

Meet the woman making waves to bring gender equality to extreme surfing

Full transcript

Anna (everywoman):

Hello, and welcome to the everywoman podcast. I'm Anna, your host, and every month we'll be bringing you lively discussion and debate with inspiring women making a difference around the world, asking the questions you want the answers to, and doubtless prompting some more in the process. So listen in to hear the stories, insights and opinions of those setting the pace and being the change.

Today we're talking to pro, big wave surfer, Maya Gabeira, who along with being one of a small number of elite women athletes in a traditionally male-dominated field, also set the world record for the biggest wave ever surfed by a woman in February 2020 — at 73.5 foot. And this was in Portugal at Nazaré beach. So, welcome Maya.

Maya Gabeira:

Thank you.

Anna:

So, you are the world record holder for the biggest wave ever surfed by a woman. And if anyone wants to go and check out just how big this wave is, I mean, I recommend going online and... I mean it's quite something. But what does that mean to you emotionally and practically?

Maya Gabeira:

Oh, it means a lot. For me, as you know, it was always my dream to establish the world record. It was always something that I envisioned as a lifelong goal for me in my career. So to accomplish that, it was amazing, but also for me, you know the ride itself and to feel the things I felt at that speed, to feel the energy of that wave, and to reach a point in my career and in my surfing that I can actually ride waves that tall is quite incredible. It took many years. I've been you know professionally surfing big waves for almost... I think about 13 years. So it's very rewarding to see that I have devoted a lot of my time and many, many years to something and then I have reached a level that for a long time I thought it was unreachable for me as a woman.

Anna:

As a woman or as a surfer?

Maya Gabeira:

As a woman. I think the level for the men was always so much greater than for us. It's such a male dominated sport that it took a lot of years and it took a lot of believing in myself to get to the level that I am today. It wasn't expected, I think, of women to surf waves that high. It was a barrier to be broken.

Anna:

I mean, in terms of, physically, there's no reason why a woman shouldn't surf waves as big as a man would surf, is there? Is it more of a psychological thing? And like you say, the barriers around that world.

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah, I think both. I mean, there is a physical advantage for men. I think in every sport that you use a lot of power and strength, and there's a lot of speed involved in our sport. So of course, like you see alpine skiing and like sports that are of high velocity, men usually have an upper hand just by their physicality. You know there has been a huge help from the fact that in our sport, we do utilise the jet ski, which is a machine, and with that we are able to close that gap somewhat. And then of course the mental challenge of a woman being in an environment that you're supposed to be very brave to conquer those waves, right? And we believe in society that men are brave. Men are supposed to be the ones that have no fear, that face challenges, that you know can put themselves out there and get injured and come back up. And when you see a woman wanting to do that, there's a little bit of a resistance from society when you see a woman you know putting themselves in a very dangerous

place, like choosing to be exposed to possible injury, possibly even death in our sport. And so there's a certain resistance that comes. Yeah, so that barrier had to be kind of broken.

Anna:

I want to ask you actually, just deviating slightly. What does it feel like to be on a wave that big?

Maya Gabeira:

It's pretty amazing. There's an amount of energy that the ocean has when it's that big and that much water is moving and those waves are being created and breaking and the noise and the speed. I think you're very much in the moment you know. It demands so much of your presence and I love that about our sport because it is so intense and it is so unique and you know it's nature, so it's always changing, moving, happening. Those are very intense, special moments that take every instinct, every focus, everything you have to be there and to be reactive and to be responding in a way that is hopefully as quick as those waves rolling in. So, it is, it is quite engaging.

Anna:

Yeah. I can imagine. I can imagine you probably don't feel more alive than in that moment when you are just about to...

Maya Gabeira:

Exactly.

