

ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO SHOW.

WOMEN'S SURFING IS SO HOT RIGHT NOW. SO WHY ARE EVENT SPONSORS GETTING COLD FEET?

Huge crowds at Snapper Rocks for this year's Roxy Pro. Photo. Chris Carey / Zaz.

Women's surfing has reached new performance heights and is poised for a fresh wave of fame across North America, yet women's event sponsors have left the building just as the party cranks up a notch.

Take one look at Nike's women's big budget surfing movie *Leave A Message* and you'd be lying if you weren't merely impressed by the surfing, but also the star's intoxicating mix of youth, attractiveness, and marketability.

When Nike 6.0 turned it's focus to women's surfing, it snapped up six red hot talents who happen to scrub up pretty; ASP women's world tour surfers Carissa Moore, Laura Enever and Coco Ho, along with young stars Lakey Peterson, Malia Manuel, and Monyca Byrne Wickey. Not familiar with the last three? Google them and you'll find chat boards lit up with guys discussing Malia's smooth style, Lakey's impressive boosts, and Monyca's bikini clad bottom turns amongst other anatomical observations. That's right, blokes remarking on women's surfing in a highly positive, though at times creepy manner. How did this happen?

Released for free download in late May, *Leave a Message* was helped along by a healthy dose of advertising support, garnering the girls incredible mileage across US surf media from *Surfline* to *Surfer*, Malia even scored a cover boosting on *Transworld Surf*. In Australia, *Surfing Life*, *Tracks*, *Stab and Waves* were all championing the cause, or at least sporting the ads. Online, the movie's preview teaser had 151K views on Vimeo over the two months prior to release. As a benchmark, Julian Wilson's hype clip, *The Next Chapter Begins Now* only racked up 14K over three months on the same channel.

Media machine in overdrive, Nike then played it smart. No matter how much hype they'd hustled up, if they'd tried to sell the movie it would've tanked, nobody besides the most diehard surfer chicks would've ever seen it. Instead, they let it freely infect the web like a malware virus, converting countless thousands of viewers into admirers. Giving the movie away became a clever PR vehicle, but also shone the lights squarely on the rapidly evolving state of women's surfing in the process.

6.0's North America Brand Manager Zach Boon told *ShopEatSurf* shortly before the movie was released, "As we got more into it, it became a bigger investment. We are treating it like we would treat any guys' movie and I think what's special, too, is besides being a core surf movie, I think it will also be a lot more appealing to mainstream media because all the girls have such unique personalities and interests.

With the girls, they are about much more than just surfing and playing golf. "We'll have a DVD at retail but it's not something we are looking to make money off of. Were using the video more as a promo item, and since kids consume video through mobile and web, we figured we would do it that way rather than just on DVD."

The month prior to *Leave a Message's* release, Rip Curl team member Bethany Hamilton's biopic *Soul Surfer* did the rounds in North American theatres. Showing on 2214 screens across the US, *Soul Surfer* cleared \$10.4m on opening weekend, and had cleared over \$40 million at time of print. While the story of a young surfer losing a limb in a shark attack is unlikely to boost surf school numbers, the movie has nonetheless exposed non-surfers across landlocked regions of America to the story of one truly courageous female surfer, and the world of surfing she loves so dearly. The movie's strong Christian overtones plus the acting debut of country music star Carrie Underwood propelled the movie across the Bible Belt, and apart from more traditional surf territories like Orange County, the movie's strongest figures came from the Southern States and cities like Chicago, new frontiers for surf. According to opening weekend data, females accounted for 85% of the audience, with a strong showing from young women (56% were under 25). The movie may not translate into an immediate rush in Rip Curl T-shirt sales, but for positive brand association you don't get much bigger. And as Layne points out, it's also a big win for female surfers. "Anything that goes out there that's in a positive, inspiring or aspirational light is a huge boost for women's surfing."

Yet for the pinnacle of this current women's surfing publicity streak, keep your eyes glued on the 2011 world title race. After the Billabong Pro Rio only Carissa Moore and Sally Fitzgibbons remained in contention coming into the Roxy Pro France. If Carissa wins, it'll be the first time an American has claimed a women's world title since Lisa Anderson in 1997. OK, technically Carissa's Hawaiian, which in surfing is autonomous from the US, but America will claim her faster than an Aussie would claim *Crowded House*. She'll also be the first Hawaiian women's world champ since 1981. Add the fact Carissa's just 18 (turning 19 in August) and balances her freakish surf abilities by being well spoken and cute as a button, and you can imagine the US mainstream media will be frothing harder than a dropped six pack. Even if Sally wins (a good possibility given the young Aussie's talent) and it's still guaranteed the media will be watching Carissa's every move in 2012, generating incredible buzz and attention for the girls.

