

WOMEN OF THE U.S. OPEN

DESPITE THE ATHLETIC PROWESS OF MANY FEMALE SURFERS, THE SPORT STILL LAGS IN EQUALITY.

BY HEATHER SKYLER

CARISSA MOORE OF HAWAII IS LIFTED OUT OF THE WATER AFTER DEFEATING LOCAL SURFER COURTNEY CONLOGUE IN 2013, AFTER A CLOSE WOMEN'S FINAL AT THE VANS U.S. OPEN OF SURFING. MOORE HAS WON TWO U.S. OPEN CHAMPIONSHIPS, HER FIRST VICTORY COMING IN 2010.

THIS YEAR, the woman's first place prize for winning the U.S. Open of Surfing will be \$60,000. The male winner will take home \$100,000. Same waves, but vastly different rewards.

And yet, not as vast a difference as last year, when Carissa Moore, 2013's female winner, took home a mere \$15,000, compared with Alejo Muniz's \$100,000 prize. Disparities are decreasing but still exist.

While there are a variety of reasons cited as to why this discrepancy in prize money is acceptable – corporate sponsors favor male surfers, male surfers draw a larger audience, etc. – the pay difference illuminates the sexism many feel is inherent in the sport.

In a 2013 interview with Redbull.com, Carissa Moore said, “The women's performance has been better than it ever has been, which is so exciting, but unfortunately the state of the tour for the women is the worst it's ever been,” citing inadequate venues, pay inequality and near invisibility in the mind of sports fans as detrimental factors.

Despite these problems, the popularity of women's surfing continues to rise, and the sport features numerous excellent female surfers. You'll be able to watch a few of these athletes compete in Huntington Beach this week, if you're willing to brave the crowds.

The U.S. Open of Surfing began in 1959 (*then known as the West Coast Surfing Championship*), and the first winner of the women's division was 15-year-old Linda Benson, of Encinitas, who dominated the female category in the early years of the competition. She went on to win the Open title five times, and won more than 20 surfing titles between 1959 and 1969. Benson was inducted into the Huntington Beach Surfing Walk of Fame in 1997 and was the first woman to ever appear on the cover of a surf magazine. Surf Guide featured a 1963 shot of Benson stepping out of the water with the cover line, “Linda Benson: World's Greatest!”

In 1964, the Huntington Beach competition was renamed the United States Surfing Championship. Soon after, Joyce Hoffman hit the waves, winning the event three years in a row, from 1965 to 1967, and again in 1970. A Dana Point native, Hoffman became the first female to surf the Banzai Pipeline in Hawaii – one of the

deadliest surf spots in the world – and the first woman to be inducted into the Surfing Walk of Fame, three years before Benson, in 1994. Hoffman is considered by many to be the first female international surfing star.

An impressive athlete and media darling, Hoffman was featured on the cover of Life magazine in 1966 after winning the World Championships, and named “Woman of the Year” by the Los Angeles Times in 1969. Hobie Surfboards even introduced the Joyce Hoffman signature model in 1967!

Not until Lisa Anderson arrived in the 1990s did any female surfer come close to matching Hoffman's popularity.

But first there was the 1970s, during which the Huntington Beach competition went on a long hiatus. In 1982, it relaunched with a new name and sponsor, becoming the OP Pro Championship throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

Florida surfer Frieda Zamba dominated the women's category throughout this period, winning in 1984, 1986, 1989, 1990 and 1991. A popular surfer, Zamba blurred the line between the performance of male and female surfing and regularly outdid her male competitors. She was inducted into the Surfing Walk of Fame in 1998.

In 1994, the competition was renamed the U.S. Open of Surfing, and Lisa Andersen, considered a role model to many of today's surfers, took the top prize. On the surfing scene since the 1980s, Andersen didn't really hit her stride until after having her first child at 24. This life event propelled her career forward, improving her wins and her confidence. She said giving birth was, “the worst, most painful thing ever,” adding, “Everything's easy after having a baby.” Andersen made the finals of a surfing competition just five weeks after giving birth.

Quoted as saying she wanted to “surf like a guy,” Surfer magazine put Andersen on the cover in 1996 – its first female-surfer cover shot since the early 1980s – with a sly cover line directed at its primarily male readership: “Lisa Andersen Surfs Better Than You.”

Andersen also had business savvy. Under contract with Roxy, the female division of Quiksilver, Andersen helped to design a female boardshort that immediately became popular and de rigeur in surf fashion.

Another big surfing name during the 1990s was Layne Beachley,

an Australian surfer who won the U.S. Open in both 1996 and 1998. Beachley became known for surfing big waves – 20-plus footers, to be exact – and was inducted into the Surfing Hall of Fame in 2006. The only woman to be named to Surfer magazine's 2009 list of the “50 Greatest Surfers of All Time,” Beachley also earned the distinction, as of 2012, of earning the most in surfing prize money, racking up a total of \$650,000.

The U.S. Open witnessed a dramatic event in 1997, when Hawaiian surfer Rochelle Ballard showed incredible strength and determination during the semifinals after a giant wave pummeled her into the Huntington Beach pier. It nearly knocked her out, and she was immediately taken to the hospital, covered in scrapes and bruises. Against hospital orders, she competed in the finals the next day – and won.

The year 2008 saw the youngest final in the event's history, between 17-year-old Coco Ho and 14-year-old Malia Manuel, both from Hawaii. Manuel won the title, becoming the event's youngest champion.

In 2009, 17-year-old O.C. local Courtney Conlogue, of Santa Ana, won the women's division. In 2010, Carissa Moore took the top title; Sally Fitzgibbons won it in 2011, and Lakey Peterson was the female champion in 2012.

Last year, Hawaiian surfer Carissa Moore won the U.S. Open for a second time, and she is the current surfer to watch. Her extreme athleticism and numerous early wins prompted Surflife.com to write this about Moore: “Surfing may have finally found a girl who can not only play with, but also beat the boys. As a 14-year-old in '07, Carissa beat out 57 of Hawaii's best boys 16 and under, to become the first-ever female winner of a Quiksilver King of the Groms regional event. A year prior, she took down a stacked field that included future ISA World Junior Champion Keanu Aising in the Boys 14 and Under division of a Rip Curl Gromsearch event. And perhaps the cherry on top of it all: The girl scored a perfect 10 in a men's WQS contest.”

Moore appears to be on her way to becoming one of the best surfers, male or female, the world has ever seen. Perhaps one day, her prize money will equal the male champion's loot at a major event.