

This Woman Surfed the Biggest Wave of the Year

Here's why you probably haven't heard about it.

By Maggie Mertens



Maya Gabeira surfed a 73.5-foot wave in February, breaking a world record in the process. (Jorge Leal)

It's a moment we don't often see in sports: a woman beating a man. But that's exactly what was announced Thursday, when the World Surf League reported that the Brazilian big-wave surfer Maya Gabeira set a new world record. The 73.5-foot wave she surfed on February 11

in Nazaré, Portugal, was the largest wave surfed by anyone this year, earning Gabeira the WSL's 2020 women's XXL Biggest Wave Award. It also broke her own previous record, a 68-foot wave. By contrast, this year's men's XXL Biggest Wave Award winner, Kai Lenny, rode a 70-foot wave.

But Gabeira's historic win was light on fanfare, with the news hampered by an uncharacteristically long delay (about four weeks after the men's announcement), and also because her achievement was subject to a brand-new and completely different set of measuring criteria than was required for the men's waves. The situation highlights a rare and missed opportunity to challenge widespread ideas about women's athletic inferiority.

The WSL's Big Wave Awards are like the Oscars of surfing, usually a live event in May where the men's and women's rides are acknowledged with categories such as Ride of the Year, Biggest Paddle, and even Wipeout of the Year. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, however, this year's awards were given out weekly throughout the summer via social media. The XXL Biggest Wave Award honors the year's biggest waves surfed, many reached via tow-in surfing as opposed to arm paddling. Both the men's and women's awards in this category were due to be doled out together on August 17—but on that date, while Lenny was announced as the winner via video, the WSL said the women's race needed further judging and would be delayed.

Jessi Miley-Dyer, the league's vice president of tours and competition, told me that the women's award was postponed and judged differently than the men's because the waves ridden by the two finalists, Gabeira and Justine Dupont, “were really, really close, and with waves of this size ... and such a small margin ... it was pretty obvious that this one was too close to call.” She said the decision had nothing to do with the fact that the women's waves were so close in size to Lenny's, “as the men's and women's divisions are separate and judged separately.” Further, Miley-Dyer said the men's competition was not as close, and did

not need further judging because they “did not challenge the current men’s XXL record as closely as [the women’s waves].”

Wave measuring, historically, has never been fully accurate. WSL judges typically will use photos and videos to estimate the height of nominated waves, Miley-Dyer said. They don’t bring complex science into it, a point of consternation for many surfers. Holly Thorpe, a sociologist who studies gender and action sports, told me that the WSL’s usual limited methodology has left the league’s wave measuring fairly subjective. “And when we have subjective decisions being made,” she said, “we’ve got all the possibilities of gender bias.” So on its face, further review of the women’s competition would seem to be a good thing, to make this award more data-driven in a year of a tight race and a new potential world record. But doing so now with just the women’s wave, and at the last minute of judging, has raised questions.

The WSL asked the scientists at Kelly Slater Wave Company, which the league owns, to review the women’s waves. Those scientists consulted with others at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography and the University of Southern California’s Department of Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering. Michal Pieszka, a research and development engineer at KSWC who helped lead the review, told me that the team calculated the sizes of Gabeira’s and Dupont’s waves using techniques from photogrammetry. Essentially, they estimated the wave height using equations that measure the size of known objects in the images, like the Jet Skis or the surfers themselves, and triangulate that with the angles and locations of the cameras taking the photos. This analysis determined that Gabeira’s wave was “conservatively” 73.5 feet from crest to trough and Dupont’s was two to three feet shorter—notably, also larger than Lenny’s.

But it’s almost impossible to really compare the women’s to the men’s, because the men’s didn’t get the same scientific treatment. “It was definitely the first time we’ve used collinear equations in terms of adjudicating the size of the waves,” Miley-Dyer said. “We’ve never had

that kind of real, objective data, scientific data, behind something like this.” When Lenny was given the men’s XXL Biggest Wave Award on August 17, for instance, the commentator Strider Wasilewski said the league “got the ruler out and the tape measure and we actually measured it out to 70 feet.” But that mention of a “ruler and tape measure” is an imprecise reference to the methodology for the men’s award—Miley-Dyer told me the typical methods of measurement are “lots of photograph and video analysis”—while the women’s extra judging resulted in a 16-page scientific report.