Layne Beachley told ASB in May, "At this stage it looks like Carissa's secured the world title, which certainly helps the cause, it'll raise interest in more international markets, especially America where we've been lacking the support we truly require. It's been such a dominant market, so for the surf brands I think it'd be extremely beneficial for America to claim a female world champion."

High Yet Dry.....

With all these factors in motion, the profile of women's surfing is about to get a face lift, and it couldn't be better timed. Over the past few years, the ASP women's calendar has been dogged by the slow yet systematic pull out of event sponsors. At the start of 2011 it looked like the world title would be decided on just five events. It solidified to seven, yet Brodie Carr, CEO of ASP International, is still at a loss as to why sponsors aren't banging down the door. "Our ideal number on the ASP Women's WT is 10 events and the same number of 6 stars. We're hitting and exceeding targets in all categories except the girls, it blows me away and bums me out. It's our key focus on the event acquisition front. We have a few targets in mind, but it's not been easy with the surf market down significantly, a 30% drop in the US compared to 2008. I think we've hit the flat spot and are now starting to feel an upswing coming. I'm hopeful we can use this upswing to covert some new events for the girls."

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Layne Beachley is pragmatic about event sponsors surfing hard to get. "I don't think women's surfing is an orphan in this regard; lots of sports are experiencing financial pressure and shrinkage in event numbers. Women's surfing is feeling the pinch, but it's still prospering regardless. I think we're just weeding out our garden and finding the true stayers. There's always ebbs and flows when it comes to sponsorship in professional sport. Of course women's surfing still needs a boost, and it's going to take strategy and effort on behalf of the ASP to not only work with the current sponsors, but start seeking newer ones by looking outside the box a bit."

Gail Bower, President of international event sponsorship and marketing consultancy Bower & Co and author of guidebook *How to Jump Start Your Sponsorship Strategy* in *Tough Times*, told ASB that blaming the economy isn't a solution.

"To me, every event is a business. Some events are well run businesses, others aren't. Also, events have life cycles. Event producers need to factor these cycles into their plans, constantly refreshing events to keep them relevant, exciting, and new. I don't see a blanket downward trend for events. Some events are thriving and growing; others aren't. Events that aren't doing well probably wouldn't even if the economy were thriving. Communities, geographic, interest based, cause-based, need events now more than ever, and event producers must uncover opportunities within these communities to make events thrive, change, merge with another, or come to a close."

Bower suggests rethinking women's events from the ground up. "Sponsors are attracted to successful, vital events. What are the men's events doing that the women's aren't? Are the women's events marketing sufficiently, attracting participants and spectators, media coverage and popularity? These questions hold the keys to unlocking the answers. Perhaps women's events need new life and vitality breathed into them, which obviously takes time. And sponsors can be brought in to these aspirations. The women's events might benefit from a new strategy to make them relevant and compelling and to put them on a growth curve. By including ways to build participants and spectators and cultivate younger surfers, opportunities for a wide range of sponsors open up."

Game On.....

Mike Blackwood, head of Quiksilver Women's division, simply puts the lack of event sponsors down to the industry underestimating the girl's talent and pulling power. "To be honest, I just don't think people realized how good women's surfing actually was," Mike stated, adding, "The Roxy Pro this year made people sit up and take notice. Seriously the level of surfing from the quarters on in that event would blow a lot of guys out of the water. Both inside and outside of the industry, I think that event was a big wake up call. Just having it on ONE HD free to air TV opened women's surfing up to a whole new audience, so that's a positive for the whole industry. There's talk of trying to get another event up for Hawaii, so hopefully that happens. Next year, who knows, hopefully we get a few other crew stepping up and supporting the women's tour."

Avid watchers of ASP events would agree this year's Roxy Pro at Snapper Rocks, where Carissa Moore narrowly defeated fellow teen sensation Tyler Wright, was a game changer. The finals highlight clip from Snapper has had 44, 800 views on the McKinnon Media Vimeo site alone – that's on top of the One HD free-to-air broadcast in Australia, and after the thousand who tuned in for the live webcast or viewed it on demand via the Roxy or ASP sites.

