

Wave Rider

As one of the top surfers in the world, Sally Fitzgibbons is used to navigating uncertainty in the water. But, it's her approach to tackling curveballs on land that makes her even more of a legend

By Alex Davies Photography by Steve Baccon Styling by Charlotte Stokes



Bound By Bond Eye swimsuit, \$170; UA HOVR Sonic 3 Running Shoe, \$180; Breitling watch, \$4890 (worn throughout)



Running in the pouring rain sounds blissful when you hear it described by Sally Fitzgibbons. “There was no-one around and giant puddles everywhere,” says the 30-year-old pro surfer, smiling at the recent memory. “I felt like a land-sea vehicle, so I just ran down the beach and straight into the water in my shoes and clothes, and I started swimming along the shoreline. Then I came back up and ran along the beach again. Nature is one of my core values. There’s something about it that just makes the day feel calm and like it’s all going to be OK, no matter what’s going on.”

What’s going on for Sally when we speak over Zoom looks like this: she’s on the Hawaiian island of O’ahu, recuperating from the first contest of the revived WSL Championship Tour (it was postponed for most of 2020 thanks to the pandemic). After a local shark attack, the final rounds changed location at the last minute, so suddenly Sally and her peers found themselves making history. For the first time, a women’s tour event was held at Pipeline on O’ahu’s famous North Shore – one of the most dangerous surf breaks on earth. Not to mention a spot Sally had never surfed.

These curveballs and challenges seem oddly fitting for such an uncertain time. The usually-tightly-scheduled international tour has to be more flexible than ever because of things like travel restrictions and quarantine. Like so many of us, Sally and the surf community are just having to, well, go with the flow. Oh, and there’s also a big-time diary date somewhere on the horizon: the rescheduled Tokyo 2020, where surfing will finally make its Olympic debut and Sally will pull on the green and gold.

With so much up in the air, it’s a good thing the highs and lows of a 15-plus-year career have taught Sally – an ambassador for top brands including Land Rover, Under Armour and Almond Breeze – a thing or two about resilience. She’s navigated setbacks, comebacks and injuries (including a shoulder fracture in 2018), all the while learning to give her mind the same TLC as the rest of her body. In fact, it’s this mindset shift that hints she’ll be conquering waves and capable of great things for a long time to come. Here, Sally talks intuitive training, sobbing in front of an Olympic legend, her nutrition non-negotiables and the power of cooling your jets.

Let’s talk about Pipeline on O’ahu’s North Shore. What did surfing there mean to you?

✳️ It was such an awesome opportunity. It was quite hectic, like cram study, but it forced us to learn really quickly. Literally I went

from thinking, ‘Where do I paddle out, I’ve never seen this before’ to – by the end of the week – feeling comfortable to be out there. It’s not like any other wave I’ve surfed in an event, so I’m hoping we get to go back there and keep learning. It was just a thrill to surf there.

It makes me think of the film *Blue Crush*, where Kate Bosworth’s character conquers Pipe at the end!

✳️ We had so many jokes about it, that we’d be like her coming out of the pipe! I think that movie is one of the reasons half our generation are surfing. I had a cameo role in *Blue Crush 2* – it went straight to DVD, but it was a dream come true.

The past year has been so different for everyone. Where were you while the tour was on hold?

✳️ I was at home on the South Coast in NSW. It has these wide-open spaces and waves you can surf, and long stretches of beaches and all these different reefs and rock breaks. I was pretty much reliving my grom days! I thought, ‘I’ve got a bit of time, there are



UA HeatGear tee, \$40; crop top (worn underneath), \$45; UA HOVR Phantom 2 Running Shoes, \$220; Seafolly bikini briefs, \$69

these manoeuvres I've wanted to try; now's my time to fall off and faceplant and just try'. There's still so much to learn on my surfboard. I got to spend an extended amount of time with my mum and dad at home, too, which was really cool, because normally we're away for 10 months of the year. We've travelled non-stop for 15 years probably and I think my body just needed time to sleep and wake up in the same spot and eat the same food. Having my mum's cooking was just brilliant! I actually think that [time] will prolong my career in a sense. It was like a halfway mark for me.

What was it like then going back on the road?

✳ [It took time] to adjust back to the routine. You think 'I've been training hard and I physically can cope with big days' but actually it's the *emotional* toll and tax of dealing with [the changes]. You don't realise how much energy that takes up. You haven't toured for a year... so it's about allowing a little more time to recover and actually admitting that's a big component of it - the mental toll and being able to restore and recover that. The more years I've been around, I've tried to tune into that side of things and it's really stabilised my approach. I'm able to give 100 per cent energy when I need to, and also just be calm, really slow things down and cool the jets.

Has that mindset shift been a few years in the making for you?

✳ Definitely. I feel like people are wired to be really 'up and go, go, go' and 'I've gotta do more, more, more', all the time, and that momentum is quite addictive. But if you can also hit cruise mode and, say, read a book or just lay out under some trees, take some deep breaths and have a little nap... those kinds of things really do give back to you 10-fold; [helping] you to feel stable and have a really even keel.

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When you've been hit by setbacks, what's your take on them?

✳ It's [about] looking at a performance and thinking, 'Well, did I show up as my best? Did I do everything in my preparation? Are there some steps forward or something I can learn?' Because [challenges] are what you actually learn from. My experience at Pipeline didn't go to plan and I got a couple of one-point rides, but I learned more there than I've learned in six months. I was pumped! So, just stay open to what you can learn. There have definitely been moments where I've thought some challenges weren't able to be overcome. I thought 'my shoulder's broken or my hip's broken, or this has happened' and I couldn't take big steps. But I could take small steps. And that's pretty contagious and is where your momentum comes from. And before you know it, you're showing back up and [people] are like 'Ah, she's still here' [laughs].