Even though the WSL announced a larger wave measurement for Gabeira’s wave than for Lenny’s, using a completely different methodology for measuring them just adds to the common perception that women and men athletes are competing in separate worlds. Additionally, delaying the women’s award for so long after the men’s buried Gabeira’s potential recognition for out-surfing all of the men this year. And although the WSL has made some laudable moves recently with regard to gender equality—including toward pay equity in surfing prizes—and the Biggest Wave Award is just one part of the WSL’s competition programming, this situation shows that the way we treat women’s accomplishments matters.

Big-wave surfing, like many extreme sports, is seen as masculine to its core. The sport’s most recent innovation, towing in athletes via Jet Ski to waves that are 50 to 100 feet tall (sometimes triple the size that surfers can reach by paddling via arm strength alone), ups the macho factor even more. Competing to surf the biggest waves in the world is inherently dangerous and life-threatening. Thorpe, the sociologist, grew up deep in surf culture in New Zealand and points out: “Big-wave surfing is that kind of last bastion of surfing that is still very male-dominated, and it reinforces a particular type of masculinity. So when [women] challenge that, they’re really challenging all of those ideas.”

Maya Gabeira knows what it means for her existence to challenge preconceived notions. In 2013, her first year chasing the biggest waves in the world in Nazaré, Portugal, she suffered a

major crash. The force of the waves broke her right fibula in half and forced her underwater repeatedly, until she was floating facedown in the water for more than a minute. Her surf partner revived her on the beach via CPR. Some prominent male surfers said that she should never have tried to surf such dangerous waves in the first place.



Maya Gabeira during an interview on February 18, 2019 (Boris Streubel / Getty Images for Laureus)

During her recovery time, Gabeira focused not just on healing, but also on becoming a good teammate. With tow-in surfing, athletes go out in teams of two or three, one driving the tow Jet Ski, and one watching to perform rescue when a surfer inevitably crashes out, pounded by the incredible force of those monstrous waves. She learned to drive the Jet Ski and perform rescue, so that when she was healthy enough to surf again, she was seen as a viable surf partner for Sebastian Steudtner, an award-winning big-wave surfer from Germany. After three spinal surgeries, Gabeira came back. And in 2018, she set the first women's big-wave world record when she rode that 68-foot wave.

Gabeira, who's 33 and began surfing professionally in Hawaii at 17, says a major problem facing women who want to enter big-wave surfing is access. "The loneliness that involves deciding to become a big-wave surfer as a female makes it much more difficult," she told me via phone in August. "It's just harder to establish [yourself as a woman] in a male-dominated community. Guys take other guys under their wing; they travel together. I don't have a group of girlfriends traveling with me chasing huge waves. Men have many different groups to go with."

Gabeira was one of just two women who were invited to the WSL's first bigwave tow-in event this past February. Gabeira and Steudtner participated as the only mixed-gender team, and Dupont surfed while her non-surfing partner drove the Jet Ski. The forecast for February 11 called for huge waves. Though Gabeira won her first Big Wave Award at just 20—for a wave she surfed at 19—she had never participated in a live WSL event before (big tow-in waves are usually judged by video after the fact). So she decided to put it all on the line that day. She knew the record-breaking wave was special. "It was the biggest wave I've ever ridden," she told me.

Gabeira was surprised that the WSL went forward with extra judging in the women's competition this year to measure her wave. She said she welcomed the announcement delay because she didn't want to lose her world record to a subjective decision. Even though she felt sure that her wave was taller than Lenny's and Dupont's before the judging, she wasn't confident that she would be named the women's winner, and she never thought they would measure hers as larger than Lenny's.

She wasn't the only skeptical one. Jorge Leal, a photographer and a videographer based in Nazaré who has filmed nearly every big-wave attempt there since surfers popularized the spot around 2011, was so sure that Gabeira's wave was bigger than Lenny's that he stitched the two videos side by side for comparison and shared it around the surfing community. The

caption on the Instagram post where the videos play side by side asks the question point-blank: “Did [Maya Gabeira] or [Kai Lenny] Score the Biggest Wave of the Year at Nazaré?” The comments are almost unanimous: “Maya.”



