



Waves that by Megan Michelson Save

Surfing and the mythically therapeutic ways of the ocean, it turns

Cancer survivor Britte Roossien
with the First Descents program
at Nags Head Beach in the Outer
Banks of North Carolina.

out, can literally save a life.

In a little town north of Boston, Britte Roossien, a young mother of two, was running a day care program out of her house. In September 2010, however, her life changed when a routine visit to the doctor went horribly wrong.

Britte's doctor told her she had stage 2 Hodgkin's lymphoma, cancer of the lymph nodes. She'd barely even had the flu before, and now cancer had stricken her like a runaway truck. Immediate surgery on her neck to remove her lymph nodes was followed by eight cycles of chemotherapy, then a month of radiation.

A few months later, still suffering from severe fatigue, full-body aches and dramatic weight loss, Britte returned to the doctor for more tests. The results showed a large tumor had developed in her chest and that it, too, was cancerous.

She had to give up her day care business and Britte's husband, Tony, took over as the main caregiver of their children, son Jace, 4, and daughter Wylie, 2, as Britte underwent another round of treatment. When Jace had a bad dream during the night, Britte would hear his little footsteps as he walked to Tom's side of the bed, not her own. It broke her heart not to be there for her children.

"My life as I knew it came to a complete standstill," Britte says. "Physically, I was wrecked. Chemo was very difficult for me, and radiation ended up being even worse. I would try to get a walk in daily to keep up my strength, but basically, I spent the majority of my time in bed or on the couch. I was crushed to not have the energy or strength to be the mom or wife that I once was."

Even after her treatment was over and doctors told her she was clear of cancer, Britte suffered from depression and anxiety, often turning to anti-anxiety pills and too many glasses of chardonnay to ease her fears.

"Thoughts about the future would freeze me," she says. "Could this come back? Could it happen to my kids? What the hell caused this in the first place?

These are the thoughts that spiraled, causing anxiety, sadness and fear."

Sensing her mental anguish, one of her doctors suggested she check out First Descents, an organization offering cancer patients and survivors free-of-charge outdoor adventures like surfing, climbing and kayaking as a way for them to reclaim their lives.

Months later, still reeling from cancer-induced anxiety, Britte got the call: There was an opening on a First Descents surf trip in the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Did she want to go? She had never even contemplated surfing before, but she figured she had nothing to lose.

Surfing with a Purpose

Ryan Pittsinger grew up surfing in Manhattan Beach, Calif., a self-described surf addict who says, starting at a young age, he spent at least three days a week in the ocean.

He says even then he understood that surfing was an outlet for him. "If I was having a tough time or something was going on in my life, I could jump in the water and have the opportunity to not think about anything else but the waves," he says. "Something about being immersed in the ocean—it's so much more powerful than yourself. It has a mystique and a healing power to it."

As he grew older, Ryan became more and more interested in the idea of surfing's influence on a person's mental state and mood, an area that had seen little to no scientific research. After his undergraduate studies, he pursued a master's degree in psychology at California State University, Long Beach. As part of his master's thesis, Ryan conducted a study that analyzed 107 individuals—men and women of a range of ages and abilities—before and after a 30-minute surf session. The results, he says, didn't surprise him that much; after all, it's what he'd been experiencing in the water his entire life.

"The results showed a significant increase in positive mood and tranquility after surfing for 30 minutes, and a decrease in negative feelings and

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Carly, the Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation's director of programs, shares a fun moment in the sand with two new surfers.



fatigue,” he says. “In other words, participants reported feeling happier and more energized after surfing.”

Ryan has had to give up his regular surf routine since enrolling in a doctoral program at the land-locked University of Iowa, where he’s a fifth-year Ph.D. student in counseling psychology. (He still gets his surfing fix whenever he heads home.)

His most recent study, which will be published in a 2014 issue of *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, surveys 12 male surfers to see how men use the sport of surfing to cope with life’s stressors, ranging from work tension, difficulty in a relationship or loss of a loved one. Whereas men especially can fall into the traps of using strategies like avoidance, anger or substance abuse to fix problems, Ryan wanted to find out if surfing could solve issues in a healthier, more positive way.