Mandy McKinnon, freelance media co-coordinator for the ASP, confirms media demand for women's event footage is at an all time high. "The incredible growth of online digital news and surfing sites has seen demand for women's highlights go through the roof this year. Our stats show the girls' highlights are receiving massive amounts of views worldwide. What's going on with online surfing media right now is unsurpassed, and the girls are a big part of that."

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Mandy feels besides the girl's skills levels, there's a lot of positive factors at play behind their current popularity. "The demand for women's media content has increased expediently over the past few years due to a whole range of factors, of which Steph Gilmore is a major one. Steph's value cannot be underestimated. She handles the media pressure like a champion, win or lose. Carissa Moore and Sally Fitzgibbons are gold to work with too, and I like what Laura Enever is bringing to the table. There's a depth in the ranks too with Tyler Wright, Courtney Cologue and Pauline Ado already establishing themselves. The girls are smart, beautiful, media savvy and ripping."

Layne agrees the new guard are more than one-dimensional athletes, and are infinitely watchable. "Steph's done a fantastic job as leader and world champion, and Sally's following along in those footsteps. Laura Enever's very media savvy. Carissa obviously generates loads of media attention. It's probably one of the most healthy, positive, and marketable times in women's surfing. There's a lot of camaraderie on tour. They're all really healthy, active, positive, strong. They're beautiful, they photograph well. There's a lot of sex appeal, and I don't care what anyone says I'm a big believer that sex sells. I think all those ingredients have come together to make a really powerful tool for promoting the sport."

Brodie Carr, CEO of ASP International, agrees the standard of the women's tour is impressive. "Best ever! Have you seen the talent pool and what these girls are doing? They surf amazing and are all rock stars."

Despite the accolades, less events means fewer opportunities for this current crop of elite female surfers to showcase their competitive prowess and build followings. So where to next?

From Retro to Metro.....

In years gone past, the girls would flit between typical exotic surf locales like Fiji, Hawaii and Tahiti. This year, the girls are hitting metro locations – Dee Why, Rio, Huntington. It's a trend that's also playing out on the men's tour, with New York and San Fran added this year. However unlike the men's tour, the girls haven't got the dream locations to balance things and challenge them, no Hawaiian leg, no big wave venues

On one hand, the move to metro locations makes perfect business sense; the ever present risk with remote locations is if they're skunked for waves, there's minimal media coverage or sponsor ROI. Take the circus to the city however and whether there's waves or not, the event PR generated across mainstream media is huge. Metro locations are great for the sport's visibility, but at a price. Nobody enjoys watching surfers flounder about in sub-standard waves – take Rio for example, which was occasionally as tedious as watching *Dancing With The Stars* just to get a glimpse of Occy.

Media guru Mandy McKinnon acknowledges events receive more mainstream coverage in cities vs remote locations; "Easy media access by reporters to the surfers and the action does increase coverage, especially at event locations. Journos like to get their own story angle, and obviously that's easier when they can be onsite. The other advantage of highly populated contest venues is the atmosphere large spectator crowds bring to events that adds to the media value. It's electrifying at Snapper with the Gold Coast population being so surf savvy, and it's amazing to be apart of that. However, you can't underestimate the value of epic contest vision. No matter where the location is, at the end of the day an event is remembered by its surf and the surfing." The changes for the women's tour don't just mean the loss of some epic waves. The event schedule has been whittled down to include just three stand alone events: the Commonwealth Beachley Classic Dee Why, the Subaru TSB Bank Taranaki event, and the Roxy Pro France – the only surf brand event of the bunch. It's easy to assume the loss of women's-only events comes down to expense; women's stand alone events cost around half a millions dollars to run, whereas combining events with men's costs less in infrastructure. For the girls, the upside to combined events is more publicity and viewers both on the beach and online, but the downside is playing second fiddle in less contestable conditions.

Layne has contemplated the conundrum of where to run women's events her entire career, and feels she's found a solution with her signature event, the Commonwealth Bank Beachey Classic, which boasts the biggest prize purse on the women's tour. "Back in the day when Rochelle Ballard, Megan Abubo, Kate Skarratt, and Pru Jeffries and I had a dream of taking the women's events away from the men's tour so we could stand on our own two feet, I think we were a bit premature.

