



Brianna

COPE

Kaua'i's Own Surf Phenomenon

Written by Amber Nightingale





Photo by Gil Cope

Her determined brown-eyed gaze meets the distant golden shoreline—holding an unwavering dream that was born in the water. Hard-core yet charmingly fun-loving, professional surfer Brianna Cope is on a serious mission. Hailing from the quaint south shore of Kaua‘i,

this powerful young woman is sculpting her way through the waves with a thirst for achievement and the vision to take her there.

“You can say you believe in yourself, but actually believing is what matters. I’m very self-motivated and driven. If you

want something, I believe in working hard for it. I chased my dream and now it’s happening,” Brianna says smiling.

At 20 years of age, Brianna has already finished her first ever Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) Women’s Qualifying Series World Tour

in 2014. Placing second in the ASP 6 Star Prime in Los Cabos, Mexico (one of the biggest events of the season), her 10 years of competing has culminated in her burgeoning surf journey that was cultured in the waters of Kaua'i.

"Growing up on Kaua'i, you feel connected to the water and nature because you're surrounded by it. The ocean is my favorite place to be. I always wanted to be a pro surfer, and there's so much talent here – you learn quickly. There was nothing else I wanted more," she expresses, her pretty tan face aglow.

Falling in love with the sport at five years of age, Brianna's search for swell began near her south shore home base in 'Ōma'o at the Learner's Sheraton break. 'Pushed in' by her father Don and inspired by her older sister Gabi's surf finesse, Brianna

was in the water every day. She recalls her early surf instructors and father wholeheartedly taunting her – claiming there were "lions and tigers" in the water below. Falling became a scary nightmare, so Brianna habitually "looked straight and rode all the way to the sand," a wise fantasy that helped her catch her first wave.

When Brianna began seriously competing around the age of 10 (her first triumph was at age 11), Gabi's positive sisterly influence became an integral element of her blossoming career. Gabi, four years older and also a surf competitor, was an idol-like figure that continually humbled Brianna and taught her invaluable lessons about her surfing technique and style. As a youth, Gabi was the motivating force behind Brianna's wave ventures, in addition to the pivotal support

from her parents. Grinning playfully, Brianna also admits her younger-sister instinct to "be better" than her older sibling.

"I always looked up to Gabi. I'd watch her and think, 'if she can do it, then I can do it.' It was the connection we had in the water – which was the one place we would go together. Gabi has made me who I am as a surfer. I love her...I trust her with everything."

Surfing side by side, sisters Brianna and Gabi were routinely dropped off at the south shore beaches to cruise together – with the understanding that they were not allowed to sit or sunbathe on the grass. Beach days meant die-hard surf adventures, not bikini-brimming giggles in the sand. Laughing, Brianna remembers being nervous that her parents would arrive unannounced, so she and Gabi



would spend the entire day in the water. "Gabi was more strict than my mom," Brianna murmurs.

Endowed with a family that advocated following her bliss, Brianna's mother and father, Liz and Don, were a crucial foundation for their daughter's sturdy moral sense and years of surf success. "My parents never pushed me to do anything," she insists. Though she graduated from Kauai High School in 2012, Brianna's real focus in adolescence was to excel in the water. With a bit of sadness, she admits that missing high school homecomings, proms and birthdays was a bummer, but has no regrets. Balancing school and competitions, Brianna maintained good grades with a final 3.8 GPA, and never chose the trendy party scene, a choice she still exercises today.

"I've always been very focused. If I know that one little thing will make me go a couple steps back, I won't do it," she describes, tucking her blonde sun-dyed hair behind her ear.

This steadfast commitment to her childhood dream yielded obvious results in the surf victories that colored Brianna's teenage seascape. By the time she was 17, Gabi was her primary coach. Traveling to diverse swells, Brianna ranked number one in

Hawaii ASP as Pro Junior and was named the Regional ASP Junior Champion. Brianna was also one of four young women selected to be a part of the Hawai'i Team (considered the Junior Olympics of the sport) in 2011 and 2012, when she and her teammates traveled around the world to successfully conquer the gold medal. Brianna's Sunset Beach ASP Pro Junior first place ranking cannot go without mention, next to her Pipeline ASP Pro Junior second place and Women's Pro fifth place.

As her skill level advanced, so did her personal growth and evolution. Brianna's underlying fervor for the sport kept her quest for surf perfection alive. Where did this tenacious passion come from?

"The feeling that I get in the water – nothing compares to it. It's indescribable. I wish I could live in the water sometimes. No wave is ever the same...once you ride it, you'll never get that wave again. You never know what to expect. I'm addicted to it," she admits.

