

The Fight for Gender Equality in One of the Most Dangerous Sports on Earth

These women want the right to compete in big-wave contests — and get paid as much as men do.

By Daniel Duane Photographs by Dina Litovsky FEB. 7, 2019

One sunny morning in January 2018, on a white boat in the blue sea off the Hawaiian island Maui, Bianca Valenti and Keala Kennelly sat on a beanbag listening to “German Sparkle Party,” a song by the Something Experience, and waiting for the right moment to surf 50-foot waves. Valenti, who is 33 and a muscular 5-foot-5, with a small, square jaw and friendly brown eyes, lives in San Francisco and is the best female big-wave surfer on the United States mainland. Kennelly, 40 and a slight 5-foot-6 with spiky peroxidized hair, lives on Oahu in Hawaii and is the best female big-wave surfer on Earth.

The waves that day, at a surf spot called Peahi or more commonly known as Jaws, were the biggest in recent memory. They were too big, really, with plenty in the ideal range of 40 to 50 feet on the face but others in the borderline-impossible range of 70 to 80. A strong wind was also creating bumps on the ocean surface, like boulders on a bad dirt road. Kennelly had already ridden a 40-footer that day, paddling her surfboard to catch a wave at its tallest point, hopping to her feet and soaring down the enormous blue face, then turning hard onto the unbroken wall and riding fast in front of the curl until the wave petered out. It wasn't the kind of ride that attracts endorsement deals or wins the big-wave equivalent of an Oscar at the annual World Surf League Big Wave Awards. The wave did not qualify as mind-blowingly huge, and Kennelly did not get barreled, a.k.a. tubed, the ne plus ultra of the sport, by riding inside the whirling cylinder created when the lip of the wave curls over and forms a tunnel before collapsing. But that day Kennelly was trying to avoid hospitalization by restraining her native impulse toward extreme risk-taking.

Valenti was less comfortable at Jaws. She had surfed smaller waves there many times but waves of this size only a few, and on this particular afternoon, she had yet to get in the water. Jaws is one of the world's two most important big-wave breaks; the other is Maverick's, a half-hour south of San Francisco, which Valenti surfs regularly. Valenti knew that getting barreled at Jaws would be a career-defining moment for her. And she openly confessed that it was her life's dream. Back home, she jumps off 10-meter diving platforms to overcome fear of long falls and practices the breathing techniques of an eccentric Dutch athlete and endurance guru, Wim Hof, who is known as the Iceman, in hopes of better surviving long underwater hold-downs after wipeouts, when turbulent water prevents a surfer from rising to get air. Valenti also follows the guidance of a Stanford neuroscientist and her personal sports psychologist to conjure spirit animals appropriate to specific surf conditions: killer bee, spider monkey and, that day at Jaws, a character she called Malolo bull kitty, a cross between a flying fish, a bull and, well, a kitty.

Valenti took in the scene: 16 other boats crowded with photographers, 12 men on Jet Skis racing in and out of the danger zone to rescue surfers after wipeouts and, among the waves, 50-plus

men from what might be called the international big-wave jet set, an almost exclusively male community of pros from Europe, Africa, Australia, Hawaii and California. Valenti watched these men do what contemporary big-wave pros must to succeed — deliberately ride the most dangerous and violent portions of the day’s biggest waves — displaying astonishing skill and bravery, but also losing control and cartwheeling down heaving blue mountainsides, shattering \$1,500 surfboards and being pushed to the bottom of the sea and requiring rescue.

It was already afternoon when Valenti decided she had to get in the water. She felt a burden to prove that female big-wave surfers can keep up with men — more so because she helped found, in 2016, the Committee for Equity in Women’s Surfing, an activist group that started with the modest ambition of getting women invited to big-wave contests, from which they had always been excluded, and grew unexpectedly into a reckoning for the global sport of competitive surfing.

Valenti changed into the standard big-wave outfit: a short-sleeve wet suit, a black neoprene vest bulky with buoyant padding and a second vest bristling with pull tabs. The tabs were connected to cartridges of compressed gas that could, if necessary, fill air bladders and float a surfer up from the deep. She dropped her 9-foot-6 pink surfboard into the water, splashed down after it and paddled off to join the men. Nauseated with excitement and trying to maintain what she calls “the patience of a Zen Buddhist monk,” Valenti spent the next two hours paddling up and over gigantic waves, waiting for one that she felt confident trying to ride.

A man on a Jet Ski told Valenti that her boat captain wanted to leave. Valenti reminded herself that she felt great and strong and ready. Then a wave appeared out at sea. Imagine standing on a sidewalk in front of a two-story house. Now picture a three-story house next door. Stack the first house on top of the second and extend this five-story colossus 200 yards to the right and left, a translucent aquamarine cliff speeding toward you. If Valenti froze in fear and did nothing, the cobalt wave face would suck concave into a gaping mouth with an upper lip flying forward to land on her with the impact of a commercial fishing vessel dropped out of the sky.



Paige Alms surfing at Mavericks in December. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

Valenti paddled toward the wave to maintain the option of paddling up and over before it broke. Then she made a snap transition to what she calls “one million percent focus.” Valenti sat bolt upright, weighted the tail of her board and rotated 180 degrees toward shore. Paddling furiously

now — “beast-mode-ing, sprinting,” she says — Valenti felt herself being pulled backward up the wave face. Prone and still paddling, she was lifted to the height of a second-story window, then a third-story window, then a fourth. She hopped to standing as the wave face steepened past vertical, and her mind went silent. Valenti and her board fell 15 feet through the air. She landed partway down the wave, accelerated off a bump on the surface and airdropped another 20 feet until she landed at the wave’s base. Astonished to find herself upright, she lost balance. Tumbling into the water, [Valenti was violently pulled skyward into airborne flipping cartwheels.](#) She yanked a tab to inflate her vest and crossed her arms to grab her own shoulders — because, she says, “the most common injury is to have your arms ripped out of your sockets.” She hit the water a second time and was drawn right back up and over that wave’s curling apex and down again through 30 feet of air and 30 feet of thrashing water. Her vest brought her to the surface just in time to be buried by a second huge wave.

