Bethany Hamilton

Birth: c. 1990
Nationality: American
Occupation: athlete, surfer

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Bethany Hamilton was a 13-year-old surfer, and one of the best amateurs in the United States, when she was bitten by a shark while surfing in October of 2003. She lost her left arm in the attack. Hamilton recovered and continued competitive surfing, and her tragic accident also made her a media celebrity.

Born c. 1990, Hamilton was the youngest of three children born to Tom, a waiter at a hotel and a surfer, and his wife, Cheri, who worked in advertising and catering. Her parents were natives of New Jersey who moved to Hawaii partly to surf. Hamilton herself surfed from an early age, and began competing at the age of five. When she reached the age of nine, it was clear that she was becoming a major talent in the sport. Hamilton soon signed her first sponsorship deal, with Rip Curl USA.

By the time she was a young teen, Hamilton was a member of the Hanalei Girls' Surf team, and had acquired more sponsors. Despite the sponsorship, her parents had to sacrifice financially to get her to tournaments. The sacrifices paid off, and in 2003 Hamilton placed second in the national championships of the National Scholastic Surfing Association. She also won other tournaments while competing against older contestants.

Lost Arm in Shark Attack

On October 31, 2003, while surfing at Tunnels Reef near Hanalei, Hawaii, Hamilton's life changed forever. She was surfing with several people, including best friend and fellow champion Alana Blanchard, when what was believed to be a tiger shark bit off her left arm just below her shoulder as she was paddling along. Her friend's father, Holt Blanchard, was with them when the incident occurred. He saved her life by applying a tourniquet to the arm and getting her to a hospital.
Despite her injury, Hamilton wanted to surf again right away. However, she first had to recover, and then learn how to balance on a surfboard in a new way. Hamilton began surfing again about three weeks later, and competed for the first time in early 2004. She finished fifth in her age group at the Open Women's Division of the National Scholastic Surfing Association meet in Hawaii. Though Hamilton planned to continue competing, it was unclear whether she would be able to have the pro surfing career she always wanted.

**Became Media Star**

Though Hamilton's future as a surfer was uncertain, she had other career options. She tried snowboarding and began to give motivational speeches about her experience. Hamilton became a media sensation in the United States after her accident, appearing on numerous talk shows. She published her biography in October of 2004, *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*. The book was expected to be turned into a feature film about her life. In April of 2005 Hamilton began endorsing two fragrances she helped develop: one for girls, called Stoked, and one for boys, called Wired.

Despite the shark attack, Hamilton maintained a positive outlook. Her agent/manager, Roy Hofstetter, told Duncan Campbell of *Observer Sports Magazine*, "The main purpose is ... to use her own experience to help others. She wants to talk about women surfing and about her faith. She does not want to be called brave or a heroine or anything, she just wants to be natural with people around the world."

**AWARDS**

ESPY Award, comeback athlete of the year, 2004.

**FURTHER READINGS**

**Periodicals**

- *People*, November 17, 2003; December 1, 2003; February 23, 2004; June 28, 2004; April 18, 2005.

**Online**

SOURCE CITATION