Gabeira competing on December 23, 2019 in Nazaré, Portugal (Stefan Matzke / sampics / Corbis / Getty)

“Maya, on that day, she was really getting different lines ... the best I ever saw from her,” Leal told me about the event. “She was really committed to do something special. She caught, for me, the biggest wave of the season, not even the contest. And the biggest wave of the season in Nazaré easily represents the biggest wave of the year.” But Leal didn’t think the WSL would frame things this way. “I feel WSL sometimes, if not every time, doesn’t have the guts to say something like that.” Of course, WSL did announce her wave as larger than Lenny’s, but the league emphasized to me, and in its press release, that men and women compete in separate divisions, not with each other.

Even so, the questionable timing and methodology is reminiscent of another struggle Gabeira went through to have her accomplishments recognized. After her first world-record-setting ride of 68 feet, it took eight months of lobbying by Gabeira (and the pressure of an online petition) to get the WSL to give her wave the approval it needed to be sent to the Guinness World Records. Before that, there was no world record for the biggest wave surfed by a woman. Today, Gabeira says she doesn't think the delay was due to outward gender discrimination, just the slow rate of change from surfing as a very male dominated sport. "I think it was just pure lack of will from the league," she said. "There was no women's world record at the time. So, for them, there was no emergency toward that category being established."

Historically, there were no separate women's categories for WSL surfing awards or records; thus, men held all the world records and won most of the awards. When women didn't have these events of their own, it contributed to the false notion that they couldn't surf big waves. Adding the separate women's-world-record category in 2018 was part of that long march toward more gender equality in the sport, said Miley-Dyer. "You know, it's really an age-old question in sports: Do women have to be better than men? Or better than the best women to be recognized as the best woman ever?" she said to me. "Maya felt very strongly that there should be a separate women's world record, and it turned out that we could do that ... and we changed [the Big Wave Awards] platform, to give them the opportunity to win more awards."

Ironically, that gender separation, although important for women athletes in many ways, may be what hurts the perception of Gabeira's accomplishment this time around. Thorpe said certain action sports like surfing often fall into this trap of "reinforcing old-school versions of gender division," which adds to the common perception that women cannot ever outperform men. "Maya, and other women surfers, are sitting out there with the men right

next to them, but when we make it a competition ... we separate them out, typically,” she said. So, Thorpe said, the question becomes: “Do we need to in a sport like that?”

Steudtner wonders, too, why the WSL wouldn’t want to capitalize on his surf partner’s competitive accomplishments by shouting this moment from the rooftops. Suppose, he said to me, a woman were competing in the X Games in a snowboarding big-air competition with the men. “And you have all the big-name guys pushing themselves, and you have a woman and she is doing bigger airs, and the same size airs as them, and has all the qualities the guys have,” he said. “They would put that on their marketing agenda and push that as hard as they could.”

In the grand scheme of how women’s athletic accomplishments are usually framed, none of this is surprising. Take, for example, skeet shooting in the Olympics, which used to be a mixed-gender competition—until a woman won the gold medal in 1992. The following year, the International Shooting Union, the sport’s international federation, barred women from shooting against men. Similar implications are behind the arbitrary rules in many other sports that determine that women simply can’t go as far (in bicycling or cross-country skiing, for example, when women’s races are shorter), or last as long (as in tennis, in which women play fewer sets, and basketball, which has shorter periods of play in the WNBA than the NBA) in competition. And although many people point to gaps in performance between men and women as the reason for these differences, those gaps in many sports are narrowing as women gain more access to professional training.

Though it is notable that the WSL pays equal prize money to male and female competitors now, and it invited women to participate alongside men in February’s tow-in contest, the league seemed to gloss over a moment fans rarely get to celebrate: a woman winning head-to-head in sport with a man. Thorpe thinks this could be a moment that surfing, and other action sports, start to consider how to break out of the gender-binary world we usually see in sports. “They could totally [say] that model doesn’t work for us. And revolutionize this

completely and offer an amazing alternative that reflects the gender fluidity of our times,” she told me. “They could have done something really wonderful here.”

Gabeira also believes this moment could signal a new beginning for the league. “Our sport is very male-dominated, with the performances on the male side [being] often much stronger than ours as females,” she said. “So to find a way and a place and a certain discipline to shorten that gap, and to conclude this year that a woman did surf the biggest, tallest wave of the year is quite phenomenal. It opens the idea that in other categories and other areas of surfing, this could be accomplished, too.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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