A Jet Ski driver found Valenti bobbing dazed among rafts of white sea foam. Back at the boat, she climbed aboard, exhausted but full of the feeling she always gets from the instant she takes off on a big one — “peacefulness again,” as she puts it, “from anxiety to this feeling of: This is where I’m meant to be.”

Big-wave surfing originated in Hawaii in the 1940s, and by the late 1950s, it was synonymous with a break called Waimea Bay, on Oahu’s North Shore, and also with courageous masculinity. There were exceptions. A 15-year-old girl named Linda Benson rode a wave with an estimated 20-foot face at Waimea in 1959, and Margo Oberg, widely recognized as the first female professional surfer, also rode big surf at nearby Sunset Beach in the 1970s. Still, the sport was dominated by outsize male personalities like Buzzy Trent, author of an infamous article titled “Big Waves Are Masculine, Women Feminine,” in the November 1963 issue of Surf Guide magazine. “There’s nothing more beautiful than a well-shaped girl riding a six-foot wave with the wind blowing through her hair,” Trent wrote, “but one thing I can’t stand is girls riding (or attempting to ride) big waves.”

When it came to the question of how big a wave it was possible for anyone to surf, the consensus during the next couple of decades held that it was physiologically impossible to paddle a surfboard fast enough to catch and ride a wave bigger than 50 feet on the face. (All wave-height estimates are just that, estimates. The traditional Hawaiian wave-measurement scale, which is still sometimes used, would report surf size based on half of the height of the wave face, such that surf 50 feet tall on the face would instead be reported as “25-foot Hawaiian.”) Surfers rode conservatively to avoid the dangerous underwater hold-downs and long swims that followed wipeouts. Judges who scored contestants at early big-wave contests, like the prestigious Eddie Aikau Invitational first held at Waimea in 1986, which honored a local surfer and lifeguard who died trying to save others after a sailing accident, encouraged that approach with criteria that rewarded successful completion of ride, meaning surfers scored higher if they avoided falling and rode a wave until it faded.

That all began to change in 1990, when a California carpenter named Jeff Clark invited a few male surfers to join him at a secret spot that he had been surfing alone for 15 years. Known as Maverick’s and hidden in plain sight off a rocky headland on the Northern California coast, that break acquired an ominous reputation in 1994 when a Waimea specialist named Mark Foo fell

on a 30-footer there and drowned. Four years later, as Maverick's became recognized as far superior to Waimea, Clark handpicked 24 male athletes and raised a \$55,000 prize purse from the Quiksilver clothing company for a new big-wave contest called Men Who Ride Mountains.

Not a single woman was known to have surfed Maverick's until 1999, when Sarah Gerhardt, a chemistry doctoral student at the time, [gave it a try](#). Gerhardt recalls being harassed by male surfers in the parking lot at big-wave breaks — “microaggressions, like, ‘Get the hell out of here,’ ” she says. At Maverick's, once Gerhardt paddled away from shore, she found the men who were actually in the water astonished to see a female face — and welcoming, as if anyone willing to confront such risk deserved respect. Clark added Gerhardt to the bottom of his list of alternate competitors for the Men Who Ride Mountains contests for a few years, but Gerhardt was uninterested in competition and considered herself less skilled than the top men, she says, so it did not bother her that she was never actually invited to surf in the contest.

During the 1990s, the elite windsurfer and surfer [Laird Hamilton popularized the use of Jet Skis](#) for towing a standing surfer into gigantic waves at Jaws. That motorized assist allowed Hamilton to reach higher initial velocities than by paddling, and thereby to ride 60- and 70-footers. Surfers everywhere invested in Jet Skis, and the future of the sport appeared forever mechanized.



Surfers, including Bianca Valenti and Paige Alms, at Maverick's. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

Then, in 2011, a Brazilian surfer named Danilo Couto outdid Hamilton by forgoing the Jet Ski and [paddling into a wave with a 50-to-60-foot face at Jaws](#), shattering the big-wave equivalent of

the four-minute mile. The next month, when a surfer named [Shane Dorian got barreled on a huge Jaws wave](#), paddle-in surfing reclaimed the spotlight — but with a move toward inflatable vests and Jet Ski rescues so that surfers could experiment with ever-bigger waves. GoPro cameras and social media also began driving the same increasingly dangerous behavior that they encourage in every extreme sport. Judging criteria for big-wave contests and awards changed accordingly, away from the old conservative ethic and toward a greater emphasis on “commitment” — deliberately seeking the most dangerous path across the tallest part of every wave.

Big waves are rare. There are only about a dozen places on Earth known to get waves over about 25 feet on the face with the right shape for surfing, and those breaks rarely have ideal conditions more than a few times a year. Contest organizers receive permits that allow them to hold only a single one- or two-day event at some unspecified time over a several-month season, then watch weather charts for a wind and swell forecast that merits telling their handpicked invitees all over the world to jump on planes, usually with 48 hours’ notice. Years pass when those conditions never materialize. The scarcity and unpredictability of big waves keep participation low, and the sport remains overwhelmingly male, with perhaps 300 men and two dozen women total, worldwide.

