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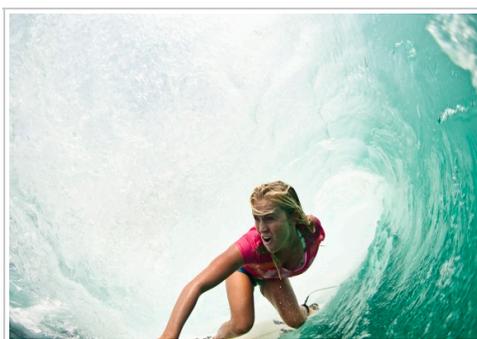
Wednesday, April 6, 2011 4:28pm PDT

'Soul Surfer' showcases one of the greatest comeback stories in sports

By: [Pete Thomas](#), [GrindTV.com](#)

"Soul Surfer" premieres Friday across the U.S. and Canada and whatever people might think of the quality of the production, most probably will leave theaters in agreement that [Bethany Hamilton's](#) comeback story should rank as one of the most remarkable in sports.

By now mainstream society is at least vaguely familiar with the movie's true-to-life plot: promising young surfer loses an arm to a shark, yet somehow discovers the strength and courage not only to keep surfing, but to compete at a high level.



But many might not fully grasp just how difficult it was for Hamilton, her deep faith in God not withstanding, to stay passionately involved in a fast-moving sport in which two arms are as vital for balance as they are for paddling and getting up on a surfboard.

"For me, watching her do what she does just makes me want to try that much harder," elite pro surfer [Alana Blanchard](#), Hamilton's close friend and witness to the 2003 attack, said Wednesday in an interview. "She is amazing how motivated she is and just how inspiring she is to everyone."

Hamilton was only 13 when the incident occurred. "Soul Surfer" stars Anna Sophia Robb as Bethany; Dennis Quaid and Helen Hunt as the surfer's parents; country music star Carrie Underwood as Bethany's youth minister, and Lorraine Nicholson as Blanchard.

From an acting standpoint, Robb recalled in a [Collider.com](#) interview that it was challenging simply pretending to do ordinary things with only one arm. "I had my arm behind my back so there were times that I was tempted to reach out for something, and then I had to remember [that I couldn't]," Robb said. "There are a lot of things that you can't really do, like tying your bathing suit, carrying bags out to the car, or opening a bottle of water, which Bethany does. She just does it all. She does more with her arm than I do with my two."

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Bethany Hamilton



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Hamilton, now 21, was born into a surfing family on Kauai, Hawaii. She competed in her first competition when she was 8. The 14-foot tiger shark struck as she was surfing at a local spot with Blanchard and Blanchard's father and brother -- Holt and Byron, respectively -- on the morning of Oct. 31, 2003.

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Hamilton probably would have bled to death had Holt and Byron not rushed to her assistance. Holt covered the wound with a thin wetsuit vest and used a surfboard leash as a tourniquet.

To everyone's surprise, Hamilton was back in the water a month later, still hoping to someday turn pro. "I just remember being so happy when she decided to get back in the water and go surfing that day," Alana Blanchard recalled. "When the shark attack happened I thought I lost my surfing partner forever, and her getting back in the water was the best thing ever."

A little more than a year after losing her arm she shocked everyone, save perhaps her family, by winning a national amateur title in front of a large California crowd.

"When she hit the water at Nationals of course everyone was watching," recalled Chris Mauro, then the editor of [Surfer magazine](#). "And everyone was nervous, not knowing what to expect. Then she ripped her first wave all the way down the beach and paddled back out like it was nothing. I watched people in the crowd melt into tears, crying, cheering. I had a huge lump in my throat -- it was easily one of the most inspirational things I've ever seen. And she hasn't stopped. She keeps blowing people away. To this day what she's doing seems impossible to most surfers."

In 2007, Hamilton turned pro and has since participated in numerous [Assn. of Surfing Professionals'](#) competitions, with the highlight being a second-place finish at the 2009 World Junior Championships. Last year, she became only one of a handful of female surfers to [ride giant waves at Jaws](#) off Maui.

More recently she has been busy in the role of stunt double for "Soul Surfer," but she'll break away from movie commitments later this month as a sponsor wild card in the top-level Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach contest in Australia.

That means Hamilton, a longtime Rip Curl [team athlete](#), will be going up against an ASP [Women's World Tour roster](#) that includes Blanchard.

Asked about the prospect of facing Hamilton in a contest heat, Blanchard quipped, "Of course I don't want her in my heat; shes a really hard competitor and she rips. But if it ends up that way then we'll just go out there and surf and hopefully have some fun."

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