Anna:

Incredible. So you did this amazing feat. You know, you've surfed the biggest wave that's ever been surfed by a woman, and presumably at one point you will go onto surf an even bigger wave, I imagine. But even though it was an incredible groundbreaking moment for a female in the sport that you're in, it didn't really get a massive, a lot of attention, did it? I know it took a while to verify the height, didn't it? The world record was only quantified 10 months later? But I mean, you know if it had been something that a man had done, do you feel that it would have got more attention than it actually did? I know you've got some attention in the press, but not in the sort of surfing press so much.

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah, yeah, exactly. Well, I got a lot of attention on the mainstream, I think, especially if you compare that with our sport, as in general surfing doesn't hit the mainstream as often as tennis or football or other sports like that. Within the surf community, it didn't get as much of a recognition as you'd expect. I'm not sure exactly why. Maybe because it was my second world record and they were just like, "Oh, again," or maybe they were just like, "Ooh, now you're just gone a little bit too far for our taste, and now it's the biggest wave surfed by men and woman this year. Just slow down there." Everyone. They chose to take little attention and let it go by a little bit, not so noticed. I think when you're breaking barriers and you're establishing a new set of standards for the sport, it is sometimes normal that the sport itself doesn't accept it right away or it doesn't absorb it right away. And so I'm glad that somebody took notice and it did matter to the mainstream and to people in general and to women. And it's there, it's in the history books. Nobody's going to take it from me.

Anna:

It's interesting, isn't it? I mean, as we've sort of said earlier, it's a very traditionally macho sport. You're one of a very few number of pro big wave surfers, aren't you, that are female?

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah.

Anna:

I must say now there are two... There are different types of surfing. We're talking big wave surfing here. So we're not talking about the surfing that is you know going to be joining the Olympics, for example, fairly soon. This is hard-core surfing where you use the jet ski to go out beyond the waves, don't you? And then come in on this incredible water. I'm looking at my notes here. Male and female competitors only started earning equal prize money in 2019 for big wave surfing competitions. Is that right?

Maya Gabeira:
Yes.

Anna:
And there's also a huge disparity in things like corporate sponsorship. I mean, these things must hold young, aspiring female big wave surfers back from entering and from being able to compete and you know then change the culture of surfing.

Maya Gabeira:
Yes.

Anna:
That sort of disparity in finances alongside the maybe traditional prejudice that still exists, in terms of a gender pay gap, if it was narrowed, what kind of effect would that have on female pro big wave surfing?

Maya Gabeira:
It shortened the possibilities of investment if you think that way. The more you make, the more you can invest, and your equipment and travelling and coaches and all of that. So of course, with the men getting paid greater dollars by their sponsors and the companies in general, it does make it more difficult for women to see means and see reasons why invest all their earnings into back to the sport, you know because in the end we also have to make a living. So we have less money to invest and therefore we have less money to invest on progressing and taking it further. You know for younger girls, it not only makes it harder to start in the sport because you know if at the top level there's little investment, imagine when you're trying to get there. I mean, there's no investment. Yeah, it makes it more difficult for sure. It's less competitive as well because there's less women pushing in that area. I think it has gotten a lot better. We have improved in the way that we have a bigger platform these days. We have more competitions, we have more awards, we do get paid the same on at least the competition level of things. And we just need the endorsements to follow that lead you know eventually.

Anna:
When you're in a competition, are you competing against other surfers or other women?

Maya Gabeira:
Other men, yeah, on the competition.

Anna:
So, every one. So you go in as a surfer. It's not a sort of a gendered...

Maya Gabeira:
No, not at all in surfing. No. No.

Anna:
So it stands to reason, if you're competing on equal terms, I mean, the logic is there, isn't it? You should be being paid on equal terms, being sponsored on equal terms, and have those equal opportunities to progress. I mean, I'm interested in how... I mean, how did you get into big wave surfing? How does a young woman or a young man actually get into big wave surfing? Is it like a call from the ocean? Because you can't really coach it, I guess, or it's not something you do at school?