He conducted his study literally while surfing. Using an underwater camera and laminated sheets of paper, he asked the men 22 questions about how they use surfing and what surfing provides for them. Often, the survey would be interrupted when the participant would catch a wave.

One of the questions on the survey was, “What were you thinking about when you just caught that wave?”

The answer, Ryan says, was usually something along the lines of, “When I’m surfing, I’m not thinking about anything except what is directly related to the act of surfing—and nothing related to my troubles.”

“It’s pretty unique to have even a few seconds of complete freedom like that,” Ryan says. “Surfing is one way

that people can find a real escape from their stresses.”

Ryan is among a handful of researchers studying surfing’s impact on human psychology, but they are not entirely alone in their belief in the ocean’s healing powers. When Carly Rogers was 18, her mother passed away suddenly. She dealt with her grief by letting the ocean’s waves wash it away, getting a job as a lifeguard and taking up surfing. Since then, two decades later, she’s been a Los Angeles County lifeguard and an avid surfer.

She’s also turned ocean therapy into her career. Carly is the director of programs at the Southern California-based Jimmy Miller Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit established in 2005 in memory of its namesake, a lifelong surfer who took his own life after a battle with mental illness. Carly, who was friends with Jimmy, runs the organization’s ocean therapy program, which offers surf lessons to U.S. veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other injuries, as well as teens living in shelters and foster care programs in inner-city Los Angeles.

While getting her doctoral degree in occupational therapy at the University of Southern California, Carly conducted a study looking at the impact five surf sessions can have on Iraq war veterans diagnosed with PTSD and depression.

“These veterans were all very strong, athletic, no-fear individuals. But put them in the water and they can’t resist it—they were all laughing and smiling,” Carly says. “They were saying things like, ‘This is the best day of my life.

I feel alive.’ Surfing provides a positive, natural environment; a chance to build self-confidence; and a catalyst for change.”

Her study, much like Ryan’s, reached the same conclusion: Surfing makes you happier.

Healing Waves

Avid surfers say they are not surprised by findings like Ryan’s and Carly’s—they, too, have experienced the raw power of the ocean. Among those is world-renowned big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton, who says surfing offers him a chance to relax amid the chaos.

“The ocean has been one of the biggest teachers in my life,” Laird says. “Whether it’s the humility or discipline you learn or the confidence and joy you gain from riding a wave, all of those lessons from the sea are applicable on land.”

Years ago, Laird was struggling in his relationship with his wife, pro volleyball player Gabrielle Reece—things just weren’t going smoothly. He flew to Tahiti to surf Teahupoo, known to have the toughest and biggest breaks in the world. As he was getting ready to depart the island, a massive swell began to head his way. Laird was ready when a rogue wave with a 30-foot face—which he named the “Millennium Wave”—came toward him. He says riding the giant wave put everything into perspective.

“That wave changed my priorities and had a sort of spiritual effect on me,” he says. “We worked the things out in our relationship, and things have never been better.”

You don’t have to be a professional surfer to feel the benefits of the ocean, Laird assures. First-time surfers may even notice the impact more.

“Your first day surfing, that first ride on a wave, you’re never going to be more present than in that moment. You’re going to appreciate the difficulty of doing it and that leads to your feelings of accomplishment,” Laird says. “Plus, the sensation of riding the energy of a wave has an uplifting effect on your spirit; not only is it fun and makes you happy, it feels like soaring—your spirit takes flight.”

LEFT: A young girl finds her footing for a successful first wave at El Porto in Manhattan Beach, Calif.



“Surfing provides a positive, natural environment; a chance



PHOTOGRAPHS: RICKY LESSER

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—Carly Rogers



On base at USMC Camp Pendleton in San Diego with the Wounded Warrior Battalion, Marines share their experiences in the ocean and how the lessons can be applied to other life challenges.

Discovering Resilience

In Nags Head, N.C., a little blue beachside building called Farmdog's Surf School rents boards, offers lessons, and serves up post-surf açai bowls. The place is run by a charismatic guy named Robert "Farmdog" Farmer.

