





Crowning Achievement

With a fifth world title and an Olympic gold medal, Carissa Moore is firmly in the conversation of who is the greatest surfer of all time. What else does the Champ have to prove?

Words CHRISTINE YU Photography STEVEN LIPPMAN

Filled with pride to represent Hawaiian surf culture on the biggest stages, Moore wore a *haku* and held a vintage longboard at Makapu'u Beach on eastern Oahu on October 9.



Moore—who won Olympic gold in July, nailed down a world championship in September and now is getting some much needed downtime in her native Oahu—has plenty to smile about.

A

II Carissa Moore could do was wait.

She's accustomed to waiting during events—waiting for the swell, waiting for the contest to be called on, waiting to surf her heat, waiting for scores to drop. But this was different. It was Rip Curl WSL Finals day, the winner-takes-all event that would crown the 2021 world champion. And Moore was defending her title.

Previously, titles had been determined based on the total number of points a surfer accumulated during the season; the person with the most points won. But that old method involved a lot of hypotheticals and math. Sometimes it led to anticlimactic end-of-season competitions that were meaningless because the title had already been decided. To spice things up, the World Surf League instituted a new format for 2021.

For the first time, the world title would be decided in the water on a single day. The five surfers atop the leaderboard at the end of the regular season would advance to the WSL Finals and battle it out elimination-bracket style. The surfers seeded No. 4 and 5 would compete in Match 1. The winner would go on to surf against the No. 3 seed, and so on.

As the No. 1 seed, Moore received a free pass to the Title Match, a best-of-three-heats competition. It was an enviable position. She only had to surf against one competitor. Essentially, it was hers to lose.

So Moore waited. She caught some warm-up waves on that September morning and then chilled at home. About an hour and a half before her heat, she headed to the contest site at Lower Trestles in San Clemente, California. She donned her red Beats headphones and

listened to “Krack” by Soulwax, a song recommended by her coach, Mitchel Cary Ross. As the afternoon rolled around, Moore learned who she'd face off against: Brazilian-born, Hawaiian-raised Tatiana Weston-Webb.

Initially, the first heat looked like it would go down in typical Carissa Moore fashion. She caught a wave right off the buzzer and gradually ratcheted up her scores—3.00, 5.73, 8.33. It was like she was winding up for a knockout punch. Except it never happened. Moore seemed uncharacteristically out of rhythm, falling off the wave on her turns.

In a normal contest, Moore would have had a couple of heats to work out the kinks. But here she had to paddle out cold into one of the most important matchups of her career. Meanwhile, Weston-Webb was warmed up, having surfed against Sally Fitzgibbons in the prior round. Her backhand was relentless, gaining momentum with each ride, until she was in the lead. With less than 30 seconds left, both surfers vied for a wave, but Weston-Webb held priority, giving her first dibs, and she nabbed another solid score. With only nine seconds left, Moore was still hunting for something, anything to surf, but nothing materialized. “Did that just happen? Did that really just happen?” she asked herself when the buzzer rang.

As she came in from the water, she realized the title could slip through her fingers. Her nerves got to her. She could tell by the way she rode her waves and in her decision-making. “I wanted to win one. I wanted to win two. I wanted it to be over,” she recalls during a FaceTime interview. Now she had 35 minutes to rein in her emotions before surfing two must-win heats. But her thoughts spiraled. Was she capable of winning? What if she fails? “This is everything that

I've worked for and I'm down one" is what she told herself.

Those questions left an opening for a pesky voice to creep in, a voice Moore calls "Old Riss." Old Riss is self-flagellating and spins tales designed to drag Moore to dark depths like an unrelenting wave. In recent years, Moore has worked hard to quiet Old Riss—to acknowledge her presence, yes, but also learn how to talk to herself with kindness. Yet Old Riss was back in full force in the locker room at Lowers.

Moore felt pushed up against the wall. "It was like, hey, you can either continue this negative self-doubt, downward spiral and just give up now," she says. "Or you can dig deep and give it your best shot and fight." She had a talk with Old Riss, firmly saying "Not today." She then leaned on her preparation, remembering her sessions at Lowers over the years and training with her dad, Chris Moore, back home on Oahu. A quick call with her sports psych helped ground her.

She pulled strength from her team—her coach; her dad; her husband, Luke Untermann. "My husband looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, 'Babe, if anyone can do this, you can,'" Moore recalls. It was more than a pep talk. Her team's unconditional love and belief buoyed her and reminded her why she loves surfing—as a way to express herself, not for the trophies. It was like they were already chairing her down the beach, the traditional celebration when an athlete wins an event. She was already the champ, regardless of what happened next.

