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# THE **ANGRY** SURFER

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CAN THE UPTIGHT EVER HANG LOOSE? HILARY ACHAUER EXAMINES  
HER COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIP WITH SURFING.

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# IT WAS 2001 AND I WAS LEARNING TO SURF ... AGAIN.

My first attempt at surfing happened five years earlier. My husband, Dave, and I had recently moved to San Diego, Calif. A college friend came to visit and asked us to set up a surf lesson for the three of us.

“If I’m coming to San Diego, I’m going to learn how to surf,” he said.

“I thought you had to grow up surfing,” Dave confided in me before our lesson. He grew up in inland Massachusetts and said he didn’t think surfing was something you could learn as an adult.

I grew up in Southern California but spent my summers on a boat or a bodyboard. None of my girlfriends surfed, so it wasn’t in the realm of possibility for me, either.

How hard could it be?

I started off the lesson full of confidence and hope, which lasted right up until we got in the water.

In order to actually surf, you must first paddle your board through the breaking waves to get to a place where you can ride the waves. When picturing myself surfing, I had glossed over that part. I was sure I’d get out there, and the hard part would be catching a wave.

After some instruction on land, the three of us headed out to the water with our instructor. I lay down on my board and started paddling. I had only managed a few strokes before a wave came right at me, knocking my board sideways. I got back on the board and started paddling again when another wave hit me. Then another. By the time the first set had passed through, I was exhausted—and no further out than when I had started.

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## I DECIDED I HATED SURFING AND DIDN’T GET ON A BOARD AGAIN FOR FIVE YEARS.

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I was severely out of shape at the time, with almost no strength or endurance. I don’t know how long I fought with those waves, but I know I gave up several times over. Every time I’d start to make forward progress, a line of waves would march toward me, each one tearing the board from my hand, shooting water up my nose and in my ears, and dragging me back to shore.

The more I tried, the more exhausted I got. The surf instructor seemed baffled by my inability to make forward progress and kept yelling at me to stop brushing the hair out of my face and just paddle.

I finally made it out to the rest of the surfers, but by that time I had nothing left. I made a few half-hearted attempts to catch a wave, but mostly I sat grimly on my board, waiting for it all to end. Dave and his friend finished the lesson energized and enchanted. I was discouraged and miserable.

I decided I hated surfing and didn’t get on a board again for five years.

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## — FROM THE OCEAN TO THE RING —

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I was done with surfing, but it remained a big part of my life. Dave and I live in Pacific Beach (known as PB), a beach town in San Diego. In PB, surfing is a social activity. People go surfing together, chat while they’re waiting for waves, then all go out and get coffee or fish tacos afterward.

This was before kids, so our weekends were endless savannahs of time. Instead of trying to fit everything in, we tried to fill the time. Dave and I would head to the beach in the morning, and then Dave and our friends would grab their boards and go surfing.

I sat on the beach, reading and waiting for them to finish.

“What did you guys talk about?” I’d ask Dave when he came in after spending two hours in the water.

“Huh? Oh, I don’t know.”

We’d walk home, him tired and blissed out, me bored and restless.

I was miserable. I didn’t see myself as a beach-chair kind of person. My mom had gone trekking in Nepal, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and gone helicopter skiing in Canada. My great grandmother was a real-life Rosie the Riveter, helping to build airplanes at the Douglas Aircraft plant during World War II.

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## HERE I WAS SITTING ON THE BEACH, TOO BORED TO EVEN READ MY BOOK.

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And here I was sitting on the beach, too bored to even read my book.

For a few years, I looked for something to do. First, I tried to get back into rowing. I rowed crew in college, so I took lessons on a single scull. It was fun, but it wasn’t something I could do on my own. I lost interest after a few months. I took a volleyball class, and aerobics, then cardio kickboxing. I discovered I really liked the punching part of the class.



Finally, I got up enough courage to try out a nearby boxing gym.

The first class left me as wrecked as that surf lesson, but at least I completed the basic requirement of the sport: I hit the bag. I left with sore knuckles and some hope.

I stuck with the group classes at the boxing gym, hitting the heavy bags for a few months until Dave gave me 10 private training sessions for my birthday. For the first time, I ducked in between the ropes and stood in the ring, facing another person—my trainer—and tentatively poked out my glove in a whisper of a jab.

Soon I was regularly sparring with other women in the gym. The better I got, the harder they hit. After a few months of sparring, I drove to a boxing gym in downtown San Diego for my first amateur boxing match. When the referee raised my arm after the match, announcing that I won, I felt something shift.

