

WINNING AGAINST THE WIND AND WAVES: THE SPORT OF SURF LIFESAVING



I've been training pretty much since I started Nippers when I was six. I can't really remember my life before I was training. I'm really training ... twice to three times a day ... every morning from about 5.30 to 7.30, sometimes something during the day ... in the afternoons again from 4.30 to 6.30 ... mixed up between swimming, board, run, ski and gym sessions.

*Kristy Munroe, 2006 World Ironwoman Champion,
Alexandra Headland SLSC*

Photo: Dragi Markovic, National Museum of Australia

Sport has always been an intrinsic part of surf lifesaving. Patrol members need very high levels of fitness to fulfil their duties safely and effectively. Sporting competitions are an excellent way of promoting the development of those skills. From 1910, lifesavers were required to gain their surf bronze medallion to be admitted to full membership. Carnivals were held to showcase the skills of lifesavers and promote the correct use of equipment. They were modelled on a system of drills, discipline and teamwork, culminating in the colourful spectacle of a military style march-past. These carnivals have drawn crowds since they first began. Public interest reached a high point during the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. As part of the celebrations, an international lifesaving carnival held at Torquay Beach in Victoria attracted over 70,000 people.

Surf sports today

Although new technology has brought changes to surf lifesaving, traditional events such as surfboat and belt races are still popular. Carnivals are held throughout the summer at club, interclub, state, national and international levels. Although the lifesaver's first role is to protect beach-goers, surf sports are an important part of club participation. Australian surf lifesavers have dominated international competition, winning six out of seven team world championships.

Events are divided into two categories: surf sports, and rescue and resuscitation. Sports events test physical speed, agility, endurance and watercraft skills. Many events comprise a series of tasks or legs.

Some events you might not know much about are:

Beach flags

A short sprint race starting from a lying position conducted in elimination rounds.

Cameron relay

An event for teams of four: one swimmer, two runners and one surfboard paddler. Each competitor races one leg.

Coolangatta Gold

An individual marathon race of more than 46 kilometres: surf ski – run – swim – run – surfboard paddle – run.

Ironman/woman

An individual race: swim – surfboard paddle – surf ski – beach sprint.

Lifesaver relay

A rescue relay in mixed, multi-age teams of nine: including surfboat crew, a swimmer, surfboard paddler, ski paddler and beach sprinter.

Surf belt race

An individual swim race, although it may look like a team event. Each belt swimmer is assisted by four reel-handlers who reel out the line.

Taplin relay

An event for teams of six: two swimmers, two surfboard paddlers, two ski paddlers. Each races one leg over the ironman/woman course.

Spectators still flock to surf carnivals and today the SLSA National Championships are the largest annual sporting event in the southern hemisphere, attracting more competitors than the Commonwealth Games. More than 8000 lifesavers, 500 officials and 100,000 spectators are expected to turn out for the 2007 National Championships in Western Australia.

Discussion point: Australians are well known sports enthusiasts, but does watching sport make you more or less interested in playing sport?

Competing as a surf lifesaver

Surf lifesaving offers many levels of competition, from weekend participation to professional events for elite athletes. Nippers can compete from 7 years of age. From 15 years, members are eligible to gain the bronze medallion and become patrol members. Members who have fulfilled their patrol obligations can compete in events at age, open or masters level. Surf lifesaving competitors at the elite level train for many hours every week and compete all around the world.

What is the bronze medallion?

Candidates for the bronze medallion must have completed a 400-metre swim within 9 minutes. To gain the award they must pass theory and practical tests in fitness, survival, rescue and first aid, and complete a 200-metre run, 200-metre swim and 200-metre run within 8 minutes.

Discussion point: What skills and personal qualities do you think characterise an elite sports person?

Women and surf sports

Women were involved in lifesaving from as early as 1908 and many formed clubs and participated in competitions. In the 1920s however, they were excluded from competition and barred from receiving the bronze medallion. Despite the ban, women continued to participate in interclub competitions, particularly outside cities, where it was easy to escape the notice of officials. This ended in 1934–1935, when the Surf Life Saving Association of Australia (SLSAA) banned women's participation in any event conducted by SLSAA or its affiliates. After much lobbying, women were finally admitted as full members in 1980. Today they make up more than 40 per cent of members.

ACTIVITIES



Photo: Dean McNicoll, National Museum of Australia

Activity 1

Sport and fitness

Ask students to list as many different types of surf lifesaving activities as they can. As a class, brainstorm the physical fitness requirements for each one. (For example, rowing requires muscle strength in legs, arms, shoulders, back and abdomen, and cardiovascular fitness and endurance.) Ask students to think of simple activities they could undertake to help improve fitness in each category. Make a list of activities that could be carried out easily at school. Choose one or two focus areas for the term and draw up a simple class fitness program.

Extension: Working in groups, ask students to research the indicators for one type of fitness per group and to devise a simple test to measure their fitness.

Activity 2

Beach hazards

Take a trip to a nearby beach or search the internet to find a webcam or good photo of a beach. Ask students to make a sketch map of the beach, showing natural and constructed features and highlighting potential hazards. Think about ocean conditions, hazards on land and dangerous marine animals. Ask students to design safety signs for each hazard. Compare these to the safety signs used by Surf Life Saving Australia (SLSA) — you will find these on the SLSA website at www.slsa.com.au. Go to the 'beach safety' page and look for 'fact sheets'.

Extension: Ask students to research one type of hazard to find out specific information on the dangers and how to manage them.

Activity 3

Images of the beach

Ask students to think about their experiences at the beach. What is their strongest memory or feeling? Ask them to use this memory or feeling to paint, draw or make a collage using at least one recognisable surf lifesaving image, such as red and yellow flags.

Extension: Ask students to write a poem or short story that relates to their artwork.

Activity 4

Sport and nutrition

Give students some basic information on sport and nutrition. When you are exercising, what you eat is very important. (When you exercise, your body uses up carbohydrate, loses water and salts, and may also use some protein if you are doing endurance training.) Ask students to search the web for information about sports nutrition. The Sports Dietitians Australia website has useful facts sheets at www.sportsdietitians.com.au. You could also look at the Australian Institute of Sport website at www.ais.org.au. Then ask students to write a simple nutrition plan for themselves, based on what they have learned and on their own sport and exercise routine.

Activity 5

Sport in society

Discuss the athlete's role in Australian society. Ask students which athletes they admire and why. What happens when we apply terms like 'role model', 'celebrity', 'legend' and 'star' to sportspeople? Does it change what we expect of them? Ask students to research a sportsperson who competed during the last century and a sportsperson competing in the same field today. Ask students to write a report examining the achievements of each and the changes that have taken place between the historical and modern eras.

Activity 6

Women in sport

In 2006, the Australian Parliament held a Senate Inquiry into Women in Sport and Recreation in Australia which heard many comments on the inequalities between men and women in funding, sponsorship, media coverage and leadership. Ask students to cut out newspaper articles and watch the television news each day for a week, tallying the stories on men and women in sport. Have them tally their findings. Hold a class debate on the topic 'It should be compulsory for media to give equal coverage to men's and women's sport'.