Most big-wave contests over the years have been grass-roots affairs organized by locals who tended to invite their male friends from other big-wave breaks. The World Surf League, a California company that runs almost all surfing contests, holds more formal big-wave contests in Nazaré, Portugal, and at Jaws, but the league excludes women from the Portugal contest and included women at Jaws for the first time only in 2016, with a total purse that was half the prize for men. Over the past two years, though, Valenti and Kennelly, along with two other surfers, Andrea Moller and Paige Alms, have insisted upon the same right to risk their lives in competition that men enjoy, and for equal pay — and they have been more successful than they ever imagined.



Bianca Valenti. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times



Andrea Moller. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times



Paige Alms. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times



Keala Kennelly. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

Like most female surfers of her generation, Valenti grew up unaware that women even rode big waves. She learned to surf at age 7 in Dana Point, Calif., in Orange County. In third grade, she wrote an essay about her dream of becoming a professional and surfing the powerful Banzai Pipeline on the North Shore of Oahu. Valenti excelled in youth contests and, like many girl surfers, idolized Kennelly — a top pro at the time, equaling the best men at displays of fearless aggression and technical mastery in dangerous surf. When Valenti was in her early teens, she signed modest endorsement deals with surfwear companies. She subscribed to every surf

magazine but found them boring because they featured action shots of only boys and men, with girls strictly on the beach in bikinis. Valenti's frustration deepened when she became convinced that her sponsors paid more to girls who looked like models, even if Valenti outsurfed them. When she protested, she lost her endorsement contracts.

Valenti was captain of the surf team at U.C. Santa Barbara and, after graduation, took another shot at going pro. In 2012, she entered a qualifying event for the Women's Championship Tour — a competition of seven contests — in Hawaii at the break she dreamed about as a little girl, the Banzai Pipeline. The waves were unusually big during Valenti's contest, but she rode barrel after barrel and won, beating even Kennelly. Valenti could not afford to travel to more qualifying contests, so she tried to line up new endorsement deals, without luck. "I took a step back, and I was like, 'Well, I love getting barreled, and I love the feeling of big waves, so I'm just going to focus on that,'" she said.

There was not a single women's big-wave contest at the time, much less a women's big-wave tour. By then, Valenti was working at her father's restaurant in Mill Valley, a suburb of San Francisco, and surfing Maverick's for fun. In March 2014, she was invited to the first-ever women's big-wave contest, part of a larger men's event in Oregon at a remote offshore break called Nelscott Reef. Although there was no announced prize purse for women and only six female contestants, Valenti made the 12-hour drive north. When she arrived, she got to know Kennelly, Moller and Alms, who had bonded while traveling to Oregon from Hawaii.

Kennelly grew up in a small town on Kauai, where her father and brother were surfers and Hamilton, a family friend, was her godfather. Kennelly's childhood friends included Andy Irons, a three-time world champion, and she absorbed the local veneration for "charging" — fiercely attacking the most frightening waves. Kennelly joined the Women's Championship Tour at age 16 and was almost unbeatable in contests [at powerful breaks like Teahupoo](#) (pronounced "Chopoo") in Tahiti, where South Pacific groundswell hits shallow coral with even more violence than at the Banzai Pipeline, and where a young Tahitian man died in 2000 after he broke his back and neck.

Kennelly, like a hybrid of fighter pilot and treader, excelled at [threading a safe path through Teahupoo's terrifying barrel](#). That feat requires so many instantaneous adjustments to surfboard and body angle that the conscious mind must remove itself from the decision loop and allow sensory data to find direct pathways from intuition to reflex — inducing what Diane Ackerman, in her book "Deep Play," describes as a core pursuit of extreme sports and shamanic practices, the rapture and ecstasy that come when "consciousness vanishes like the gorgeous fever it is, and you feel free of all mind-body constraints."

Kennelly ranked in the top 10 on the Women's Championship Tour from 2000 to 2006 and came close to becoming overall world champion in 2003. She attracted lucrative sponsorships, but she grew frustrated with the Association of Surfing Professionals (which became the World Surf League in 2015) for its practice of paying women less than men at every contest worldwide. Kennelly also suffered from the industry's hypersexualization of female pros, including pressure to present herself as heterosexual — she identifies as a lesbian — and sexual harassment by

surfwear-company employees who managed sponsored athletes. “Creepy team managers,” she calls them, “trying to creep on you, and I’m, like, *not* into it.”

In 2006, the Association of Surfing Professionals stopped holding women’s contests at Teahupoo, citing safety concerns — while continuing to let men compete there. Kennelly was furious. Without the extra tour points that she typically earned at Teahupoo, she saw no path to becoming world champion and, in 2007, left the tour. Male pros, particularly those specializing in big waves, made a living outside the championship tour as so-called free surfers — earning their keep with sponsors by appearing in photos and videos of intimidating surf. Kennelly gave that a try and also stopped hiding the fact that she was gay — the first professional surfer to do so. Three of Kennelly’s four sponsors abandoned her. The economy was tanking at the time, but Kennelly assumed coming out didn’t help.