I was in shape. I was no longer a beach-chair person.

One day I looked at the surfboards in the garage. If I could get into a ring and face down a woman with a blue Mohawk and tattoos, I could certainly figure out how to stand up on a surfboard.

## — STANDING UP —

The wave built behind me, gathering size and speed as it approached. I turned the board around, lay down on my stomach and started paddling. I felt the wave pull me back slightly as it crested, then, suddenly, I was shooting forward, my board picking up speed.

The wave was in control. I was just a passenger. I placed my hands on the side of the board, awkwardly got to my feet and immediately fell off. Again.

I looked at Dave in frustration. This was the eighth time we had gone out surfing together, and I had yet to stand up on the board.

Now that I was in better shape, my arms strong from hours of throwing jabs and uppercuts, I could paddle out. I could sit on the board. I could even catch waves. But I could not figure out how I was supposed to jump up on a moving board, putting my feet in the perfect spot, and then just stand there, all casual. Most of the time I rode the wave on my belly, not even having the courage to jump up. When I did try to stand up, I fell over as soon as my chest became vertical.

It was not going well.

I was aware this process was taking me much longer than most, but I wasn't surprised. I've never been a natural athlete. I'm strong and determined but not extremely coordinated. Dave was patient, but I was losing hope.

In fact, I got so frustrated by all the factors out of my control that I earned a nickname from Dave: "The Angry Surfer."

Why was this stupid sport so popular, anyway? We had to get up early before the crowds grew and the wind ruined the surf. The water was usually cold, seaweed got tangled in my leash when I paddled out, and just getting into a spot where it was possible to catch a wave was a workout.

Those ads in surfing magazines of girls in bikinis effortlessly cruising along the wave, relaxed and smiling, had to be staged.

I was in too deep to give up, though. Not this time. I decided to try something a little different.

The movement from lying on the board to standing on your feet is called a pop-up. Most beginning surfers try to slowly work their way up to their feet, sticking their butt in the air, but this takes too much time and throws off your balance. The wave is unforgiving. You've got to get on your feet fast.

## WHY WAS THIS STUPID SPORT SO POPULAR, ANYWAY?

I was having trouble with my pop-up. I decided I was going to practice them on my living room floor. Twenty at night, before bed, and 20 in the morning.

The next morning I set my alarm for 5:30 a.m., a few minutes earlier than usual. In the dim early morning light, I lay down on the floor on my stomach. I put my palms on the ground and then jumped to my feet, landing in a half crouch. I did 20 in a row.

Then Dave woke up, and it was time to go.

The waves were small that day, which made paddling out easy. It was a clear summer day with no wind, so the waves held their shape as they peeled onto shore.

Dave and I paddled out and waited. He caught a few waves right away. I tried for one but didn't catch it. Another wave came through, and I set off again, paddling hard. Then I felt the wave take my board. I held onto the rails, took a breath and popped to my feet.

Suddenly, there I was, standing on the board, moving swiftly toward shore. I looked down at my feet, astonished. The effort of paddling and the chill of the ocean were gone. Now it was just me, the surfboard and the wave.

Movement without effort or sound. It was like flying.

Then, almost as soon as it started, it was over. The wave petered out and I fell off.

I came up from under water to see my husband cheering for me from his board, and I burst into tears.

I was a surfer.

## — THE STOKE —

We all have our reasons for being out there, but everyone is after the same thing.

Surfers call it “the stoke.”

It's that moment when the wave takes control. You're on the board and the board is on the wave. It's up to you to stay in the sweet spot for as long as possible, ahead of the breaking wave, using the power of the ocean to go faster, ride a little longer.

Ask surfers what they find so addictive about the sport and they struggle to put the feeling into words.

Kim Pedersen, a CrossFit athlete from Australia, said the secret to the stoke is the ocean.

“The ocean is like nothing else, not earth or snow. It constantly moves and when you sit on your board you feel like you are a part of it,” Pedersen said.

“This might sound silly, but getting to the beach, not really knowing if the waves are going to be good or not, looking at the ocean and paddling out, it's such an amazing experience, just sitting in the water waiting for a wave,” he said.

Out there, nobody wants anything from you. There are no lunches to be made or emails to answer. There's just the next wave.

But surfing isn't easy. Especially when you try to learn as an adult.

“It was so hard!” Pedersen said about learning to surf when he was 24.

“I had no one to teach me and had no idea what the ocean was doing, so in the beginning I was just trying to figure out when and where a wave that was surf-able would break. I was paddling in circles, not catching any waves.”