It's a great idea, great concept, but it just needed to be orchestrated a bit more. So we've seen the success of the women's tour when it stands alone, but when it's in remote isolated areas, it tends to lack media interest and the coverage support it gets from being somewhere like Dee Why. Fortunately Dee Why's still considered to be a pretty high-class wave, I mean we had six foot out the point this year. But my interest was all about generating mainstream media attention for the girls. Locations need constant monitoring and consideration, but at this stage the ASP seem to be scrambling for events and accepting them wherever people want to put them. I'm very curious to see the kinds of waves the girls are going to get in Baيرritz in July for example, the worst time for surf in France."

Show me the spono contract.....

In the 2008 season, a third of the surfers on the ASP Women's World Tour lacked major sponsors. In, 2011, that's dropped a little to four of the Top 17. So while endemic brands are tending to shy away from events, they still recognise value in having a strong team, and they're still the strongest supporters of the women's Top 17 which boasts four RipCurl team members, three Billabong, three Roxy or Quiksilver and a Volcom rider. But the big change afoot? The top girls are making bank. Take Steph Gilmore for example, whose new contract with Quiksilver Women is rumored to be in the vicinity of \$5 million over five years. Carissa Moore, whose sponsors Red Bull, Nike 6.0 and Target are no slouches in the fat cheque writing department, is reportedly raking in a similar figure.

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Mike Blackwood told ASB adding Steph to the Quiksilver Women's roster brought the label instant visibility. "Having someone like Stephanie on board who is one of the highest profile female athletes in the country can only help raise your profile," Mike said, going on to explain why she's the sole surfer amongst their 'global ambassadors', a diverse mix of female DJ's, writers, photographers, musicians, and even a chef. "It just seemed like a natural fit, as cliché as it sounds, when we looked at what we wanted to stand for as a brand. Then looked at the person Stephanie is, the things she's into and wants to do in the future. On top of that Roxy is such a strong brand as it is. It has its own DNA and already has an incredible team of athletes representing it and what it stands for, like Sal and Sofia in the surf, Torah in the snow. It just made a lot of sense to bring Stephanie on as a Quiksilver ambassador."

Of the brands throwing down these big sponsorship deals, Quiksilver already heavily invests in women's events under it's Roxy label, but besides Red Bull all Carissa's new sponsors are relative newcomers to surfing. The faith these brands are placing in the future of women's surfing is promising. Target earned \$65.4 billion in revenue in 2009 (nearly ten times the entire surf and skate industries combined) so they kind of know their shiz where business is concerned. Target entering the fray understandably makes surf purists very uncomfortable, but if Target think Carissa's as marketable as their other signed high profile sports megastars like Shaun White, it validates women's surfing and broadens it's reach - although Target don't plan to put their distinctive red and white logo on event banners. Target Lifestyle Manager, Troy Michels, told *Surfer Mag* in 2010. "Right now we're not looking at doing anything but supporting Carissa and making sure she gets all of the best opportunities out there. We're currently not going to do any advertisements in the magazines or sponsor any events."

Carissa's other sponsor Nike, however, has been launching a no apologies assault on surf, including investing in women's surfing. It upgraded the women's section of the US Open of Surfing to a world tour contest, and spent two years and suitcases full of cash filming *Leave A Message*. It also placed Laura Enever in the ad campaign for The Chosen alongside top athletes like Julian Wilson, skater Paul Rodriguez and snowboarder Danny Kass. Nike doesn't do those kinds of things for fuzzy feel good points, it expects serious sales in return. End of 2010 reports from Nike project. Their action sports unit specializing in surf, skate and snow will double to \$1.2 billion within five years. So if Nike also think the girls are marketable, there may be good times ahead.

Could the top girls' sponsorship contracts quadrupling in recent years be the culprit for a money drain affecting events? Perhaps. It's more likely however that surf brands diversifying to reach the youth market via music, art and philanthropic events has left the kitty a little dry during lean times. But while it's unclear what the future holds for women's events, it's exciting times for women's surfing. *Leave a Message*, Bethany's *Soul Surfer*, and Carissa's possible world title are going to bring the girls into the most visible position they've ever been in across North America, still a very influential territory for surf. The question is, can the women capillise on their popularity to bring more sponsors to the table? Layne thinks the girls are already on the right track. "Athletes can't keep relying on their industries to promote their sport, they've got to do it themselves. They have to have some sort of responsibility and accountability for the sport's progression, and I think the girls are finally beginning to understand that. By promoting themselves and allowing people into their worlds, the more interest they generate and possibilities they open up."