With the residue of the first heat washed off her jersey, she waded into the water with a clean slate. Her renewed confidence was evident from her first wave of the second heat. She carved up a glassy Lowers wall with her trademark powerful, sweeping turns. She won the next two heats in convincing fashion for back-to-back world championship titles.

Moore is a Hall of Fame surfer who has long been in the conversation as to who is the greatest surfer of all time. 2021 put a

huge exclamation mark on that claim. She won the first digital Vans Triple Crown of Surfing. She placed no lower than third at any event on the Championship Tour and held onto the coveted yellow jersey the entire season. She landed one of the biggest aerials in competition, a massive air reverse in the quarterfinals of the Rip Curl Newcastle Cup in Australia, surprising even herself. She won the first Olympic gold medal for surfing in Tokyo. She claimed her fifth world title. Jessi Miley-Dyer, WSL's head of competition and a former pro surfer, says Moore's year is "probably the most successful year anyone's ever had in the sport."

And she's only 29.

Some might say Moore's rise to the top was inevitable, a foregone conclusion. People expected great things of her long before she competed professionally. But it's more than just her accomplishments that set her apart. It's the way she surfs—freely, from the heart—that makes her one of the best and most progressive surfers of her generation and beyond.



Scenes from a perfect year (clockwise from top left): Moore holds the hardware in San Clemente in September after winning her fifth world championship; carving with characteristic power at the Corona Mexico Open in Huatulco in August; celebrating a historic victory with Team USA after a golden run in Tokyo.



Her office is in the ocean, but Moore recharges inside the cathedral of greenery that envelops her home in Honolulu's Palolo Valley.

HEROES
2021



Moore says she's been on a journey to find the freedom to trust herself. And it's paying off.

**When she meets
and inspires girls to
surf, Moore says,
“it makes me feel
full in my heart.”**

In the lead-up to the WSL Finals, Moore was home on Oahu doing what she's done countless times: surfing under the watchful eye of her dad. They ran practices sessions—30 minutes in the water, rest for five minutes, repeat—designed to simulate the new contest format. Moore was born in Honolulu, and it was her dad who introduced her to surfing in the turquoise waters off of Waikiki Beach when she was 5. He was her first coach (and remains her coach today). Like any proud parent, he posted videos of little Carissa surfing to a blog. He wholeheartedly believed in her and her ability to accomplish anything she set her mind to. “He's always pushed me to strive for more than I thought I could,” she says. That unfettered confidence gave her the freedom to experiment, beyond what other kids were doing in the water.

Miley-Dyer remembers watching those clips when she was still competing on tour. It was the first time she'd really seen a girl—not even out of middle school—do maneuvers like aerials, fin throws and massive carving turns. “We all kind of went ‘Who is this?’” Miley-Dyer recalls. It's no surprise people predicted Moore would change the trajectory of the sport when she burst on the competitive surf scene at age 12. As an amateur, she

racked up 11 National Scholastic Surfing Association (NSSA) titles.

When Moore finally arrived on tour in 2010 as a teenager, everyone expected her to be crowned world champion right out of the gate. While she didn't win a title her rookie year—that would have to wait until her second year on tour—she did stress-test the boundaries of high-performance surfing. “Shooting for a contest win is one thing, but being able to do it in a unique fashion is even more special,” Moore says.

Her style would come to define power surfing. She rides waves with an impeccable flow punctuated by staccato power punches at the lip, whip-quick snaps back into the pocket, the wave's energy center, before unleashing another artful, swooping line across the face. She's pushed the progression of technical tricks in women's competitions, too. “No one had been doing them,” Miley-Dyer says. “There was no real kind of rubric for how these things were scored.”

Moore is quick to point out that she's not solely responsible for the sport's development. Prior women on tour had set a benchmark for her performance goals, both where she needed to go and surpass. Plus, current athletes—Stephanie Gilmore, Tyler Wright, Lakey Peterson

and Caroline Marks—aren't slouches. “There's been this healthy push among all of my peers that has really helped us keep raising the bar,” Moore says. “We can show the girls what is possible, but that you can go past it.”

“Carissa is someone I have so much respect for,” says 19-year-old Marks, who also represented the United States at the Olympics. But Marks first had to wrap her head around the fact that she was now surfing alongside one of her idols. In 2019, Marks notched her first pro win against Moore, a moment she describes as “crazy.” But if she's honest, Marks didn't want to compete against anyone else in that situation because “she makes me a better surfer.”

While Moore's technical prowess had an immediate impact on her peers, her biggest influence has been more subtle. She rewrote the script on what's possible for women in the sport and for the rising generation of women surfers, she instilled the power to believe.