Like most surfers, he clearly remembers his first wave. He was in Currumbin on the Gold Coast, out with some friends. They'd all been trying to learn to surf together without much luck.

“I paddled into a wave, having no idea if it was good or not. Popped up on my board, stood up, and the wave just pushed me along for probably 20 meters, but it felt like a 100 meters!” he said.

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## NOBODY WANTS ANYTHING FROM YOU. THERE ARE NO LUNCHES TO BE MADE OR EMAILS TO ANSWER. THERE'S JUST THE NEXT WAVE.

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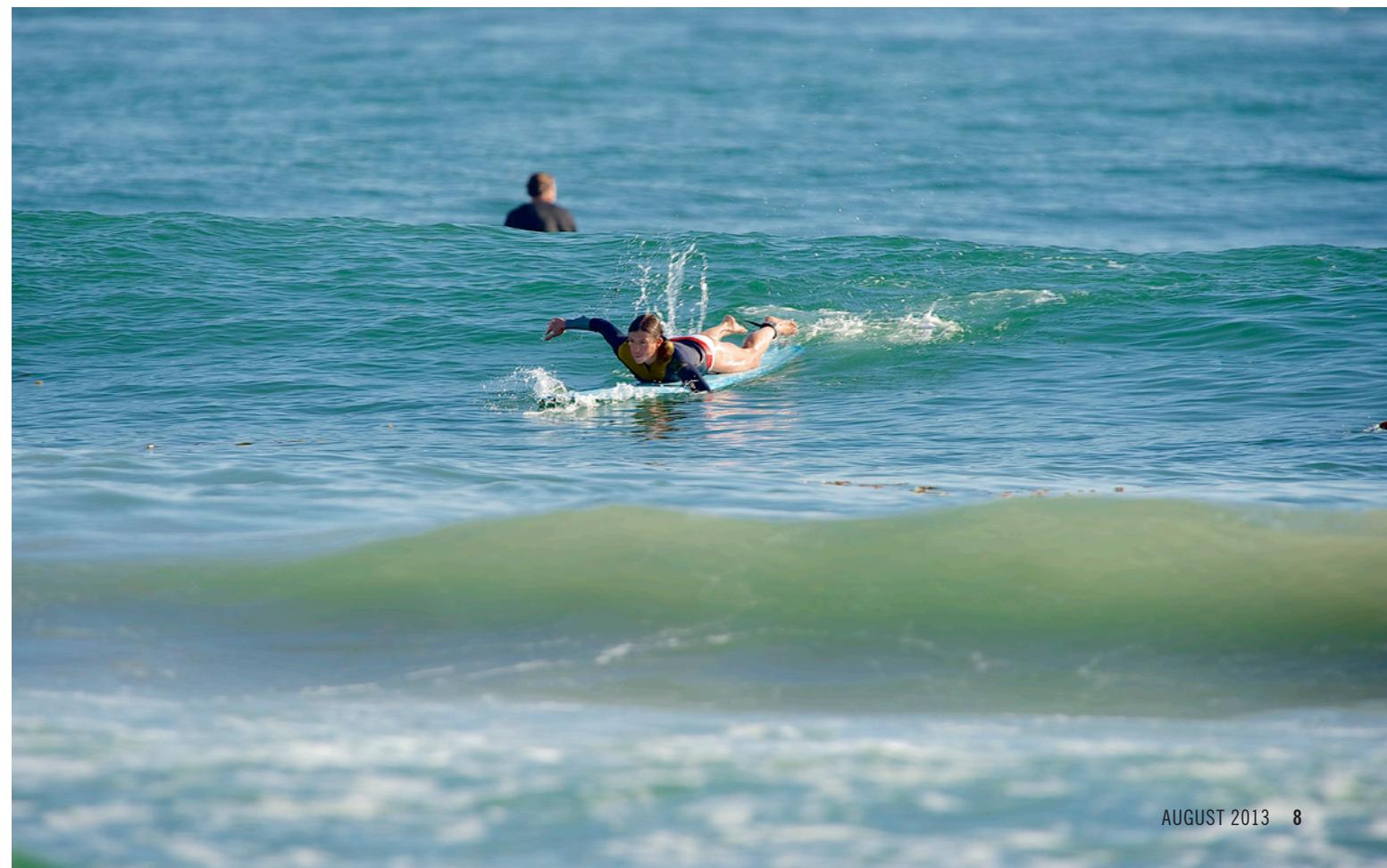
Pedersen didn't really understand what was happening, and he had no control of where he was going. The wave just kept pushing him along. That didn't matter.