Perhaps it was this wave-riding sublime that carried Brianna through her first full round of the ASP Women's Qualification Series World Tour last year, where she made a radical ranking jump from 79th to 15th place as a

professional surfer. As impressive as it seems, however, this was heart-wrenching to Brianna since she didn't technically qualify for the coveted Elite Tour (which only has 16 top-ranking spots). Even before she launched into the tour competing at smaller contests, like the US Open of Surfing, she experienced a slump in her winnings and only had one small sponsor. It was degrading her confidence. Brianna began to feel lost and questioned her future as a surf competitor.

Witnessing her distressed daughter, Liz pulled her aside after one of her losses at a contest. Desiring the best for Brianna, she encouraged her daughter to think about attending college (like other kids her age) and join a surf team on the side. Although Don never wavered in supporting his daughter's surf ambitions, Brianna was torn by her mother's advice.

Crossing her strong, lean arms against her slender frame, she says "I was devastated. I had been working my entire life to come so far. I felt like my dreams were ending."

Traveling on the Qualification Series Tour to places like Australia, New Zealand, France, Spain, Cabo San Lucas and California, it was Brianna's first time traveling alone. Coining this



Photo by Gil Cope

as her “learning year,” she had a difficult time transitioning, with inconsistent lodging, limited food choices, loneliness and worst of all, she was losing surf heats. Her mother’s words rang in her mind. Heated with fierce emotion, her mother’s well-intended remark “lit a spark” in Brianna. She was fired up to improve. After Brianna’s mom joined her on

the tour in Australia, she saw her daughter achieve two rare near-perfect scores on a wave. She knew her daughter had the spirit to make it, yet there was a looming blockage in the way. After her mother reconsidered her initial advice, Brianna felt the full wave of her family backbone and a deeper message was revealed.

Considering that the sport of surfing relies entirely on individual performance (versus the support of a team), it takes a tremendous amount of inner belief in oneself. This ‘mental aspect’ affirms the importance of training the mind alongside the body for maximum athletic performance (wisdom even Olympic athletes apply). Marking

Photo by Gil Cope



a potent turning point in Brianna's career, this insightful principle – discerned by her mother – translated to her ocean kinship with marked results. As a part of Brianna's current fit physique repertoire, this brain training concept also interweaves with one of her currently adored sponsors, Under Armour.

Exclusively selected, Brianna was the youngest of six women (19 years old at the time) to be chosen in Under Armour's largest-ever global campaign titled "I Will What I Want," alongside eminent figures like supermodel Gisele Bündchen, world champion downhill skier Lindsey Vonn and three other distinguished female athletes. This campaign touts the importance of empowering women to boldly pursue their dreams, celebrate who they are, work hard and own their personal willingness to grow. Beyond just a sponsor, this credo speaks to Brianna's heart and outlook on life.

Despite being plastered on posters nationwide rocking stylish Under Armour gear (she, of course, loves their surf-savvy suits), Brianna is still a blushing beauty from south shore Kaua'i. Even her natural competitive demeanor has fused with the aloha way of life and formed

an unshakable foundation that will always shine.

"Kaua'i is a small island – we gotta stick together. It's so supportive. I feel a little bit of pride for the south side... we can do it, too! I've traveled to many places and I can't think of one place I love like this. Kaua'i is Kaua'i."

Seeing as Brianna's ideal day is to surf from dawn-to-dusk with her closest friends, Kaua'i is her true home base. You may see her doing powerful turns on a Hawaiian Island Creations 5'11" board by Eric Arakawa at her homebreak, PK's. Otherwise, she's busting out her workout five days a week (involving weights, TRX Suspension Training and surfing in between breaks). A tomboy deep down, Brianna also loves skateboarding, boxing and outdoor adventure.

Dewy-eyed and sincere, Brianna acknowledges, "The craziest thing for me now is hearing a little girl say that I've been a role model for them. Being from such a small island and hearing that I'm a hero or inspiration for someone almost makes me cry."

Without a hint of hesitation, Brianna expresses eternal gratitude to her sister Gabi

and her mom and dad for their instrumental support through the years. A big mahalo also goes to her sponsors, Under Armour, Steve Madden, MadLove, Jones Soda, Matusse Wetsuits, Kicker Audio, Rockwell Watches and Hawaiian Island Creations.

Dedicated and competitive, yet coated in sweetness, Brianna is definitely willing what she wants. For next year's journey on the World Tour she aims to make it to Elite status and from there, "take it to the top" as the world champion.

"Why settle for less? Go out there and get it. If you have a dream, chase it and work hard. There are a lot of sacrifices, but if you want it enough – you'll get it. I'm such a believer." ■