Izzi Gomez first believed she could win a world title by watching Moore. Gomez, 21, now a five-time stand-up paddle surfing world champion, started to take surfing seriously at age 12. She didn't have a coach, but she had Moore. Gomez studied footage of the badass girl ripping

and surfing like a guy, which Gomez says is “how you want to surf to be the best.” When Nike released the film *Leave a Message* in 2011, it was radical for its display of women’s surfing as, well, surfing, not padded with artsy lifestyle shots. “I would always fast-forward to her part because she was pulling into huge barrels, doing airs, blowing her fins out. Just the coolest moves. At the time, no other girls were doing that,” Gomez says. Then she would hit the water to try and mimic Moore’s “futuristic” style.

Miley-Dyer saw that impact, too. “The fact that [Carissa] was consistently doing [these maneuvers] and, importantly, that she did them when she was young, makes it tangible for a lot of young kids,” she says. Nailing gnarly aerials and surfing waves like Pipeline wasn’t just something to aspire to. It was something they could do now, and today there’s a crew of unbelievably talented teen girls—like Caitlin Simmers, Erin Brooks, Bettylou Sakura Johnson and Vaihiti Mahana—who are sending it. “They’ve grown up only watching that in the competitive arena. It’s totally normal for them that women would be doing airs and that they should be doing the airs. It’s that flow-on effect from someone like Carissa,” Miley-Dyer says.

And it turns out, inspiration is a two-way street. Moore is in awe of the young ones, too. “These kids growing up right now!” she says. “I’m like, you know what? I may never do that in my lifetime and that’s alright. But if I could try to keep up a little, that would be pretty fun.”

While she’s checked off every major professional accomplishment, Moore still has goals. Improving her backside barrel-riding technique. Getting better at waves of consequence like Teahupo’o. Flying above the lip more. Making her surfing look even more seamless, graceful and radical at the same time. And doing it all within a 30-minute heat format. “It’s different when you’re just surfing all day long,” she says. “When you have to do it under pressure, and in a time frame, it’s a really fun challenge.”

Miley-Dyer thinks people will look back on Moore’s old blog posts the same way they look back at *Kelly Slater in Black and White*—as radical. “They’ll remember that as being the beginning of this new revolution in women’s surfing,” she says. “Where everyone started doing all the tricks that all the boys could do because Carissa could do it.”



She’s a fierce competitor, but Moore—here sharing a laugh with Maya (left) and Tuffy—believes in the power of aloha.

**"She's not just the
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She's the people's
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Before leaving for the Tokyo Olympics, Moore was invited to a screening of *Waterman*, a new documentary about Duke Kahanamoku. He was a five-time Olympic medalist in swimming, the revered Ambassador of Aloha, the godfather of modern surfing. His dream was to see surfing in the Olympics, something he pushed for beginning at the 1912 Olympic Games in Stockholm, Sweden.

Growing up, Moore says she passed Kahanamoku's statue almost every day on her way to surf Waikiki. She admits that she didn't know much about his legacy—not only his Olympic achievements but the kind of person he was and how he used surfing to spread love and aloha. She told me about a scene of his funeral (in 1968). There was nowhere to stand on the beach because he'd touched so many people during his lifetime. "Being able to

see that film before I left gave me this sense of pride to be a Hawaiian, to be a surfer, and to go to the Olympics and see his dream come true," she says. "I'm so proud to be a small part of the story."

You could say Moore isn't just part of Kahanamoku's legacy; she's carrying it on. When I asked people to describe Moore, the same answer repeats: She's a good human. "She's not just a world champion," Marks says. "She's the people's champion."



Moore, who also likes to skateboard and hike, has a basic open-air boxing gym in her yard. It's safe to say she has some power.

"I want people to remember my surfing because it made them feel something."

Moore has often said that surfing is an extension of herself and a way to connect with others. "I want people to remember my surfing because it made them feel something," she says—and that it leads people to be more understanding and empathetic, too. It's the North Star that keeps her centered amid the chaos of traveling the globe, the heavy expectations and the inevitable target on her back.

"What I've consistently seen her do through her career is think about ways to motivate herself that are important to her as well as uplifting for the sport," Miley-Dyer says. After Moore's first pro win in New Zealand, she donated her prize money to a local boardriders club, something Miley-Dyer had never seen anyone do before. More recently, to express her gratitude to the Japanese community of Makinohara for hosting Team USA's training camp before the Olympics, she thanked them, her whole speech in their native language.

