

# SHARK ATTACK SURVIVOR

A devastating shark attack cost young surfer Bethany Hamilton her arm—but not her determination to become a world champion. **BY KRISTIN LEWIS**

**H**alloween 2003. It was a gorgeous morning on the north shore of Kauai, Hawaii. The sun was starting to rise, lighting up the horizon in brilliant pinks and purples. Out on the open sea, Bethany Hamilton was in her own personal version of heaven: on her surfboard, waiting for a wave.

She was only 13 years old, but already Bethany was one of Hawaii's most promising young surfers. From the first time she stood on a board at age 5, the feeling of riding waves brought her an indescribable thrill. Her talent was unmistakable. She was winning major amateur surf contests by her 10th birthday. Only the most elite, most dedicated surfers make it to the professional level. Few doubted that Bethany would get there one day.

Just moments later, however, Bethany's life would change forever.

As Bethany floated happily on her board, a 15-foot tiger shark, one of the deadliest predators in the ocean, was stalking her. Her arm dangled in the water; perhaps the metallic glint of her watch attracted the shark. She did not see the shark



**✓ CHECK IT OUT**  
AS YOU READ, LOOK FOR:

**Character Trait: Resilience**

Resilience is the ability to recover from a major setback. In this article, Bethany Hamilton shows incredible resilience. As you read, look for examples of this character trait.



approach. She did not see its rolled-back eyes or hideous jagged teeth as it sprang from the water. She didn't even feel pain when it clamped down on her arm. All she felt was pressure and a tugging sensation. It took only a few seconds for the shark to sever her arm in one gruesome bite.

Instantly, the water around her darkened with blood. A chunk of her board was missing. With a strange calmness, Bethany stared at the stump on her shoulder where her arm used to be.

### "I JUST GOT ATTACKED!"

Bethany called out to her best friend Alana, who was surfing a few yards away. Alana's dad Holt was with them too, as was Alana's brother, Byron. "I just got attacked by a shark!" Bethany shouted.

Bethany remained in a state of dazed composure as the others fought panic and took control. With lightning speed, they pushed toward her through the waves. Holt reached her first. At the sight of her mangled shoulder, Holt's heart pounded with fear—but he did not let his shock slow him down. He knew that with wounds like this, a victim can bleed to death in minutes. He had to slow the bleeding or Bethany wouldn't make it.

Gripping the back of her board, Holt pushed Bethany to a reef, where the water was shallow enough to stand. He yanked off one of his reef guards—sleeves designed to protect skin from sharp coral—and tied it tightly around the bleeding stump. To



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**1:** Bethany recovers in the hospital. **2:** Bethany shares her story on dozens of TV shows. **3:** She wins a Teen Choice Award in 2004 for courage. **4:** Bethany works with other amputees, teaching them to surf and building their confidence.

his relief, this seemed to help. In the meantime, Byron reached the shore and raced up the sand to call 911.

It took an agonizing 15 minutes for Holt to pull Bethany to the beach. She remembers shivering violently and being seized with fear.

A chilling thought settled in her mind: *I could die.*

### "NOW WHAT?"

What happened next was a blur. Bethany recalls being laid on the sand. Bystanders rushed to help, covering her with towels. She winced as Holt removed the bandage and tied off the stump with a surf leash, which is like surgical tubing. Someone produced a first-aid kit and wrapped the wound with gauze. The bite had caused the arteries in her arm to tighten, so the wound wasn't spewing blood. Still, even with the leash tightly bound, she was bleeding badly. Time was running out.

After what seemed like an eternity, the ambulance finally arrived at the remote beach. Drifting in and out of consciousness, Bethany listened to the siren's shrill wail and longed deeply for her mother. She didn't know that her family had already been alerted, and that her mom was trailing behind the ambulance, trying desperately to stay strong for her.