On a warm day in June 2013, Britte showed up at Farmdog's in remission from cancer and suited up for her first-ever surf lesson. Within five minutes of arriving, her camp leaders, Wreck and Pedro, granted her a First Descents nickname: "Big Red," thanks to her recently regrown ginger-colored hair.

In the days that followed, Britte got to know fellow cancer fighters as they all attempted the humbling act of standing up on a surfboard. Surfing, it turns out, isn't exactly easy to learn. But something about it clicked for Britte.

"I would try to stand up on my board, and I'd take huge wipeouts, but I'd bounce back up, usually laughing and coughing up some sand," she says. "I was learning that I wasn't going to break, that I was much stronger than I ever realized."

Robert says he sees this type of shift in people all the time at the surf school he's owned since 2007. Over the years, he has witnessed people overcome phobias, ease anxiety, alter their body images and return a year or two later to tell him that his surf lessons changed their lives. "I'm merely a surf instructor, but people do share a lot when they're in the water with you," he says. "It's both physical and mental therapy when we're out there in the water."


Even when they're getting pummeled in salt water—getting tossed off their boards by unwieldy waves—Robert says the ocean has a way of healing. "The ocean can have its way with you; it has no empathy," he says. "But even when you're out there struggling and the ocean is giving

you a beating, it's still rewarding, still cleansing."

By the time Britte was packing her bags to return to her family in Massachusetts, she was on her way to becoming a different person. "Surfing taught me that cancer was just a small part of my history and the woman that I actually was, right here, surfing, laughing out loud, in the moment and full of love for the people around me. I finally felt separate from cancer."

Since then, that experience has been a springboard for change. Five months later, Britte ran her first marathon, and last winter, she tried ice climbing for the first time. She's continued to surf as well: This summer, she went on another

surf trip with First Descents to Mexico, and she's taken her family, including her kids, now 8 and 6, surfing, too.

"Living life is no longer a scary undertaking. I've never felt stronger, less fatigued or more confident in my life," she says. She no longer relies on anti-anxiety medication or wine to calm her nerves, and when her doctors asked her how she managed the transition, she told them simply, "I started by going surfing." 



Want to try surfing? Here's where to sign up from coast to coast.

CAMPSURF; LOS ANGELES

Take a private lesson or a group class at Manhattan Beach with California's Campsurf, one of Los Angeles' most respected surf schools. Bonus: Many of the instructors double as professional competitive surfers. (From \$60; Campsurf.com)

FARMDOG'S SURF SCHOOL; NAGS HEAD, N.C.

On the Outer Banks, Farmdog's Surf School offers private, group and standup-paddleboarding surf lessons for all ages and abilities. Really want to dive in? Sign up for their new adult three-day surf camp held from June through August. (From \$65; FarmdogSurfSchool.com)

PASKOWITZ SURF CAMP; MEXICO AND SAN DIEGO


The San Diego-based Paskowitz Surf Camp runs a weeklong camp geared toward beginners in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, each spring, and camps in San Diego year-round. The camp was founded by legendary surfer Dorian "Doc" Paskowitz and is now run by his son, Izzy. (From \$1,250 for weeklong camp; Paskowitz.com)

HANS HEDEMANN SURF SCHOOL; HONOLULU, HAWAII

Former Association of Surfing Professionals World Tour surfer Hans Hedemann opened Hans Hedemann Surf School in 1995. With three locations around Waikiki and one on Oahu's North Shore, it's the perfect place to learn while you're vacationing in Hawaii. (From \$75; HHSurf.com)

COREYSWAVE; MONTAUK, N.Y.

Owned by Southern California transplant Corey Senese, CoreysWave offers private and semi-private adult lessons on Montauk's Ditch Plains break. Sign up for a lesson between June and August for the warmest water and the most beginner-friendly conditions. (From \$125; CoreysWave.com)



**Pro surfer Laird Hamilton off
Ho'okipa Beach in Hawaii at
the popular surf spot known as
Peahi. OPPOSITE: Young adult
cancer fighters and survivors
at Farmdog's Surf School at
Nags Head Beach, N.C.**