“It’s like, ‘You don’t have to have sex with me to keep your job, but you have to make me want to have sex with you,’ ” she says, recalling the message she received as a sponsored female surfer, “ ‘and it’s fun seeing you in a bikini, but it’s not fun seeing you charge giant waves.’ ”

In 2011, Kennelly was in Tahiti when a gigantic swell forced officials to declare a “code red” emergency, banning boats from the water and delaying a men’s contest. Kennelly joined a small cohort of surfers who set out on Jet Skis anyway to experience Teahupoo as a proper big-wave break, with barrels the size of the Holland Tunnel — if the Holland Tunnel morphed and whirled like the vortex eye of a crystalline-blue tornado that happened to be spinning within a few feet of hard, razor-sharp coral. Kennelly surfed flawlessly. She described experiences like that [during a 2013 TED Talk](#): “Time slows down. Some of your senses — like smell, taste and sound — fade away, while others are so incredibly heightened you feel like you have superhuman powers. Your sight has pinpoint precision focus, and your sense of touch is so amplified you can feel every drop of water on that wave.”

Two days later, when the waves got much smaller, Kennelly fell into the reef head first. Rushed to a hospital, [she underwent emergency facial-reconstruction surgery](#). The following morning, discharged onto a Tahiti street with a bandaged head, Kennelly realized that nobody was coming to meet her. Reps from her one remaining sponsor were in town, she says, hosting male pros at a luxury hotel. “The sales reps just fanboy out on those guys and get them whatever they want, and I don’t do anything for them,” Kennelly told me. “All watching me surf does for them is make their balls shrink.”

Andrea Moller, 39, is one of the most decorated water athletes in Hawaiian history, with dozens of records and race victories in windsurfing, outrigger-canoeing and stand-up paddleboarding in addition to big-wave surfing. She grew up on a Brazilian island where her father owned a marina and taught her to windsurf. In 1998, Moller moved to Maui for college and took up surfing. When she gave birth to a girl five years later, she named her Keala, after Kennelly, whose career Moller followed.

Jaws was near Moller’s home on Maui, so when Hamilton and other men began tow-surfing there, Moller asked some of them to take her along. They were rarely willing. In 2004, Moller and Maria Souza, Hamilton’s ex-wife, who also had a small child, pooled money to buy a used

Jet Ski. They taught themselves field repairs like changing spark plugs, then motored out to Jaws. They found men convinced that women did not belong there. “They were like, ‘It’s too dangerous,’ ” Moller recalls. “ ‘You’re going to die. What are you doing here?’ It was a very big barrier. But I wanted to have the fun they were having.”

Moller soon towed into a 60-plus-footer, bigger than anything ever ridden by all but a handful of men. Standing on her surfboard at the top of that wave, she says, looking down over the immense ramp of water below, “You know you have a long ways to travel to make it out of the danger zone, so it’s almost a moment of silence because it’s just you and this huge volume of water and this pat-pat-pat of your board on the surface.” Once she made the drop and turned up into the wave’s wall, Moller says, “You’re in this silent glass world of water, and you’re in so much risk, and yet you’re so driven that it almost feels like there’s a pause.” She recalls the wave growing bigger as she rode along, until it blocked out the rising sun and seemed as if it might keep growing forever. That vision never left her. “That’s the wave of your life,” she says, “the wave that, years later, you can still can go back to.”

In 2008, Moller returned to school to become a paramedic, [but she continued chasing big surf](#). Eventually, after Couto had broken the 50-foot paddle-in barrier at Jaws, Moller went out and started paddling into the spot’s big waves. In 2016, a wave hit Moller so hard that it ripped her hamstring muscle off the bone. Unable to walk for months, she depended on her 12-year-old daughter for help bathing. Still, Moller recovered and didn’t stop surfing big waves. “I think it defines me, who I am,” she says. “Like, when I got hurt, I wondered: Could I just settle down and make a garden, focus on projects at home? Unfortunately, when I do that in my life, I feel incomplete.”

Paige Alms, who is 30, grew up on Maui and started surfing at 10. She aspired to ride big barrels like Kennelly and recalls running to a local surf shop whenever Kennelly was there signing autographs. A Maui surfboard shaper mentored Alms from the ages of 13 to 16 and pushed her into 25-foot waves. Alms’s male peers took it for granted that she would join them at Jaws. She first tow-surfed there at 17, and she started paddle-surfing around the same time Moller did.

The contest in 2014 at Nelscott Reef in Oregon was the first time that Alms, Moller, Kennelly and Valenti surfed together. That morning, they pulled on thick wet suits under frigid blue skies. Jet Skis carried them out to the reef, where 30-foot surf broke in long, even walls. All four women were thrilled by the experience of riding big surf without men; Kennelly, in particular, found the abundance of available giant waves almost dangerously liberating. As she put it, “I’m like, ‘I can take any of these?’ When you have just a couple other chicks and you’re used to 50 hungry guys, it’s so hard not to overstroke it.”

They were together again in Maui last January, the day after Valenti and [Kennelly surfed at Jaws](#). Alms hadn’t joined them in the water because she didn’t like the conditions, and Moller sat out with a knee injury sustained while practicing Brazilian jujitsu. The four women drank coffee on comfortable couches in the cluttered living room of the house that Alms, who repaired surfboards and worked at a fish restaurant, shared with her boyfriend on the green slopes of Maui’s biggest volcano, Haleakala. One wall of that room held a framed photograph of Alms’s proudest moment as a surfer: when she became, in 2016, the first and still only woman to get

barreled at Jaws. It was set above the actual surfboard she rode — a surfer’s equivalent of a mounted rhino’s head and the rifle that fired the fatal bullet.

Much of their talk was about male pros who make enough to buy last-minute intercontinental plane tickets many times a year to big-wave breaks, then charter boats with catered lunches and pay still other men with Jet Skis to pull them out of danger after wipeouts. Valenti heard a South African pro mention that a spreadsheet helps him keep track of all the surfboards and safety vests he has stashed in storage lockers around the world. “That’s how I’ll know when I’ve succeeded,” Valenti said, “when I’ve got my own spreadsheet!”