I still love showing up and working on my craft; I still enjoy going to competition days. And if that was all built from these little steppingstones that I've had, then so be it. I've been really stoked on my journey.

Tell me about your approach to fitness. What does a day of workouts look like?

✳ Being a surfer and on the road, you have to be so adaptable. Like right now, we can't actually go into the gyms because of the Covid bubble [created] for us to compete, so it's like 'what can I use to throw some weight around?' And you just fill up a bunch of water bottles in a bag, and you can get a 15kg weight right there. And then you might go for a walk or run and do some burpees, push-ups and a set using a tree. For me, I wake up and have a stretch or do sort-of yoga to ready the body; I do some bodyweight resistance sets; and then the surf sessions are scattered through the day. I use cardio, like going for a run or swim, to sometimes regulate my adrenalin, too, because your energy is so heightened [when you're surfing]. So, I might go for a run straight after a surf, just to find a rhythm again, so I don't spread that anxiousness across the rest of my day or the people around me. I'm all about consistency and doing things that make me feel really good and agile. You know when everything just feels together and connected? I chase that sort of feeling, whether it's the things I'm eating or drinking, how I'm exercising, the people I connect to. I want to feel in tune with the day and nature, so I pick activities that relate to that.

Are there any nutrition non-negotiables that you swear by?

✳ I just try and stay wholesome and healthy and get really good produce. If I can get it from someone's farm, that's the pinnacle.



Under Armour jacket, \$150; sports bra and bike shorts (Sally's own)

Sally in... 60 Seconds

Favourite workout move?

Burpee. It's good practice for jumping up on your board.

Perfect weekend?

Definitely in nature with friends or family. You're sitting in your deckchairs and watching the sun go down after a day of surfing together. Plus, really good food.

Smoothie line-up?

Cucumber, celery, spinach, ginger, pineapple, pear, lemon - leave a little bit of the zest on. A splash of water, coconut water or Almond Breeze if you want it creamy. And ice.

Self-care moment?

A really good chai latte. I love having a cup of tea with my mum. It's the ultimate pause, and then you can just go back to life.

Podcast pick?

The Howie Games, where [sports commentator] Mark Howard interviews athletes. His voice makes me feel at home.

App y days?

With my apps Sally's Surf School and Surf Coach, it's like, 'hey, I wanna be your pocket coach!'. For anyone who wants to pick up a board, there's a place to go.

Top surf spots?

At home in Australia, Bells Beach in Victoria. Overseas, Cloudbreak in Fiji. My bucket list? Nicaragua.

Netflix menu?

The Queen's Gambit - I played chess when I was a kid. Bethany Hamilton's movie *Unstoppable* [about the US surfer's comeback after losing her arm to a shark attack]. She's a good friend and so inspirational. Her documentaries are wild.

Sally in Hawaii enjoying two of her greatest loves: "core value" nature and adventure



On the Gram

Just treat your body like you're a world champion, even if you're not an athlete. Cooking my own food is really important. You get a connection to and appreciation of [your meal] through that process. I love watching a good cooking show - it's so soothing! And the sport version of cooking shows is watching golf. That's like meditation.

How are you feeling about the Olympics?

✳️ It's pretty wild that surfing's been invited to the biggest sports party in the world. It's such an elite sport now and the things both men and women are doing on waves is really, really athletic. It's a great introduction for people to really get some eyes on our sport, hopefully pick up a board and start their own relationship with the ocean. It's such a hero-ed sport in Australia, so we feel really supported going into a Games. I feel like we have a great shot at going for those medals.

You were in the stands when Cathy Freeman won her historic medal in 2000, is that right?

✳️ Yes, I was totally there! I was 10 years old. We were in the last row from the very top - so like Google Maps looking down - and I was hanging off the top beam and the whole stadium was shaking. I had my lucky hat and I said to my mum, 'Cathy will sign it, won't she?' and she was like, 'Ah, she's pretty busy' [laughs] and I cried on the way home. Then, in 2018, [Cathy] came to talk to us to get us prepped for the Olympics. I asked her, 'Can you sign my hat?' and I just bawled.

Loving life on the golf course with fellow pro surfers Keely Andrew and Isabella Nichols



Spending time with her inspirations, Steph Gilmore (above) and Sally's dad, Martin (right)



Putting in the hard yards in the gym (left) and the water (above). What a total champ!

Aussie athletes are smashing it atm. What makes you able to go above and beyond?

✳️ As Aussie kids, we love our sport and just getting outdoors, so I think it's a product of the environment. But, then there's the momentum and coverage of women's sport, the support for it and the 'push' to tell the stories, have it on live TV and have young girls looking up to what our generation is doing now. That combination is creating the ripple effect. There's a lot of heart in these performances and you can't *not* be inspired by them.

Who inspires you?

✳️ When we're travelling, we see a whole array of jobs, and if someone

can have good energy and a really positive impact [that inspires me]. I've learned to show up in life and my sport from my family, and I wouldn't really see through the lens I do without my parents being there every step of the way. In terms of sport, I get inspired by a Roger Federer of the world, for sure. Layne Beachley, Pam Burridge and the hierarchy of Australian women's surfing showed us what was possible. Also, Steph [Gilmore] who's still in our generation. It's so cool to see all the groms starting [to surf] now. And just the waves of young girls hitting the line-up, because it wasn't as common when I started out. You'd be the only girl in the surf for miles, so [this new era] has been a pleasure to watch. **wh**