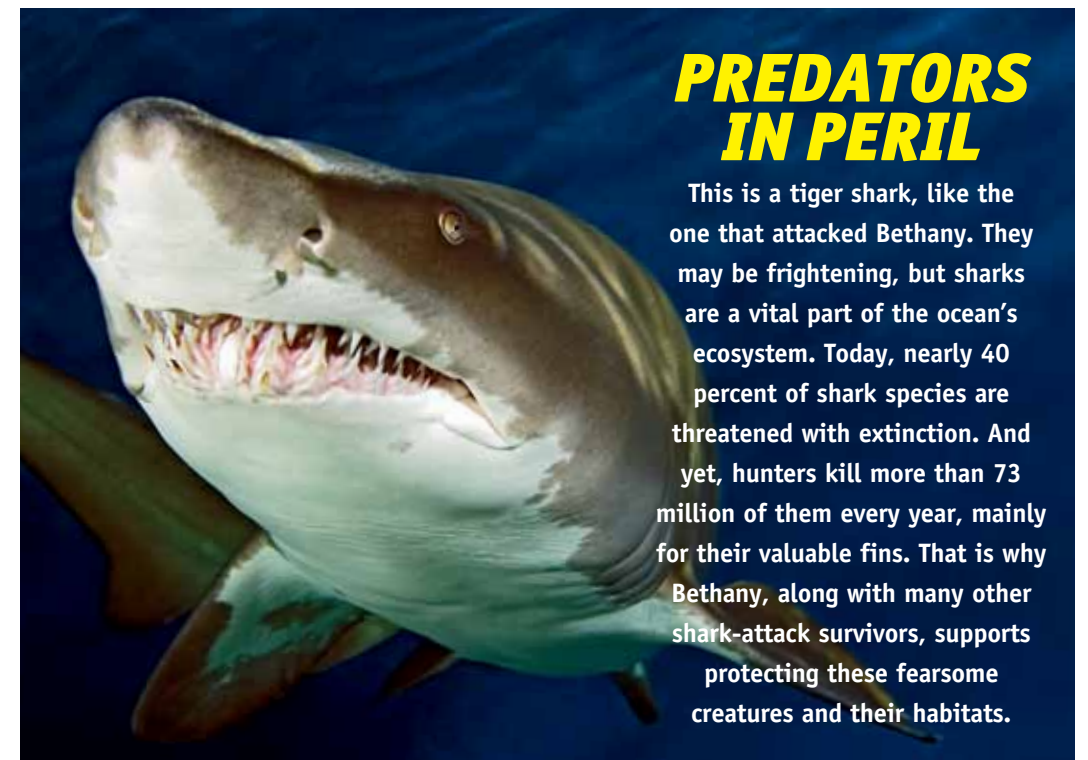
By the time she reached the emergency room, Bethany had lost more than half of her body's blood. As her shocked parents and two brothers held vigil in the waiting room, the doctors went to work. First they cleaned the wound; those who survive a shark bite can die from infection later. Then they tied off the nerves in what was left of her arm. This, they hoped, would reduce phantom pain—a common condition in which a person feels an excruciating sensation of pain, itching, or burning in a missing limb.

Despite the blood loss, the doctors were confident that Bethany would pull through. Holt's quick thinking and Bethany's cool-headedness had saved the day. If Bethany had panicked, her fast-beating heart would have pumped even more blood out of her wound.

When Bethany came out of surgery, she was relieved to see her family, but she found herself staring at the bandage around her shoulder, trying to grasp that her arm really was gone. *Now what?* she wondered.

Within 24 hours, Bethany's strength was returning. A steady stream of visitors lifted her spirits. Soon, her hospital room was overflowing with flowers, cards, balloons, and stuffed animals from people around the world. Alana brought her a stack of newspaper articles about the attack. It seemed Bethany had become a celebrity.

Even though the support was galvanizing, she couldn't help but notice how everyone looked at her. "I remember seeing sorrow on people's faces," she says. "They wanted the same Bethany they had known before." →



## PREDATORS IN PERIL

This is a tiger shark, like the one that attacked Bethany. They may be frightening, but sharks are a vital part of the ocean's ecosystem. Today, nearly 40 percent of shark species are threatened with extinction. And yet, hunters kill more than 73 million of them every year, mainly for their valuable fins. That is why Bethany, along with many other shark-attack survivors, supports protecting these fearsome creatures and their habitats.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: NOAH HAMILTON; MATT SAYLES/AP IMAGES; NOAH HAMILTON; PETER KRAMER/NBC NEWSWIRE/AP IMAGES

NORBERT WU/SCIENCE FACTION/CORBIS





Today, Bethany is one of the best surfers in the world.