Maya Gabeira:
I moved very early to Hawaii. I was 17, in search of good waves and experience and English and all those things. I wanted to be abroad from Brazil. And with that, I fell in love with big waves and started really seeing a possible path for me in that direction. Not so much professionally yet, but a little bit. I had a little bit of a vision that that was a niche in surfing that was completely unexplored by women and I thought that there was going to be a lot of potential in the years to come, in the future. So that's how I started. I started basically borrowing boards at the age of 17, paddling out at Waimea with

older friends, male, and then slowly started being mentored by different men, different friends, older friends. And that's how I started.

Anna:

In terms of young female surfers, big wave surfers coming up, I mean, is it, is it the case that you come to it in kind of personal ways or quite random ways? There's no sort of academy where you can learn to big wave surf, or...

Maya Gabeira:

No.

Anna:

No. So, again, you've got to have that incentive to bring through professionals, haven't you? To bring through young people who are going to commit their time to do this.

Maya Gabeira:

Yes. Well, what happens, a majority of the young girls are coming from Hawaii and they're young girls, they're always in the ocean. All their friends start to surf bigger waves. They're part of this community and they get the support and encouragement from their friends to go out there and explore those waves these days. So there's a lot of younger girls coming out of Hawaii now that surf big waves. We don't see that that much here and for it to go in Europe. We have amazing, actually, big wave surfers here these days. They're very focused in Nazaré, but they're all late 20s, early 30s, so they're already like a different generation. But the young, young ones that I see that are the future of the sport, they are the ones that are growing up in a community that is very connected to the ocean and does wind sports in the ocean and tow surfing and paddle surfing and they're in that environment. So they either have parents, you know a dad that surfboards and takes the daughter under their wing, or they have friends from school or a boyfriend, things like that.

Anna:

And now they have some amazing female role models as well. I mean, you must play a massive part in inspiring people to want to take their sport forward for a young woman surfing. I mean, how important do you think it is? Did you have a female role model when you were starting out?

Maya Gabeira:

I had. I had, but I didn't have like, they didn't have a professional success. But I looked up to them as surfers because they charged and they were brave women and they were putting themselves out there, but they didn't have like a career I could mirror. So the career part I had to create for myself because I did actually become the first female big wave surfer paid in the sport. So, but I did have role models like Keala Kennelly at the time, Jamilah Star, girls that were pushing the boundaries of the sport in waters and dangerous waves.

Anna:

And now you've taken that forward to the next step.

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah. It's the more professional.

Anna:

Absolutely. Let me just ask you. Let's just talk general surfing. What's the difference in mentality between normal surfing and big wave surfing? And what is it about the latter that you particularly love? Does normal surfing feel a bit tame to you?

Maya Gabeira:

No, I love normal surfing, I absolutely love perfect waves. But you know I would never get paid for them because I'm not that good, and that's not my main focus. So I couldn't be you know a professional surfer on the tour and compete 12 times in the year in all different kind of waves. That is not me. So I had to kinda hold onto what I thought was more realistic to me professionally, and also what I thought I had more talent, too. They're different. They're different. A professional surfer that's on tour has to be

somebody extremely competitive. There's a lot of turns, a lot of different manoeuvres you have to practise. You have to surf in every condition. I was always very picky. I always wanted the very perfect waves. I wanted to travel. I didn't want to grind on average waves to be the best on any condition. I wanted to be the best in a very particular condition. So that kind of already put me on another category. And with big waves, I think, to me, is a challenge, to me is the beauty, the intensity, the magic that I see when the waves are huge. To me, there is something special there that is memorable and it's unique and it's rare that I really enjoy to be part of and to prepare for those days and to take the most that I can out of those days. So, ride and ride as many waves as I can and ride as well as I can and be a part of that magic moment that usually really just lasts a day. It's that peak, you know, when the swell arrives and hits the coast and those lines come in and break perfect waves. So, yeah, it's more of a... it's, those are very different sports and there's also love for speed. I love the speed of those giant waves. I love the noise. So, yeah, it's very different.