“It was probably one of the biggest highs I've ever experienced,” he said. “When the wave let me off, I remember the first thing I thought was, ‘What was that?’ And from then on, all I wanted was to catch another one. And another one.”

## — RETURN TO THE WAVES —

After that first wave, I spent the next four years dividing my time between boxing and surfing. Dave and I went on a surf trip to the coast of Mexico, north of Zihuatanejo, spending eight glorious days sleeping in a hut, surfing twice a day, and eating homemade tortillas and fresh-caught fish. I grew more confident, catching bigger and bigger waves, chasing the rush I had felt on that first day.

Then came the kids. Our daughter was born in 2005, and our son in 2008. Surfing was something I always did with my husband—it remained a social activity for me—and it didn't seem right to pay a babysitter so we could surf. We went out now and then, but my surfing basically stopped until 2013, when I decided it was time to get back in the water.





I don't know what I was expecting, but I certainly didn't anticipate getting no waves the first two times I went out. Sure, the conditions were terrible, and I was obviously rusty, but I felt the familiar frustration build.

This is the thing about surfing: there's so much out of your control. The waves, the tide, the wind—all come together to create rideable waves. If you're a great surfer, you can usually make it work in even the worst conditions. But for an already shaky surfer, miserable conditions significantly raise the difficulty level. There's no scaling in the ocean. You surf what's there.

Many people will tell you they are happy to be out in the water, and it doesn't even matter if they get waves. It's just the salt water, the air, the birds, the sky.

I'm not one of those people.

Pedersen understands: "Surfing can be so frustrating! I'm not Zen at all. Sometimes I can't even paddle out to the

break 'cause the current is so strong. If I'm alone it's easy 'cause I just paddle back in. But if I'm with a friend, and he—or worse, she—manages to paddle out, obviously I have to get out too, even if it kills me."

Pedersen tries not to be competitive, "But if your friend gets a really good wave, you want to get a better one," he said. "You get jealous and stoked at the same time for your friend's waves, I guess."

Still, as a team CrossFit Games competitor in 2011 and 2012, Pedersen said surfing is a good rest-day activity and a way to shake off the stress of training.

But this time around, in my second shot at learning how to surf, I wanted to jettison some of my anger. CrossFit provides me with more than enough competition, struggle and pain. Could I silence my inner critic and become a soul surfer? Could I tap into the stoke? I wasn't sure, but I knew who I needed to talk to.



## — THE ZEN SURFER —

I've known Dana Vaughn for about 10 years; we met working at a walking-tour company in the early 2000s. Our lives have changed a lot since then—we now both have two kids and struggle to balance motherhood and work—and we lost touch. When I found out she had started to learn to surf again, I reached out.

I'm competitive, have Type A tendencies and am performance motivated.

Vaughn approaches life with optimism and wonder. She's 34 but seems younger, which is heightened by the fact that she doesn't wear makeup and often puts her dark hair in two ponytails. Vaughn is determined to find the good in every situation. She is also unfailingly kind to herself. She cuts herself slack.

I am relentlessly hard on myself. I get no slack.

Vaughn is all about the process, not the outcome. I'll never forget when she told me about her approach to running, which she calls "flow running."

"I just go out and run for as long as it feels good," she said. "Sometimes it's 20 minutes, sometimes it's an hour or more."

"How does she compare her performance against the previous run?" I thought. "How does she know if she's getting better?"

Vaughn started to learn to surf in 2005, "But I never really learned how," she said.

"Then I started having kids," she said, and like me, surfing was off the table for a while.

In May of 2013, Vaughn got back in the water.

"I'm not sure what made me go back out," she said. "Finally, the kids are sleeping more, so I had a little freedom."

The husband of her kids' preschool teacher agreed to help Vaughn in the water. A lifelong surfer, he also windsurfs, kayaks, bodysurfs and sails. He's a true waterman. Vaughn referred to him as her "sea teacher."

The first few times she went out, Vaughn couldn't stand up on the board. She kept going out.

I told Vaughn about when I first learned to surf, and how all those feelings of anger and frustration were returning now that I was learning again. I felt The Angry Surfer coming back. I felt discouraged and frustrated. I let the bad thoughts wash over me, close over my head and hold me down.

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## "SURFING BRINGS ME BACK TO A MORE PURE VERSION OF MYSELF." —DANA VAUGHN

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"Don't you ever get frustrated?" I asked Vaughn.

"I don't," she said. "I like being in the water. I like the challenge of it. I know I'll eventually be able to (catch a wave), and the moment of not being able to do this is not permanent."

