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La Jolla surfer earns first WSL win at Soup Bowl

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Tiare Thompson used her clutch forehand attack to win the World Surf League's Live Like Zander Junior Pro surf competition.

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Tiare Thompson is interviewed after winning the World Surf League's Live Like Zander Junior Pro surf competition.

Off the shore of Bathsheba, Barbados, three junior pros sat on their surfboards in the Atlantic Ocean, foreheads freckled from sun and salt, as they waited for the Soup Bowl swell they each hoped would carry them to first place. Samantha Sibley, Ava McGowan and Tiare Thompson were on high alert as the last two minutes of the finals heat ticked away at the World Surf League's Live Like Zander Junior Pro surf competition.

Thirty seconds later, Thompson saw her chance, paddled past her fellow surfers, caught the wave and used her clutch forehand attack to earn a 6.23, which added to her previous 7.00, gave her just enough points to beat McGowan.

"I saw this inside wave that looked really good," said 17-year-old Thompson, recalling the moment. "There was a minute and a half left and I just thought, 'This is the wave.' I catch it and rip it so hard, riding it all the way to the beach. I come in with 50 seconds left and just hear the announcer go, 'Tiare Thompson gets the score!' It was almost surreal feeling."

Nov. 10 marked the day Thompson earned her first big win as a surfer. While she's already made a name for herself with four California state titles, and by being chosen by the USA Surf Team to represent the United States every year since 2014, Thompson says her victory with WSL was a great way to end the season and prepare for her last year as a Pro Junior.

"It was so amazing," said Thompson. "I was so stoked that I won and as my dad and sister were carrying me up the beach, I was shaking because I was so excited. There was a lot of adrenaline."

The La Jolla-born surfer wasn't the only one emotional that day. As her family watched beachside while Thompson ripped through the wave's white caps, her father, Foster, was shouldering the emotions of both a diligent coach and proud parent.

"During Tiare's competitions, it's totally nerve-wracking and she doesn't realize it, but I got the butterflies in my stomach," said Foster, who is an avid surfer himself. "I'm the one who's pacing back and forth, biting my fingernails watching her every minute throughout the heat."

Tiare, named by her Hawaiian mother after the Tahitian word for Gardenia, has been surfing competitively for 13 years. Thompson's love of the sport began in Fiji, while visiting the outer island Tavarua with her father. Foster says he still remembers placing his 4-year-old daughter on the large starter board and pushing her through the tropical, crystal blue waters.

"She had this uncanny sense of balance," said Foster. "It was amazing how, at four years old, she didn't fall off the board. She'd just stand up and ride it all the way to the beach. It wasn't the biggest wave or smallest board, but I knew from that point forward that it was her destiny to surf."

Her father says from that day forward, Thompson has been in the water for hours every day, surfing even on the coldest days of the year. While Foster says Thompson blew her competition out of the water growing up, now that she's making her way in the pro world, there's a whole new set of girls doing all they can to fulfill their own destinies. But Thompson's got something that sets her apart, other than just her "dynamite" initials, T.N.T.

While a majority of her competitors are homeschooled, Thompson has gone to public school her whole surfing career, currently attending her last year at La Jolla High School. Instead of isolating surfing, Thompson's aquatic niche is interspersed with her family, friends, school, and soon her college career. While it's a lot to balance, Thompson says surfing remains the one of the more "fun" parts of her life.

"My favorite moment is when I do well in a heat, coming into the beach on that wave and seeing how happy my dad is," said Thompson, who says her surfing heroes range from Bethany Hamilton to Tom Curren, both of whom she's met. "Also, when I really need to score, seeing a perfect wave coming just to me, it's like my whole priority and all that matters in that moment. There's nothing like it."

Tiare is currently one of four junior women to represent the USA in the under 18 division, and for a fourth year in a row, will represent the USA in the Pan America games in Peru, Dec. 2-9.

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