Anna:

God, that's amazing. And what top speeds can you get up to?

Maya Gabeira:

I think over here we may be doing like up to 65 kilometres an hour.

Anna:

Wow. That's extraordinary.

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah, it's very fast.

Anna:

Yeah. My God. I mean, your evident love for the sport and for the connection that you have to it, and your record as well, is even more stunning and notable because in 2013 you nearly drowned, didn't you, after a serious wipe-out at Nazaré?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes.

Anna:

In terms of facing your fear and just pushing yourself beyond your experience, I mean, how did you do that to get back to your sport? How did you push yourself past that?

Maya Gabeira:

Patience. A lot of time, a lot of dedication. You know I really try to just attach to outcomes, to goals, to results. And I really focus myself on the path and everyday challenge of overcoming everything that I had to overcome to get back to the top. And for most part, I had no idea if I was ever going to reach the top again. So it was more about just, "How can I get back to surfing big waves? I mean, can I get back to surfing big waves?" So every day I had challenges. I had a lot of injuries to overcome from that accident. I had a lot of emotional trauma, so it was busy although I was not performing as a top athlete, I was very busy trying to get back to the confidence and to the physical ability that I once had. And then, of course, on top of that, surpass what I once had because my accident was basically the first time I ever surfed Nazaré, and Nazaré was in the very begin of the exploration of this wave and it was a new standard and a new place for the sport that would hold every record since, and have a lot of attention from our sport. So I not only had to get back to where I once was, but I also had to improve enough that I would be a successful surfer here, which obviously you know after my accident, being the first experience I had here on a big day, a lot of people doubted that that was a place that I should be at all. So those two things combined kept me very busy for years, until I actually realised that I was going in a direction of full recovery and that that's what I wanted and I could possibly do it again.

Anna:

Does it help that technically there's no such thing as the same wave, is there? Every wave is different. I mean, when you were approaching waves and you are building your way back into being able to surf

big waves, did you look at it that way, or did you see it as just a sort of a holistic thing that you had to do? Or did you take each wave as it came, as you were getting back to full health?

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah, I was taking what I could from all the experiences. Like if I couldn't surf, then I'll be on the cliff doing the radio part for the team. And then I would learn by doing that. And then if I couldn't surf but I could drive the ski, then I'd be doing the rescue and improving my driving skills. And then so I kept improving on all different angles of the sport, but just not performing as a top athlete. But that really gave me a lot of time to put a lot of the pieces together that I think I needed to build up my confidence again and to be better than before. I learned a lot by not being at top shape and not having the possibility of just focusing on my performance and being able to look at the big picture and just be involved in very different roles in the sport. And that helped me a lot. But you know it was never a guarantee that I was going to get back and surf those huge waves again. So I was just kinda accepting the limitations and working within the limitations to get the most out of it.

Anna:

What did you learn then from having to take steps back in order to go forward?

Maya Gabeira:

Well, my skills, my driving skills improved tremendously. My ocean reading improved tremendously. My understanding about the wave in Nazaré improved a lot. And in the end I think I was able to peak as an athlete when I wanted and when it felt right, but I was able to not crush myself and my soul when things didn't go my way. I became very forgiving with myself, which was very different than I was before as an athlete and as a person. And I think, for some reason, being kind to myself and forgiving myself for you know not performing or not conquering, not winning, really it made a big difference. It made when I achieved things like very fluid and very... maybe my instinct, I don't know what it was, but it just made things happen at the right timing. You know, I stopped pressuring and forcing things, and I started allowing things to happen more in their own timing. And that really brought me amazing results.

Anna:

That's incredible. It's a different state that you moved into. I mean, obviously, you know you've smashed first goal, but you've got more goals to come, haven't you? I mean, do you want to hold the record for the biggest wave ridden, irrespective of gender? How big is that one? How much more have you got to ride?