All that practice and travel, plus all those big-wave contests open only to men, help men improve and also accumulate the currency of big-wave success — photos and videos that please sponsors, win awards and earn invitations to more contests. Kennelly, at the peak of her powers, was making ends meet by working full time as a bartender and disc jockey known as D.J.K.K. Every woman in Alms’s living room dreamed of having the financial freedom to surf big waves full time.

One morning last winter, at the pastel rowhouse that Valenti shares near the beach in San Francisco, she sat on a chair in her garage among wall racks cluttered with surfboards. Valenti told me that she became an activist at the urging of a filmmaker named Dayla Soul, who was making a documentary about female big-wave surfers in the Bay Area. After shooting video of the 2014 Oregon contest, Soul told Valenti that women deserved the right to compete at Maverick’s, too. Soul then tipped off Valenti that a call-in radio show planned to interview Jeff Clark, the man who first organized the contest at Maverick’s, along with Griffin Guess, founder of the company Cartel Management, which was promoting the event.

On June 17, 2014, Valenti listened as the radio host asked Clark about female surfers. Like all big-wave contests, the one at Maverick’s was strictly invitational. Because the contest could last only one day, it accommodated only 24 athletes. They were chosen by a small committee of men that included Clark. On the radio, Guess explained that for women to qualify, they would have to rank in the top 24 and compete with men — an approach to athletic competition that is virtually unheard-of, including in all other surfing contests. Clark added that he was open to an “expression session,” a less prestigious exhibition, if enough women surfed Maverick’s on noncontest days to prove their abilities.

Valenti knew Clark had seen her surf Maverick’s and that he had seen footage of the women’s event in Oregon. So she called in to the show and asked what else it would take for Cartel to invite them. “It’s on you now,” Clark replied. “You need to get that group of women to come and surf.” Clark says now that he was thinking mostly about safety; a second male Hawaiian surfer, Sion Milosky, drowned at Maverick’s in 2011. At the time of Valenti’s call, many men were also arguing about whether big waves were too dangerous for women, after a 2013 incident in Portugal. A male surfer named Carlos Burle towed a female surfer named Maya Gabeira into an 80-footer there, one of the largest waves ever caught at the time. Gabeira’s board hit a bump, and she wiped out. She was driven underwater and buried in the waves. Burle found her floating face down, unresponsive and not breathing, her ankle broken. [He revived her with C.P.R.](#)

CNN sought comment from Hamilton about Gabeira. “She should not be in this kind of surf,” Hamilton said. “It’s Carlos’s responsibility to take care of her, and he’s just lucky that she didn’t drown.” Chas Smith, a founder of the popular online surf tabloid BeachGrit, told me that other male big-wave surfers complained about women at the time. “They said, ‘These women are dangers to themselves and to us, because they drown, and then we drown trying to save them.’”

To prove that women could handle themselves just fine, a female tech entrepreneur named Nico Sell wanted to finance a women’s contest at Maverick’s. When she discovered that Clark had an exclusive contest permit, she invited more than a dozen women, including Kennelly, Moller and Alms, to travel there and surf together in December 2014 on a noncontest day. It was the largest-ever gathering of women in big waves.

Still, when Cartel sought permits for its next contest, it made no provision for women. Any contest at Maverick’s must have permits from numerous government agencies. Most are rubber-stamp affairs, and Cartel was finalizing a five-year exclusive permit from the San Mateo County Harbor District.



In 2016, Alms became the first and still only woman to get “barreled” at the Hawaiian big-wave break known as Jaws — the ne plus ultra of the sport, when a surfer rides in the tunnel formed by a wave. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

In November 2015, Clark attended a meeting of the California Coastal Commission seeking a permit from that agency too. During the public comment period at the meeting, a woman named Sabrina Brennan stood up to speak. Brennan’s wife was a surfer, and Brennan also happened to

be a commissioner with the San Mateo County Harbor District. Frustrated with her own agency for granting Cartel an exclusive permit, Brennan told the coastal commission that if it was going to grant Cartel exclusivity, it should also require the company to invite women. She gave a PowerPoint presentation explaining that the nature of these permits, combined with Cartel's failure to invite women, effectively barred female surfers from competing at Maverick's. Clark insisted that women were excluded only because they did not surf well enough — or, as he put it, they did not start their rides at Maverick's in what he called "the bowl," the biggest and most dangerous part of the wave. Valenti points out that Foo and Milosky each died taking off on the bowl, other men have had eardrums blown out and plenty of top men avoid it. The coastal commission granted Cartel an exclusive one-year permit but made renewal dependent upon a comprehensive plan for including women in the future.

One day several months after the meeting, Valenti was standing outside a surf shop Clark owns when Clark sped up in his truck, hit the brakes and jumped out. He was livid, Valenti says. "Eyes bulging out, coming straight at me, he went into like a 10-minute scream-fest." Clark told me that he was upset because Valenti once said, in huge surf at Maverick's, that she did not feel ready for the waves that day, and then she went on the radio claiming that she *was* ready. (Valenti says she doesn't remember ever saying this.)

Valenti felt hostility from other local male surfers, too, perhaps because they resented her demand for inclusion in a contest that excluded them. Merely surfing a break like Maverick's has the power to transform a person into a big-wave surfer, an exalted status that money can't buy. An invitation to a contest brings still greater respect. With room for only 24 surfers in a contest that took place once a year at most, inviting women inevitably meant inviting fewer men. Demanding that Cartel invite women also threatened the control that Clark held over an immensely valuable social commodity.

