

# On the road to surf inclusion for the Oregon Coast

*By: Reina Harwood/Intern for the Siuslaw News - Updated: 2 days ago*

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July 28, 2021 — On Saturday, July 26, the Tokyo Olympics opened with one of the newest additions to the Olympic line-up, which has drawn attention for its inclusion and centuries old traditions. Surfing was added to the medal docket in 2020, thanks in part to the Tokyo Organizing Committee who pitched the idea. The International Olympic Committee authorized inclusion for the sport of surfing in the Olympic program in 2016.

The first official international competition for the cultural cornerstone of Hawaii has brought the allure of victory, presenting 40 surfers from around the world to discuss the history of the sport and its future.

Gold medalists will be announced today, July 28, according to the Tokyo Olympic day-to-day guide. Each match is set to take place at the Tsurigasaki Surfing Beach along the Chiba shore, but the schedule is subject to change depending on when surfing conditions will be at their best.

*(UPDATE: Due to surf conditions, winners were announced Tuesday, July 27, after print deadlines. Results are available at <https://olympics.com/tokyo-2020/olympic-games/en/results/surfing/olympic-schedule-and-results.htm>.)*

Florence has a small community, but dedicated surfers often congregate at the South Jetty of the Siuslaw River when the tide, swell and crushing breaks allow.

Most have been surfing for decades. Meanwhile, young surfers are paddling to catch their first waves. With wetsuits zipped, Florence surfers drop in midday or early mornings, depending on the surfing forecasts.

Historically, surfing has been recognized as a male-dominated sport, a trend that Lexi Hallahan, who runs the Northwest Women's Surf Camps (NWWSC) in Seaside, strives to change. With an appearance of 20 women surfers at this year's Olympic Games, the beauty and grace of the sport has soaked in the spotlight and further promoted gender equality and empowerment for women in the surfing community.

“It’s kind of amazing to think that the Olympic worldwide vision of sports is embracing it. It’s really exciting,” Hallahan added.

Her vision for the NWWSC began with “expanding the surfing community for women in the Northwest and to show women a way by giving exceptional instruction with our full women coaching team,” she said. “It gives the women empowerment.”

Professional women surfers like Bethany Hamilton and Alana Blanchard have paved a way for women surfers to participate in the sport. Locally, more women have hopped on the wagon and can be spotted surfing at popular breaks in Oregon at Seaside, Short Sands, Otter Rock and Pacific City.

Since the 1980s, Hallahan has noticed an increase of women showing up to surf on the weekends.

“About a third of the people surfing or bodyboarding are women now. You’d never see that 20 years ago,” she said. “It’s not just 99.9% male every time you look out in the water.”

Surfing is on the rise for women, but underlying obstacles persist amongst smaller surf communities in coastal towns, like Florence.

Heidi Jarman, a mother and dedicated surfer at the South Jetty since the late 1980s, is one of a few women in the surfing community in Florence. Throughout the years, most surfers have been men, which hasn’t changed, according to Jarman. Because of this, women surfers in Florence have continuously been a minority of the sport due to social barriers.

“Locally, I only know one other woman right now who surfs, so that’s a little disappointing,” Jarman said. “I would love to have more women surf in the community. It feels like I’m missing out.”

One reason why Florence lacks women in surfing is due to limited resources with no active women surf groups, shops, clubs or organizations in the area that offer equipment or community.

Furthermore, this has closed doors on newcomers of any kind who seek surfing. These patterns mimic the greater issues within surfing, including unequal access.

With social disparities in surfing, it leaves some women to surf alone or not at all.

“You just have to be strong, independent, and trust your skills,” Jarman said. “I’ll go out by myself on a calm day, but I realize I take risks by going out by myself sometimes.”

However, the National Weather Service advises that beachgoers “should never swim alone.” But some go anyway — because “it’s a passion,” Jarman added. “A lifestyle.”

This has raised safety concerns among women surfers on the Oregon Coast.

Local surfers hope that with women's surfing spotlighted this year in the Tokyo Olympics, local issues within smaller surf communities will be addressed as more people discover the sport.

Jarman has seen the overall surfing scene for women progress.

“It's blossomed and I love seeing how far it's come,” she said.

Looking forward, Jarman is hopeful to connect with more women in the surfing community throughout the summer and in the future.

“If there are other women out there that know how to surf and would like to go out, reach out. That'd be great,” Jarman said.

According to Hallahan, some of the women who've participated in her surfing getaways and camps have followed on their own paths to create women's meetup groups on Facebook. The goal is to encourage women to find other women.

“These meetup groups have been essential in helping women,” she said.

A popular Facebook group for women and all surfers seeking friends in the community or a surf buddy is “Surfing in Oregon,” along with “#PNWsurfchicks” and “BabesOnWavesNW.”

Aspen Inouye, a 28-year-old resident of Florence, has faced similar struggles in meeting women who surf in the community. For Inouye, surfing reminds her of the connection she has with the ocean, her friends and family.

“There's nothing like it,” she said.

Often, Inouye chooses to travel over 50 miles to visit Otter Rock, instead of the South Jetty.

Although she is willing to make the hour drive for a surf-sesh, she explained her appreciation for all Oregon surfers in the community.

“They’re some of the most dedicated people I’ve ever met,” she said. “To go out in Oregon weather, the swell conditions, and again in the morning, you have to fight to get out there and it’s inspiring to see.”

Similar to Inouye, 31-year-old Brandon Nivilinszky, who’s lived in Florence for about 21 years, enjoys taking his son to Otter Rock as he’s learning to ride his first waves.

For Nivilinszky, surfing allowed him to overcome his fear of drowning and further push himself in becoming a stronger surfer over the years.

“I kept pushing my limits, and once I realized, ‘OK, I can do this,’ I got over my fear of water. It’s all because of surfing,” he said.

In his family, surfing has brought exciting moments and memories for him and his son.

“It’s an awesome feeling because hopefully he’ll keep surfing and doing his own thing — exploring and getting the same kind of joy as I get out of it,” Nivilinszky said.

He is continuing to surf with his son while exploring surf spots throughout Newport, roughly 50 miles from Florence.

For more information in surf lessons, learn about NWWSC in Seaside through <https://nwwomenssurfcamps.com>. There, the staff offer parent and kid camps, group surf lessons, co-ed bodyboarding clinics, women’s bodyboard day camps and more.

Another resource for surf lessons is at Ossies Surf Shop, 4860 Highway 101 in Newport, where Summer Surf School is in effect at Agate Beach. For more information, visit [ossiessurfshop.com](http://ossiessurfshop.com).

Lastly, Newport Parks & Recreation announced that the annual two-day Agate Beach Surf Classic surfing contest will take place Sept. 11 through 12. This will be the first surfing contest in Oregon since COVID-19 restrictions began. Learn more at [newportsurfclassic.com](http://newportsurfclassic.com).

As women surfers hit the waves on a global scale, the Pacific Northwest is on its way to equipping groups of resilient women in today's surfing world.

The women of Florence hope to see the same, with even more people following in their wake.

For more information, visit <https://olympics.com/en/sports/surfing/>.