Maya Gabeira:

It's 80 feet.

Anna:

Okay. So it's not that much, is it? It's another seven feet.

Maya Gabeira:

Not that much.

Anna:

No.

Maya Gabeira:

Yeah. It's doable. It's doable.

Anna:

I mean, you talk about the place of acceptance and allowing it there now. So I don't know how you think when you think of your goals, whether you're like, "Right, I'm doing that," or you're like, "No, I'm going to be the best I can be and see how it goes." But is it something that you'd like to do?

Maya Gabeira:

Yes, I'm always like that. I already feel extremely privileged to have been able to achieve something so difficult I think in sports, which is breaking the gender barrier, even though for a second or 40 seconds, whatever it took for me to ride that wave, it is incredible. It's something that I hold very close to my heart because I did have to deal with gender inequality for my whole career. So to suddenly put that and surpass my male peers for a few seconds is quite special. I didn't really have, you know like I said, since my accident and all the years that I had of struggling, I never really had you know something that if I didn't do it, I would be bummed. Like, I would love to get a world record, and then of course I would love to get a second world record. And then of course I would love to break you know the male world record right now, and that is why I train every day. That is why I'm out there every day, as long as I can. That is why I'm a dedicated athlete, but if it's not meant to happen, I'm okay with it because there is something in surfing and especially in big wave surfing that it's not only about us athletes. You know, it's a wave. There is a force of nature in the equation, and if it comes for you and it happens, it's a blessing, but it's just not something you can force. And I don't want to have that type of frustration on top of a goal that I am prepared to set that new record, but then the wave doesn't come. And then what can I do? I can only do my part, so I'm prepared. I'm ready. I think I'm evolving as an athlete. I think I still haven't peaked, but whether I am or not going to break a world record, I'm not sure.

Anna:

I was going to ask you what the ocean had taught you through your life. And it sounds very much like, again, it's that sort of acceptance that there are some things that are out of your control. I mean, would you agree with that if you had to sort of sum up what the ocean has taught you?

Maya Gabeira:

That's definitely one of the things. That is definitely one of the things, accepting and trying to be as accepting and as grateful... You know, being grateful has been like a very huge, humbling lesson, too, since that was my first emotion when I woke up on the beach after being resuscitated. It was how grateful I was that I did have a second chance. And then patience. And I also learned that within every limitation that's put around us for different reasons, there's always something we can do. And so, I always try to focus a lot on the small things, the little things, the little victories and the little challenges. So I try to take a lot of the grandiosity away from like this one record, and then the second record, because I do think that it's every day that counts. If you do everything just for that one thing, like it's a big waste of life. I don't want to waste my life. I want to live every day, when there's no records, when there's no waves, when there's waves, and there's big waves. Like, if I don't take every minute and every day with like a lot of appreciation, I just feel like whatever I achieve in the end is not going to mean that much.

Anna:

So, my last question was going to be, what would you like your legacy to be? And I suppose it's a really interesting thing as to what one considers one's legacy is, whether it is the big awards and the world titles and all of that, or, like you say, just that inspiration to be the person that steps up and gets in the water and does it and lives it and is present. So, I mean, in terms of your legacy, when you think... I mean, you've got loads sort of more stuff to do, but at the moment, what would you like your legacy to be?

Maya Gabeira:

I would like to inspire people to search for what they want to do, for how they want to live life and really think outside of the box. You know, we have the tendency of following up and like seeing what somebody else is doing and then going and doing kind of that. And it is important for us to try, since a young age, actually, to look inwards and really define like what is, who are we, and what do we want? Because in the end of the day, that's what's going to make us most happy and satisfied. We have to inspire people to really discover themselves because the more they know themselves, the better they're going to do in the world, and the more they can contribute, you know. We're all different and we should all be inspired to really create our own path and be unique. Be different.

Anna:

Be different. Maya Gabeira, thank you so much for joining us.

Maya Gabeira:
Thank you.