Gabeira's tow-partner, Burle, saw something else at work. Growing up poor in Brazil and told all his life that he was foolish to dream of pro surfing, he identified with women who resisted efforts to define what they could and could not achieve. The persistence of those male efforts, in Burle's view, had to do with big-wave surfing's role as a proving ground where men strive to establish manhood. "If you're proving yourself stronger than other men and then comes a woman and starts to do whatever you're doing," Burle told me, "maybe that's diminishing your achievement."

Dayla Soul watched the live webcast of the November 2015 coastal commission meeting and was thrilled by Brennan's presentation. Two days later, Soul met Brennan in California. Soul, who is transgender, and Brennan each had decades of experience in L.G.B.T. political activism. Soul introduced Valenti to Brennan, who encouraged her to organize an advocacy group. Valenti then reached out to Kennelly, Moller and Alms while Brennan enlisted yet another ally, Karen Tynan, a labor lawyer who offered to help pro bono. In February 2016, Tynan joined Valenti, Brennan and others in a visit to the coastal commission's offices in San Francisco, where Tynan pointed out that the California Coastal Act of 1976 forbids discrimination in all use of public resources. Commission staff members were sympathetic and encouraged Valenti to make their case for a nondiscriminatory Maverick's contest.

Brennan, with the help of Valenti and the other surfers, worked out contest details during the spring and summer of 2016. In September, the six women formed the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing. Cartel, meanwhile, submitted a written application for a four-year extension of its exclusive permit from the coastal commission. The company also posted a list on Instagram that same month of 56 prospective invitees for 2016-17, including four women: Alms, Moller, Gabeira and Emily Erickson, the daughter of Roger Erickson, a famous big-wave surfer in the 1970s, but neither Kennelly nor Valenti. Nine days later, Cartel posted a shorter list with every woman's name gone.

In November 2016, the coastal commission held its permitting meeting at the Oceano Hotel at Pillar Harbor, next to Maverick's. Optimism electrified the room as it filled with female surfers from around California who had come to support the women's big-wave cause. By that point, Cartel had amended its permit application to include a women's heat at Maverick's, albeit with only six athletes and a prize purse far smaller than that for men. Brennan stepped to the lectern and listed the main demands of the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing: at least 12 female athletes and six alternates invited to compete; one woman on the athlete-selection committee chosen by female surfers; and the same cash prizes for the men and the women.



Bianca Valenti surfing at Maverick's in December.

Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

A parade of women followed Brennan to the microphone. Jennifer Savage, California policy manager for the Surfrider Foundation, a nonprofit that advocates conservation of the coastal and marine environment, said that teaching her children to surf had been a highlight of her life as a mother. Savage urged commissioners to recognize the culture-changing power of women in giant surf. “My younger daughter has continued to push herself into bigger and bigger waves in Santa Cruz, and my son takes for granted that women can charge because he learned to surf in the shadow of his sisters,” she said.

The next woman to the lectern was Delia Bense-Kang, who had driven seven hours from near the Oregon border to speak, as she put it, “on behalf of the neighboring surf community of Humboldt County and as part of the greater women’s surf movement.” Bense-Kang said that she grew up “where the waves are big, the water is cold and we wear wet suits instead of bikinis.” As a young girl learning to surf big waves in cold water, Bense-Kang struggled to find female pro surfers to idolize. “Today that has changed,” she said. “There is now a tribe of women big-wave surfers who have dedicated their lives to surfing big waves and want to showcase their talent.” She continued: “We need to show this next generation of girls and boys that all of us are equal and have equal opportunities.”

Mira Manickam-Shirley, the co-founder of a community organization called Brown Girl Surf, which is based in Oakland and dedicated to connecting girls and women of color to the ocean and surfing, addressed the audience. “Bianca Valenti is literally their hero,” she said of the girls in her program.

The coastal commission voted to approve only a one-year extension, with renewal again contingent on still greater inclusion of women. Commissioner Martha McClure evoked Mount Everest — women were once told they did not belong there either. Then Cartel finalized its list of six female invitees: Alms, Moller, Kennelly, Gerhardt, Erickson and Jamilah Star, a veteran big-wave surfer living in Hawaii. Valenti, the only active female Maverick’s regular and the winner of the only women’s big-wave contest in the previous five years, was iced out. She kept her composure until she was alone in her car, driving home. Then she began to weep. When I told Clark recently that Valenti felt as if somebody was sending her a message, he replied: “She was not crazy to read meaning in that.”

The World Surf League, a California-based company that runs more than 180 contests around the world, justified paying female athletes less than men by using a “pay parity” formula for calculating contest prize purses that adds the same fixed amount to the pot for every athlete, male or female. But the league invited far fewer women than men to nearly all contests, so purses — and therefore prizes — remained grossly unequal. Nonetheless, the World Surf League has taken some steps toward greater equity in recent years, like increasing the overall number of women’s contests. In November 2016, it held the first-ever women’s division in the big-wave contest at Jaws, though with a far smaller first-place prize than for men. That day, high winds made for such dangerous conditions that Kennelly and Erickson each had knees torn apart in falls. Valenti caught a big one and was blown straight upward by the wind, right into the lip for a punishing wipeout. The Inertia, a popular adventure-sports website, ran an opinion piece by a male surf journalist named J.P. Currie, who called the contest an “abject failure” and wrote: “I don’t see women achieving equality. I see women striving for masculinity.”

