

THE CHOSEN ONE

By Anika McLaren

On any given Sunday - before everyone stirs from their slumber, before the local church throws open its doors, even before the sun comes up – a tiny, lone figure floats beyond the breakers at Warri Beach.

The figure is the five foot, four inch 15-year-old wunderkind, Sally Fitzgibbons. She's the Gerroa grommet creating a stir up and down the South Coast. The girl with the wind in her sun bleached hair and the world at her size six feet.

The local religion is surfing, and she is blessed like no other.

Blessed with talent. Blessed with ambition. But most of all, blessed with the best parents any child could pray for.

“No way in the world could I live without them,” she confesses.

“Oh, and sport. Yeah, sport. I can't live without it either.”

Sally is a small town girl taking on the male-dominated world of surfing. Her parents – Martin and Mary – have dedicated their lives to helping their only daughter and youngest child fight her way to the top.

“We are just along for the ride, as one is for all their children. Sally has her goals and dreams and we have never pushed her into anything, but if she asks to do something we generally say, ‘if we can fit it in, let's give it a go’,” Martin says.

“As a parent it is important to remember that they are Sally's achievements not ours and we are here to help her achieve her potential.”

It is easy to see why the creases etched along the corners of his eyes are deep, with a perpetual smile beamed across his face.

“With three energetic boys, the only thing that could keep us sane was to go to the beach... Sally was quite young but was hopping on my Mal[ibu] at an early age. From my point of view it was a life skill I was teaching them and I never intended for it to be done competitively,” he says.

But for a girl of Sal’s age and experience, those in the know agree: size (or gender) doesn’t matter. This goofy-footer’s achievements are biblical. At the tender age of 14, Sally had represented NSW eight times in five different sports.

Martin and Mary can’t help but wonder: “Where to next?”

“I am happy to achieve my goals and just have fun, then I just set some new goals,” Sally says, punctuated with a wide grin.

Nicknamed the ‘Giant Killer,’ the diminutive Kiama High school student became the youngest surfer ever – male or female – to win an ASP-rated pro junior event and make the grade for the final of the WQS (World Qualifying Series) at the Billabong Girls Easter Surf Fest in March 2005. Sally has won so many surfing heats and tours that it is almost impossible to list them all. It seems that she wins almost every contest she enters. But last May in Brazil, she missed out on being crowned the under 18 World Junior ISA (International Surfing Association) Champion by 0.46 of a point.

“Winning isn’t everything. You can’t control winning, but you can control how you surf. Every wave counts,” she says.

“I’m stoked to do what I do. I love to travel and it’s always fun meeting up with the other girls at comps. Catching up on school work is probably the only bad thing, and it’s not that bad,” she says.

Both Sally and her parents are quick to emphasise that a swelling swag of medals, bowing shelf of trophies and the odd novelty-sized cheque wouldn’t be possible without a little help from the IAS.

“The Academies, both the IAS and [NSW Institute of Sport], play a special role in support; by giving Sally structure and providing a meeting place for like-minded people. Not everyone appreciates what an athlete goes through to achieve their goals or even understands why they bother,” Martin says.

With her pint-sized board tucked under her arm, she strides from the water with purple lips, her hair matted and her toes wrinkled. Another sublime Sunday has just begun, and the surfing Gods are smiling.

Sally Fitzbibbons and the IAS

Sport: Surfing, Individual athlete program

Time spent with the Academy: Joined the Academy in October 2004

Career:

- Sally is the youngest surfer ever to win an ASP-rated pro junior event.
- She took out the Under 16 and Under 18 titles in 2005.
- Sally won both the under 16s Billabong Occy GromComp as well as the Rusty GromFest in 2006. Sal also won the Open Pro and under 16 All Girls Showdown.

- In April, she scored a near perfect 9.00, and won first place in the under 21s Billabong ProTeen Girls
- Sally was named 'Junior Sportswoman of the Year' at the Gilmore electoral Sports Awards.
- And surfing is not her only love: Sally is also a NSW touch football and soccer representative, reigning NSW cross country title holder and NSW 800m and 1500m athletics champion.

IAS Highlight:

Sally: "Probably my trip to Brazil (for the World Junior Surfing Championships in May 2005) would have to be up there. But just getting out there in the surf or on the soccer field is great. Any kind of sport is great. I love it all."

Sally's dad says: "The first time she wins at whatever new level she is testing herself at always has a special memory."