



BETH M. HOWARD

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# WOMEN'S SPORTS & FITNESS

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SPECIAL ISSUE

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# It Only Looks Easy, Gidget

**I**n spite of the early-dawn hours, frigid Pacific water, sharks I imagine to be swimming by, riptides, rocks that cut my feet, mouthfuls of choking salt water, sunburn and jellyfish stings, relentless waves that push me back toward solid ground, and surfboard that keeps slamming me on the head, I love to surf. It's the hardest sport I've ever tried, and it's one with an endless learning curve.

"Each time you surf you get a little more comfortable with the water," explains Letha Davis, the 1987 U.S. amateur champion. Even Davis is still learning. "The conditions are always different; no wave is ever the same."

Unlike mountain biking or skiing or other fast-moving activities, surfing is a sport in which everything moves. And besides excellent balance, you need upper-body strength, good depth perception and pure intuition in reading the waves, excellent timing in taking off and standing up, sound judgment, and the ability to overcome fear.

Fear? It's a big part of surfing. You see that wall of water coming at you, and you know its power. Wipe out and you get caught under it. If you find yourself in this situation, you have to hold your breath and make yourself relax (try it—just holding your breath can induce tension). After an interminable 10 seconds the wave will pass you by.

So why do people surf? "When you ride your first wave," offers Davis, "you get an adrenaline rush like no other, especially when you're getting barreled [when a wave is curling over you]. This natural force pushes you along, and you forget about everything else. It's a kind of therapy."

The draw of the sport goes beyond excitement, though. Through it you develop a rapport with the sea. You sit out there on your board in the morning sun, watching the dolphins and getting wet. "It's metaphysical," explains a friend who's put in 25 years on the waves. "Your senses come alive, and you're cleansed."

—Beth M. Howard

## DETAILS

**You Too Can Surf:** Some surf shops rent boards; call around. Ask about lessons, wet-suit rentals and used-board sales. Long boards, about nine feet in length, are easier to learn balance on than short boards. New, a beginning board will set you back less than \$400; used, \$200. The best beaches for learning have sandy bottoms, warm water, gentle waves and good surfers to observe. If you want to structure a vacation around learning, San Onofre, California; Waikiki, Hawaii; and Biarritz, France, are three of the most inviting locations. ZJ Boarding House surf shop in Santa Monica, California, hosts one-day surfing camps during the summer. Call 310-392-5646 for dates and locations; the Summer Fun Surf Camp in San Clemente, California (714-361-9526); and the Super Surf Camp in Huntington Beach, California (714-680-4000). —B.M.H.