Still, Alms displayed a perfect balance of caution and aggression by catching a 40-footer before it became too steep. Hopping into a stable crouch, she drew a clean line down the face and turned hard onto that big wall, flying along with controlled confidence until the wave faded. Alms did the same on a 50-footer to win the contest, and suddenly the World Surf League was in the business of crowning a women's big-wave world champion.

Two months later, Cartel Management, which had been struggling financially, filed for bankruptcy; the World Surf League bought Cartel's Maverick's harbor-district permit for \$525,000 and sought a single-season permit from the coastal commission with the same offer that Cartel had made: six athletes and a smaller prize purse. The commission agreed to only a one-year nonexclusive permit, yet again demanding greater inclusion of women in the future. Weather conditions never allowed for a Maverick's contest during the 2017-18 season, but the World Surf League's second women's contest at Jaws, in October 2017, was a success. Valenti, Alms, Kennelly and Moller all rode 30-to-40-footers, and Alms won again. But the surf media largely ignored the event, as if success were less interesting than failure. Last summer, Valenti won the first women's big-wave event in Latin America, at Puerto Escondido in Mexico, and received \$1,750; the male winner received \$7,000.



Kennelly (left) and Alms. A decade younger than Kennelly, Alms looked up to her and recalls running to a local surf shop whenever Kennelly was there signing autographs. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

In July, the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing effectively declared war against the World Surf League, sending a letter to the coastal commission arguing that the league was in

violation of state civil rights law, not just at Maverick's but, as a California-based company, in all operations worldwide. (The league denies that it has done anything illegal.) Later that month, Sophie Goldschmidt, chief executive of the World Surf League, met with Brennan, Tynan, Valenti and others at a hotel near the San Francisco airport. Brennan focused on Maverick's, demanding the inclusion of 10 female athletes with equal pay and noting that this would cost the World Surf League less than \$35,000, in a contest for which it had spent half a million for one permit.

According to Brennan, Tynan and Valenti, Goldschmidt accused them of exploiting the #MeToo movement and used the words "poor performance" to describe women's big-wave surfing. They also recall Goldschmidt's declaring equal pay out of the question, threatening to cancel Maverick's and saying that if the World Surf League paid equally there, the league would have to pay equally everywhere. When I asked Goldschmidt over the phone about this meeting, she said it was private and that it would be inappropriate to comment. Later, the World Surf League, on her behalf, denied that she made comments about poor performance and #MeToo.

Valenti left the meeting despondent. Brennan contacted Elliott Almond, a reporter with the Bay Area News Group, and told him that the World Surf League was resisting pressure to pay women equally at Maverick's. Brennan provided Almond with emails from the World Surf League threatening to cut off communication with the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing over the issue. Almond's article, published in The San Jose Mercury News on Aug. 1, 2018, caught the attention of Jennifer Lucchesi, an executive director of the California State Lands Commission, an agency that controls the narrow strip of coast between the median high- and low-tide lines — and also requires permits to hold surf contests. Lucchesi, who is a competitive open-water swimmer, told Brennan by phone that the lands commission had three commissioners, including State Controller Betty Yee, who Brennan knew had a history of fighting for pay equity. Also on the committee was Gavin Newsom, then lieutenant governor and running for governor, whom Brennan believed she could get on board. Lucchesi's staff was already processing an application from the World Surf League to lease 1,000 acres of tidelands at Maverick's for the contest, and Lucchesi and her staff eventually asked Brennan to suggest terms.

By coincidence, on Aug. 20, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a bill that made surfing the official sport of California. "A lot of people thought it was comedic, and a joke," Yee told me, "but it got me thinking: How do we elevate the state sport to make it truly representative of California?" The answer came when Lucchesi posted to the lands commission's website a staff report that characterized the inclusion of — and equal pay for — women at Maverick's as central to the larger project of promoting fair treatment of people of "all races, cultures, national origins, genders, gender identities, gender expressions, religions, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status." The report's thesis read like the motto of a newly independent Republic of California: "The waves do not discriminate."

"In every way," Newsom told me via email in November, after beating the Republican candidate, John Cox, to become governor of California, "this decision aligned with the values that California stands to defend at a time when gender equity is being attacked nationwide."

The World Surf League, in negotiations with the lands commission staff, asked if it would be acceptable if there were a little more money for that year's contest in exchange for equality at some point in the future. The Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing didn't want that: Unequal was unequal. Days passed. Valenti pleaded with other surfers for public statements of support. "Male competitors were coming at us," Valenti recalls, "like, 'You girls are pushing too hard, you should be thankful just to be invited, and just shut up.'" Online commenters on surfing websites seethed:

"Greedy BS from the women ... nothing short of dangerous for any and all sports ..."

"Paige Alms, Keala Kennelly, Andrea Moller and Bianca Valenti should be ashamed."

"Awful Hegelian 'feminism' strikes surfing now."

"Next comes affirmative action to make sure there is an appropriate numbers of minorities."



From left: Kennelly, Moller, Valenti and Alms, after Kennelly won the 2018 Women's Jaws Challenge. Dina Litovsky/Redux, for The New York Times

On Sept. 5, Valenti read an email from a professional surf photographer accusing the committee of jeopardizing the very survival of big-wave competition and imploring it to stop. Valenti was so depressed that she lay down for a nap. She awoke to a series of unexpected text messages: Goldschmidt had announced that the World Surf League would become the first global United

States-based sports league ever to offer equal prize money for men and women across all events in all disciplines worldwide.