If she's having trouble catching waves, Vaughn said she looks at the sky, watches the pelicans swooping down or looks for dolphins.

"Surfing brings me back to a more pure version of myself," she said. "I'm in the moment, and everything else is gone. I reach the core of myself, go back to the person I used to be, before all these things happened."

"These things" are work, stress, bills, disappointments, failure, loss, uncertainty.

The ocean plays a big role in helping Vaughn stay in the moment.

"It takes pure concentration, trying to coordinate with something out of my control," she said.

The unpredictability of the ocean is what I find so frustrating about surfing, but Vaughn said she finds the ocean helps her reach a deep level of concentration.





*The author and her kids (left) and Vaughn (right).*



“I stop thinking so much,” she said. In these moments, she is trying to be like the ocean, to understand it. “Thoughts of negativity and judgment drop away.”

She loves catching waves and said surfing feels like flying, or gliding, and that it’s always over too soon. But for her, surfing is about the whole experience, not just catching waves. If she misses a wave, or two, or three, she figures the next one will work out.

“It’s a lot easier to not blame yourself while surfing. You just blame it on the ocean,” she said.

## — KEEPING SCORE —

After going surfing once with Dave and once with Vaughn, I decided to go by myself.

The tide was heading toward its high point for the morning, which meant the reef break I had been surfing wasn’t going to work. As a result, the beach break was more crowded, with everyone pushed together in more or less the same spot.

That’s another thing about surfing, especially in a highly populated area like PB. In addition to negotiating the waves, you have to stay out of the way of the other surfers and make sure you don’t accidentally steal someone’s wave. The thing is, surfers all congregate where the waves are the best. If you don’t feel like you can hang with the veterans, you’ve got to do what you can on the outskirts.

The paddle out was easy that day. I didn’t even get my hair wet. I sat on my board with my dry hair and forced myself to look at the ocean, at the sky. I looked at the people walking on the beach and made up little stories about the surfers around me.

For 15 minutes I tried for the smaller waves that came through. Nothing. I fought back feelings of discouragement, of inadequacy. I looked at the sky again, saw a bird dive for a fish.

A little wave popped up on the horizon, and I decided to give it a shot. I paddled hard, digging my hands in the ocean, careful to keep my fingers together to increase the resistance.

Then I felt it.

My board started moving faster. I stopped paddling, and the board kept moving. This was it. On the last few waves I had tried for, I had popped up too early, so this time I forced myself to take a breath and wait. Then it was time.



I popped up on my feet, and I was riding the watery roller coaster.

I turned the board parallel to the shore, staying ahead of the breaking wave. I felt my board slow down, so I walked to the nose a few steps, trying to make the small wave last longer.

Then it was over. I jumped off, grabbed my board and pointed it back out to the ocean.

## — THURSDAYS —

I have a standing weekly surf date with Vaughn on Thursday, my rest day after three days of CrossFit workouts.

On Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, I keep track of everything. I know exactly how much weight is on

the bar and if it's more or less than I've done before. I know how those around me are doing and if I'm ahead of someone who normally beats me or if I'm falling behind. I know my score at the end, and so does everyone else—it gets written on the whiteboard next to my name.

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## I POPPED UP ON MY FEET, AND I WAS RIDING THE WATERY ROLLER COASTER.

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This measuring and competition have done great things for me. They've pushed me to do things I never thought possible. That, in turn, has given me confidence in other areas of my life. My physical and mental worlds have expanded.

On Thursdays, out in the water, I'm trying not to keep track. I went surfing last week and I don't know how many waves I got—I had some fun rides and I missed quite a few.

When I came home, my 5-year-old son said, "Mommy, did you catch lots of waves?"

"I had fun," I said.

"And guess what? I saw three dolphins!"

The Angry Surfer has to count something. ■

## — ABOUT THE AUTHOR —

*Hilary Achauer is an award-winning freelance writer and editor with a background in marketing and communications. An amateur-boxer-turned-CrossFit athlete, Hilary specializes in health and wellness content, focusing on emerging fitness trends. Her writing has been featured in a leading online parenting magazine as well as a number of travel and lifestyle publications. She is an editor for Frommer's travel guides and writes websites, brochures, blogs and newsletters for universities, start-ups, entrepreneurs, accounting and financial service organizations, and management consultants. She lives in San Diego with her husband and two small children and spends most of her free time at CrossFit PB. To contact her, visit [HilaryAchauer.com](http://HilaryAchauer.com).*