Bethany set them straight. True, she was lying in a hospital, wrapped in bandages and missing her arm. But, she told them, “I am the same person on the inside.” Indeed, by her second day in the hospital, Bethany had only one question: “When can I get back in the water?”

Her doctors said that it would take time to adjust to life with one arm—that simple tasks like tying shoelaces would be more difficult, that she would be fitted with a prosthetic arm, that a therapist would teach her new ways of doing things. She tried to pay attention, but her thoughts kept drifting to the sea, to the memory of the warm salt water and the rush of catching a big “gnarly” wave.

She made herself a promise: to be on a surfboard by Thanksgiving Day.

### “I WAS NOT AFRAID”

The day before Thanksgiving, Bethany went to the beach for the first time since the attack. (“What else could I do? Stay in bed?” she says.) She had been out of the hospital for a few weeks, and the last of her stitches had been removed.

As Bethany walked down the beach, she was plagued with doubt. Would she panic in the water? Would she be strong enough to paddle through the waves? Would she be able to stand on the board? The instant the water washed over her, her worries vanished. “I was not afraid,” she says. “My whole mind concentrated on catching a wave.”

Bethany had to learn to surf all over again. First, she had to figure out how to paddle evenly with one arm.

Then, to stand up, she had to place her hand on the center of the board, rather than grab the sides as you would with two hands. Lifting her feet turned out to be a big challenge, and she fell on her first attempt. She tried a second time. No luck. She tried a third time. And a fourth. Again and again, she struggled to stand until she was exhausted. She hadn’t expected it to be so hard.

Just when she was thinking of quitting, her dad called out: “Try it one more time. This will be it!”

Preparing herself, Bethany spotted a wave. She put her hand firmly on the board. She planted her feet and slowly stood. Ecstatic cheers erupted from her friends back on the beach. Bethany burst into tears of joy.

With this personal victory behind her, Bethany still had a long road

## BONUS PLAY!

### Free Readers Theater Play!

Go to *Scope* online to download our thrilling play adaptation of *Soul Surfer*, the new movie based on Bethany’s autobiography.



TOP: AFP/GETTY IMAGES; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF MTV

NOAH HAMILTON

GET THIS ACTIVITY ONLINE



## CONTEST

**Writing About Resilience** Resilience is the ability to recover from adversity. But what does it take to be resilient? Consider Bethany Hamilton. What are three qualities (for example, self-confidence) she has that enable her to be resilient? Write a paragraph answering this question. Support your conclusions with details from the article. Send your paragraph to **SURFER CONTEST**. Ten winners will each get *Surf Mules* by G. Neri. See page 2 for details.



ahead if she wanted to be ready for competition. With the help of her two coaches, she launched into a rigorous regimen of swimming, running, and strength training.

### “BIGGER AND BETTER”

A little more than a year after the attack, Bethany astounded the world by coming in first place at the National Championships, one of the toughest competitions for amateurs. That win launched her professional career—fulfilling her lifelong dream.

Today, Bethany is a professional competitive surfer—one of the best in the world. Everywhere she goes, fans beg for her autograph. A movie about her life is playing in theaters.

So how does she get in the ocean day after day? “Sometimes my heart pounds when I see a shadow under the water,” she admits. “But to dwell on what *might* happen would totally suck the joy out of the sport.”

Bethany’s incredible comeback is only part of her story. As she found her way back to surfing, she was flooded with letters thanking her for being an inspiration. She realized her purpose was greater than just being an elite surfer. Now she

uses her fame and fortune to help children with disabilities who live in poverty get the care they need. She also sponsors her own organization for amputees in the U.S. and gives motivational

speeches around the world.

“I made the decision early on not to mourn the loss [of my arm], and I’ve stuck to that,” Bethany says. “Past is past. On to bigger and better!” ●



In 2004, Bethany won Best Comeback Athlete from ESPN.