Filmy clouds blanketed the sky pale gray on Oct. 26, when Valenti joined Kennelly, Moller, Brennan and Tynan on the beach at Maverick's for the opening ceremony of what they hoped would be the first women's contest there — not the contest itself, just the beginning of the five-month waiting period, which runs through March. Gerhardt drove up from nearby Santa Cruz, and other female competitors traveled to the break. With a dozen or so male invitees including Jeff Clark himself, the surfers all paddled out on surfboards to form a floating circle, holding hands for prayers and thanks. Later, Valenti and others stopped for a beer at the nearby home of Nico Sell, the tech entrepreneur. Brennan and Tynan sat at Sell's table, with a view of Maverick's, talking about the peculiar setting Goldschmidt had chosen for her official announcement of equity — an artificial wave pool in central California, with a crowd of small-wave pros, as if to avoid even the slightest association with the women who fought for change.

“We've been pushing for equality for a while; this isn't a sudden decision,” Goldschmidt said in that news conference. “This has been something that we've been working on for years.” I asked Goldschmidt what role the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing played in pushing the World Surf League toward equal access and pay. Goldschmidt said that the committee had a strong opinion but that the World Surf League consulted many groups and individuals. I pressed her to name one, but she declined. Governor Newsom had no such reservations. In an email referring to the Committee for Equity in Women's Surfing, he said: “I applaud the courage of the athletes and activists who fought for this victory, and I am hopeful that this will inspire the next generation — of daring athletes and activists with the audacity to challenge the status quo.”

The first surf contest to offer equal cash prizes for men and women ended up taking place at Jaws this past November. Before dawn that day, in a misty downpour, 50-foot waves broke with exceptional power, and forecasters called for waves to reach a terrifying 80 feet. Even male big-wave surfers, watching from the cliff, worried that conditions might become unacceptably dangerous. An argument had also been raging in big-wave circles about whether World Surf League judging criteria — for contests and the annual Big Wave Awards — were encouraging surfing that was too risky. Grant Washburn, who sits on the athlete-selection committee for the Maverick's contest, called the constant emphasis on “commitment,” combined with cash prizes, akin to “dangling a carrot over a volcano” — championing what amounted to suicidal BASE jumps in pursuit of money and glory.

Valenti and Moller told me they were more concerned about their responsibility to prove that women could surf big waves with the same bravery and skill as men, even if that meant mortal risk. Still, for safety and performance reasons, they asked the World Surf League to run the women's division at the Jaws contest first thing that morning, before the waves became impossibly massive. Alms and Moller competed in the first heat with a French surfer named Justine DuPont, who suffered a badly dislocated shoulder and knee on her second wave, and a young Brazilian named Raquel Heckert, who works as a cashier and cares for the elderly on Oahu, and had an inflatable vest only because a Brazilian rock band bought one for her. Kennelly and Valenti competed in the second heat against Erickson and Isabelle Leonhardt, a Mexican dentist who had been fixing teeth in the city of Manzanillo when she received a last-minute

invitation, sent her mother on a three-hour round-trip bus to collect her inflatable vest and then took a bus five hours to catch a red-eye to Houston for a connecting flight to Maui.

Erickson stuck to the old traditionalist approach, taking off where she knew she could make the drop, gliding beautifully across big walls to safety. Valenti played a more contemporary game, catching a 50-footer at its biggest and steepest spot. She made the initial airdrop only to have her board lurch sideways and throw her off. Driven to the ocean floor and rescued by a Jet Ski driver, Valenti found herself on a boat with no memory of how she got there.

Moments later, still badly dazed, Valenti paddled into the final heat with Kennelly, Alms, Moller and Erickson, but she concluded she had a concussion and did not compete. The swell began to build, as 60-foot waves roared like jet engines and broke with enough power to splinter wooden ships — easily the biggest and most dangerous surf ever faced by women in a contest. Erickson stuck to her old-school ways while Alms launched herself off the top of a monster only to have wind blow her board out from under her and send her on a 30-foot plummet through space. Kennelly, embodying the contemporary death-or-glory approach as much as any 20-something man, charged repeatedly into the scariest parts of the scariest waves and wiped out on every single one, thrilling World Surf League announcers who applauded what one of them called “the warrior in Keala Kennelly, who has obviously been the most committed woman throughout this competition.” She won the day.

During an awards ceremony the next evening at a restaurant and bar called Charley’s, Kennelly looked exhausted but ebullient — about her win and also a new and unexpected honor. She had just become the first female invitee in the decades-long history of the Eddie Aikau Invitational at Waimea Bay, for the 2018-19 season.

As a group of young surfer girls had their pictures taken with Kennelly, I recalled a speech she gave in 2016 at the Grove Theater in Anaheim, Calif., during the annual Big Wave Awards. One of Kennelly’s Teahupoo barrels had won Barrel of the Year in a so-called open category that includes men, marking the first time a female surfer had ever won. Onstage that night behind a black lectern that made her seem tiny, Kennelly leaned into a microphone. “When I was a little girl, I didn’t really want to be a little girl,” she said. “Because when I was a little girl, I kept getting told, ‘You can’t do that because you’re a girl.’” She rattled off a litany: “‘Women can’t surf.’ ‘O.K., women can surf, but women can’t get barreled.’ ‘Women can’t surf big waves.’” Visibly moved, she continued. “So, who I really, really want to thank is everybody in my life that told me, ‘You can’t do that because you’re a woman.’ Because that drove me to dedicate my life to proving you wrong, and it’s been so damn fun.” Finally, Kennelly confessed that even she never thought a woman could win a men’s big-wave award and thanked everyone “for sharing this moment with me right now, when the impossible became the possible,” she said, “because I have never been so proud in my life to be a woman.”

Daniel Duane is the author of the surfing memoir “Caught Inside: A Surfer’s Year on the California Coast.”