong, walking on tiptoes, as part of the “Girl in a Shirt” pin-up series. Other than being near a body of water, the Girl in a Shirt has nothing to do with surfing. The copy next to her photo even refers to her as, “that nugget we saw everywhere and just assumed was too hot to be single.”

Nugget. The *one* woman featured in *Surfing* magazine was called “that nugget.”

What are we doing here, and why are guys okay with it? Are men really so afraid of women who can rip that they purposefully choose to relegate images of women to those literally walking on their tiptoes?

“The one woman featured in *Surfing* magazine was called 'that nugget.'”

The importance of appealing to men is especially notable when considering the careers of women who are queer. In her column at TheInertia, Clare Sullivan [explains](#) that for queer women, coming out can risk your sponsorships, and without sufficient sponsorships, competing on tour can cost up to \$50,000.

The Role Of Activist Editorial

Why is surf media so steeped in sexism? Is it because the sport is dominated by men? Probably not, actually. Mountain biking is similarly dominated by men, but a recent issue of [Mountain Bike Action](#) magazine not only featured multiple photos of women on bikes, but also had profiles of women riders, as well as results from women's races. None of the women were photographed wearing thongs or referred to as "nuggets." They were dressed in racing gear, not styled to be "sexy girls on bikes."

Even more impressive is *Runner's World*, which consistently represents as many women runners as men. While it seems logical that this should be the case, it wasn't always this way. It's easy to forget that in 1967, women weren't allowed to run in the Boston Marathon, and Kathrine Switzer was [attacked by a race official](#) who wanted her out.

It took the bold leadership of *Runner's World* and other publications to help change the image of running as a sport only for men, to one that now seems totally gender-inclusive. The October 2015 issue of *Runner's World* even features a profile of an LGBT running club.

Tish Hamilton, executive editor of *Runner's World*, explains that these days, *Runner World's* pages reflect the demographic of runners, and in some ways always have. "In the 1970s, that meant it was nearly 90% male readership and the pages reflected that. Today, women make up more than half of the number of finishers in road races." Hamilton points out that [61% of half-marathon finishers](#) in 2014 were women.

The tipping point for women joining races in equal numbers as men came around 2010, but *Runner's World* was ahead of the times, balancing the number of women with the number of men in its pages for at least a decade before that shift. These days, the editorial staff recognizes that it's not women who are underrepresented, but African-American and Hispanic runners, and that's an issue they struggle with. "Running as a recreational sport tends to attract Caucasians and not as many African-



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WHY I'M SCARED OF WHITE WOMEN



Americans. What is our obligation to make sure we have other ethnic groups represented?”

It's a question they talk about a lot, she says, and that leads me to wonder whether these same conversations are happening in the editorial meetings of magazines like *Surfer* and *Surfing*. Do they realize that, in order for change to occur, they will have to take an activist stance and start featuring women surfers, even if it seems uncomfortable at first?



Camille Brady, competitive surfer

Luckily, at least, some other surfing magazines may be catching on. There's a beautiful magazine published in the UK for younger women called *Surf Girl* that depicts young surf girls in exactly the way I'd like to see them represented: surfing or otherwise in action, empowered, and having fun. The images are so inspiring, I've even purchased a subscription to *Surf Girl* for my teenage niece.

The November-December issue of *The Surfer's Journal*, considered to be the *National Geographic* of surf magazines with its thought-provoking features and epic photography, boasts a **cover story** about the fearless Emi Erickson of Waimea, and a full feature about Ecuadorean surf legend Dorothy Jurado.

But don't let one issue of *The Surfer's Journal* fool you. While it's leagues ahead of *Surfer* and *Surfing* in representation, and seems



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to be making an effort to avoid the objectification the others exploit, the last cover that featured a woman before this one seems to have been from spring of 2009. Even in a story about Mason Ho (issue #24.4), brother of pro surfer Coco Ho, the photo they had of the siblings was not of them surfing, but rather sitting around looking cute—yet another missed opportunity to capture and convey women surfers' strength and skills.

The bottom line is simple: surf media needs to change. Magazines like *Surfer* and *Surfing* are not only erasing the reality of women athletes from the sport, they're actively telling the younger generation—young women like Soah Grace Franklin—that they don't matter. And that's not just bad for our girls, but for the future of the sport.

“The bottom line is simple: surf media needs to change.”

These publications have in their hands the power to change the landscape of the lineup for women and girls who surf. They have the power to inspire young women to stick with the surfing they loved when they were little, and to get more women like me, learning to surf a bit later in life, to feel like we can kick ass out there, too. They even have the power to grow their demographic—after all, wouldn't more women buying their magazines be a good thing?

So why won't they step up and show us that they believe we're worth it?

Lead image of Alana Blanchard: Wikimedia Commons

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