In 2018, Moore launched Moore Aloha, a nonprofit whose mission is to encourage young girls to be strong, confident and compassionate people. Moore had a hard time balancing life as a professional athlete and a teenager who, like other adolescents, grappled with her changing body and finding her identity. "I've put so much pressure on myself my whole life to get a certain result," she says. "It was this search for like, 'Who am I if I'm not winning contests?'" But unlike most adolescents, Moore's struggles played out under the harsh light of public opinion. People relentlessly picked apart her appearance, compounding the feeling that she wasn't enough despite her success.

She has spoken openly about binge eating and the body shaming she experienced as a young athlete, as well as the professional burnout that followed her third world title in 2015. The Moore Aloha nonprofit is another way to

remind people (including herself) to believe in themselves, that their worth is defined by more than their résumé. "Those are the times when you have to go back to the drawing board," she says. "For me, it was all about reconnecting with love and happiness, finding more peace and just living a good life, you know?" Her husband. Family and friends. Skateboarding with her dogs. Hiking the lush trails around her home in the hills above Honolulu. Scrapbooking. And yes, surfing, too.

"It's really cool to hear Carissa speak on that from her personal experience," Gomez says. "She's showing, I can still be beautiful and an amazing human and an amazing athlete." Moore admits her motivation is selfish, too. She feels good when she sees girls smile, walk away with a new friend and feel empowered after riding a surfboard for the first time. "It makes me feel full in my heart," she says.

There's a photo of Moore standing in front of a low barrier with the word "Tokyo" painted on it. She's looking out toward the ocean. The clouds show glints of the fading sun. She has a red, white and blue towel wrapped around her waist and her hands rest on her hips. Her shoulders hang low, betraying a sense of calm, a quiet confidence that no matter what the Universe rolls her way, she knows she's living by her standards of success and happiness.

And the Universe had tricks up her sleeve at the Olympics. For one, Moore wished she had known that each heat would involve sprinting down the beach and then paddling out into the surf. Then she would have trained for it, she jokes. And due to COVID-19 restrictions, her trusted team couldn't travel with her; she'd only have Team USA by her side.

The biggest wild card was the surf itself. Conditions during the initial



Winning medals and titles is great, but Moore also wants to have a life full of love and happiness.



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rounds were lackluster, then came to life with Tropical Storm Nepartak. Organizers scrambled to move up the contest and run the quarterfinals, semifinals and medal rounds in one day. After a long day, Moore advanced to the gold medal match, the last heat of the day, against South Africa’s Bianca Buitendag. She had a moment of doubt beforehand. Naturally, she called home and was reminded she already knew what to do. She was ready.

With foamy, choppy surf, this wasn’t going to be a shoot-out of technical skill. This was going to be a tactical game of wave selection and getting points on the board. At times it felt more like a battle against the ocean, both athletes repeatedly washed over by the whitewater and paddling endlessly against the current. Eventually it was Moore who found her rhythm. She capitalized on the handful of clean wave faces, the ones with the most scoring potential, and went to work. Roundhouse cutbacks. Laybacks. Power and drive through end sections of waves.

In the fading daylight, announcers started counting down the clock. Moore, still paddling back to the lineup, was unaware. She looked back toward the beach and sat up on her board, a look of confusion on her face before a flash of realization. She covered her face with her hands before letting a brilliant smile shine and raising her arms in celebration. Team USA embraced her and chaired her up the beach. She achieved a dream she hadn’t even foreseen a few years earlier.

When she returned to Honolulu, she made a special trip down to Kahanamoku’s statue and shared her leis with him.

Moore is talking about freedom. “I’ve been on this journey, especially this year, of feeling more comfortable in my own skin and my decision-making, of trusting myself,” she says. It’s been a journey to believe. A search for freedom, an ease that allows her interior mindset to match her exterior actions. “As a performer, I feel like I’m just starting to feel in sync with who I am personally and professionally,” she says.

That freedom has allowed her to rise up, meet a tough sequence of challenges this year and ultimately perform her best. It’s the culmination of years of work on a personal and professional level. It was on display on tour—the fire in her belly, the gratitude for the day-to-day grind. It was on display at the Olympics, where she learned to trust herself without her core team on site and where her new family, her Team USA family, stepped in to fill their shoes. And it was on display at Lowers when she let go of the doubts. “Any other year, I would have crumbled,” she admits.

Moore says the enormity of the year hasn’t sunk in, but every now and then she’ll catch herself and think, “Oh my gosh, that was fun. That was pretty cool.” And she’s not done yet.

Maybe Moore will pass Layne Beachley and Gilmore for most world titles of all time (seven), but it doesn’t really matter. At the end of the day, Moore is making fans feel something with her surfing. With her fairy-tale year, she’s inspired thousands to believe in the power of belief. The possibility. The awe. The freedom. The magic that if you just follow your heart and lead with love, anything is possible.