

FILM / Wednesday, April 13, 2011

5

CURL FRIENDS

By Bill DeLapp


[Share](#)

Soul Surfer's fact-based flick, which received a recent Syracuse premiere, could make box-office waves

Thanks to a hungry tiger shark off the Hawaiian coast on Halloween morning 2003, 13-year-old budding surfer Bethany Hamilton lost her left arm, a lot of blood and almost the will to go on with her young life. *Soul Surfer* (TriStar/FilmDistrict; 106 minutes; PG; widescreen; 2011), the new biopic culled from Hamilton's subsequent memoir, recalls the events that would shape the athlete's career in an earnest yet immensely appealing fashion, with audience applause sure to greet this underdog tale.

Director Sean McNamara, a Disney Channel veteran who has helmed many episodes of the *That's So Raven* sitcom, knows what he's doing in the opening reels, as he quickly establishes Bethany (played by AnnaSophia Robb) as a gifted queen of the curl, born into a surf-loving family that includes still-hunky dad Tom (Dennis Quaid and his washboard fab abs) and attractive mom Cheri (Helen Hunt), plus brothers Noah (Ross Thomas) and Timmy (Chris Brochu). Bethany also has a best gal pal, Alana (Lorraine Nicholson, Jack's daughter), and a fierce surfing competitor, Malina (a hissible turn by Sonya Balmores Chung), plus a sweet religious counselor named Sarah Hill (American *Idol* icon Carrie Underwood in her first dramatic role). You know you're watching a movie set in Hawaii when there is a scene involving a surfside church service.



Everything's happy, of course, until that fateful shark attack. Mindful of the parameters of PG-rated family features, McNamara uses fleet-footed editing with discretion to minimize possible viewer trauma; if you want to see something with more tension and teeth, go rent *Jaws*. Despite Bethany's pluckiness (she immediately asks the doc, warmly played by Craig T. Nelson, when she can hit the waves again), overcoming her new physical condition is another matter, as illustrated by tiny flourishes such as her culinary challenge to make a sandwich.

In another adroit touch, McNamara correlates the earlier shark feeding frenzy with later scenes involving camera-toting newshounds who swarm the Hamilton house to get the story. The tabloid TV show *Inside Edition* agreed to the purchase of a prosthetic arm for Bethany in order to get an exclusive, but even the movie's family dog (played by Bethany's real-life pooch in a cameo) had issues with the fake limb. And in a movie that is often concerned with cresting the ultimate wave, *Soul Surfer's* biggest irony is that Bethany had to take a missionary trip to Thailand, site of the 2004 devastating tsunami, for her to refocus on life's most precious priorities.

Soul Surfer admirably refuses to shy away from the Christian beliefs that form the pipeline of the Hamilton family. At one point Bethany, in a moment reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's "Where's the rest of me?" shocker from the golden oldie *Kings Row*, cries out to Sarah, "How can this be God's plan for me?" It's a reference to an earlier scene when Sarah resorts to Jeremiah 29:11 for guidance: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Uhoh, sounds preachy but it's not: Underwood's novice acting works to her benefit, making her Sarah a sincere believer, while Robb offers true grit as Bethany, not a southpaw-less Pollyanna that would have likely centered a more inferior adaptation.

Beyond the faith-based elements, *Soul Surfer* can also be taken as a tropical travelogue, with location footage at Hawaii and Tahiti in which you can practically sniff the Coppertone, as well as an inspirational sports flick in the disability-impaired category, such as the 1949 baseball biography *The Stratton Story* with James Stewart as a legless pitcher on the comeback trail. It's also a well-defined family film, especially in telling moments when the Hamiltons are in domestic-drama mode. Quaid and Hunt, both growing older with the grace denied us mere mortals, are swell as the parental units, while it's interesting to note that Hunt is acting alongside the daughter of her fellow *As Good As It Gets* Oscar-winner.

Soul Surfer also has the key ingredients found in other examples of the surf-movie genre, except for the obligatory Beach Boys tune on the soundtrack. Recent items in this category have ranged from *Blue Crush's* grrrrl power programmer to the Disney cartoon *Lilo and Stitch*, but the real gems are director John Milius' still-underrated 1979 entry *Big Wednesday* and Stacy Peralta's terrific documentary *Riding Giants*, movies that place an emphasis on the sport's

spiritual nature. *Soul Surfer* hews closer to the latter flicks, even to the point of Bethany's bedroom wall being adorned with a poster for the 1966 documentary *The Endless Summer*.

Computer graphics help create the illusion of Robb on her surfboard, with the real-life Hamilton doubling for the actress in key catch-the-wave visuals; indeed, we're a long way from the days of rear projection with Frankie Avalon performing some faux hang-10s. The dialogue occasionally may require a glossary for surf terms like "duck dive," with dad Tom resorting to mystique-laden wisdom such as "sometimes you wipe out and end up in the Impact Zone," where unforgiving waves pound away at your noggin.

Yet Bethany's profile in courage manages many uplifting movie moments that never ring false. Much like the original *Rocky*, *Soul Surfer* is less about a climactic victory and more concerned about one determined lady's journey as she goes the emotional distance, only with swimming instead of boxing trunks.

The April 5 benefit screening for the local Make-A-Wish Foundation at Eastwood's Palace Theatre offered Central New Yorkers a chance to hobnob with the moviemakers, including director McNamara and executive producers David Tice and Dominic Ianno, the latter profiled in the March 30 issue of the *Syracuse New Times*. Ianno explored his hometown ties to make the event happen, and claimed that he would like to make more beat-the-odds type movies and bring them all back to the Salt City for premieres. McNamara noted that it took more than 750 effects shots to create the armless illusion, with actress Robb wearing a green sock on her left arm that could be digitally erased in post-production.

The evening's big surprise came from a Skype-broadcast appearance from Robb, who was attending a Manhattan dinner function that night. The giggly young actress, who seemed flummoxed about the Skype arrangement, recalled that "it was a huge honor" to play the role and that Bethany Hamilton actually had a part in her casting: "If she requests me to be in the movie, I'm there—especially in Hawaii!" *Soul Surfer's* opening weekend provided a happy ending, too. The \$18 million-budgeted movie (according to the *Los Angeles Times*) earned an impressive \$11 million and favorable word-of-mouth, offering firm evidence that FilmDistrict's faith-based marketing campaign covered that base and made sufficient inroads into the mainstream audience to suggest smooth sailing ahead.

Did you see Soul Surfer? Tell us about it at syracusenewtimes.com

Overcoming obstacles: AnnaSophia Robb as Bethany Hamilton in *Soul Surfer*.

Movers and shakers: From left, Hollywood executive producers David Tice and Dominic Ianno and director Sean McNamara invade Syracuse for the *Soul Surfer* premiere.



RELATED CONTENT

GREEN SCENE

Ostracized Peanut Family

Friends of the Family

Art and Soul

Soul Man

Related to:
her soul surfer bethany family hamilton mcnamara also