

PRESS RELEASE



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Surf's Up in Newquay

A typical summer seaside scene; ice-cold Atlantic Ocean, blue skies, surf dudes doing their thing. Just another day in paradise for wave-lovers at the UK's surfing hotspot, Fistral Beach in Newquay.

But these are surfers with a difference. They all have a disability, some of them profound. And they are experiencing the joy and freedom of the waves thanks to a pioneering course launched this summer by Mark Hill, in conjunction with Sports Leaders UK.

Mark, the founder of the remarkable Freedom Surf project based in Cornwall, decided to use Sports Leaders UK as the basis of his course after witnessing firsthand the powerful effect that surfing and leadership training can have when combined.

"I have been teaching disabled people to surf for many years now," said the 36-year-old, who runs Freedom Surf as a non-profit organisation.

"I have taught soldiers who have had their legs blown off, people with cerebral palsy, those suffering from depression as well as wayward youngsters, and the effect is almost always the same; the moment they get in the water, that fear and anger dissolves. It's like watching them wake up after a bad dream." Local councils and other organisations are so impressed with the positive results; they want to know more about Mark's scheme and how it may help them.

"A morning in the waves is enough to take the aggression out of anyone!" he jokes. "That's one of the reasons it's been so successful with disadvantaged youngsters. They come here full of rage for any number of reasons, but once they come back out of the water they tell me they feel truly alive and refreshed. To be honest, the reward and inspiration I get from seeing these people - most of whom I now call my friends - is what keeps me going."

Some 20 youngsters formed the mainstay of this summer's Sports Leaders UK course, which was designed to lead them to the Sports Leaders UK Level 1 Award in Sports Leadership at the end of a week's training and practice.

Although some of the participants are severely disabled, Mark has designed and secured funding to build surfboards specifically to accommodate them - and the waves have proven to be a great leveller between the disabled and their more able-bodied colleagues.

"If you get wiped out, you get wiped out, disabled or not!" said Mark, "So before long disabled surfers lose the inhibitions and self-consciousness they may have on land. When they come out grinning, you know you've helped them, even if it's in a small way."

Mark says that seeing the resilience and spirit of his trainees has stopped him on more than one occasion from moaning and groaning about his everyday problems. Although it must be daunting for the candidates to consider leaping into the unruly ocean, their determination is truly impressive. "At first some of them were nervous naturally, but once you give them the reassurance they need and they get a taste of the exhilaration when they're flying along on the board, there's no holding them back."

Mark has found that the leadership skills taught by Sports Leaders UK are an ideal fit with his aim of getting candidates to feel confident in the water - and able to start communicating that to others. And most satisfying of all, by the end of their training week, the disabled members of the group were competent enough in their abilities to begin offering tips to younger would-be surfers.

"That was an incredible moment for me, actually," he says. "I sat back in the water watching these people who until last week hadn't dreamed of being on a surfboard, and they were training other disabled people about how to do the same thing. It was mind blowing."

The course was such a resounding success that more are in the offing, with several organisations interested in participating - not least, local detention institutions who have seen the positive mental effects that surfing can have on inmates. A large percentage of the candidates Mark has taught have come straight back and offered to work for Freedom Surf, meaning he now has a good base of volunteers who can help others.

"They are so keen they are waiting impatiently for me with their wetsuits on when I arrive at the beach," laughs Mark. "I'm hopeful we can secure some funding in the near future to be able to pay them something to get involved. Freedom Surf has proved a great success, and I'm privileged to work with such inspirational people and at the same time do something I truly love."

To find out more about Freedom Surf, email Mark at freedom.surf@hotmail.com

Note to editors:

Sports Leaders UK is a charity delivering sports leadership awards and qualifications to 200,000 people a year, through 4,000 schools, colleges, local authorities, prisons and young offender units. It acts as an Awarding Body providing nationally recognised qualifications and has a Foundation that delivers free or subsidised courses in areas of greatest need.

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