



A rebel with a cause

Would you dare to surf a 50-foot wave in the dark? To everyone's astonishment, blind Brazilian surfer Derek Rabelo has done so many times. Seeing potential rather than problems, life coach and motivational speaker Rabelo inspires others to eliminate excuses and go for goals.

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON

Fresh from surfing New South Wales' Manly beach with former pro surfer Layne Beachley, lunch with former surfing world champion Tom Carroll and talking to 5500 students for a Stand Tall event, Derek Rabelo expressed his affection for Australia, his home for two years. "I miss Australia, the culture, the surfing, the people." Australia has embraced Rabelo for his unbreakable ambition. You may recall seeing him on a Nutri-Grain box. The world became captivated by the brave blind boy when surfing footage of him went viral in his twenties. "How does he do it?" was the question on everyone's lips. Surfing is hard enough but blind surfing seems suicidal and impossible. But "impossible" isn't in Rabelo's dictionary. "If you can dream it, you can do it," is Rabelo's motto as he's gone on to conquer surfing the famous Pipeline break, tow-in big wave surfing, skydiving, downhill skateboarding, snowboarding and jet skiing among other adrenaline-seeking activities. What drives Rabelo and where does he get the guts to tackle things most sighted people wouldn't even try?

Prophetic prayers

On May 25, 1992, an energetic Gemini Water Monkey came screaming into a welcoming world. Rabelo's destiny was written before his birth. His father, Ernesto, a keen surfer, prayed his unborn son would become a pro surfer such as his namesake Hawaiian surfing legend Derek Ho. But when Rabelo smiled with sea-blue eyes, his brown-eyed parents were worried. Doctors declared Rabelo 100 per cent blind from congenital glaucoma after many torturous operations.

However, this Brazilian battler hasn't let any handicaps hold him back, eventually exceeding his dad's dream to surf the world's biggest breaks. Rabelo's mother Lia just hoped her hyperactive son would have a safe and satisfying life.

"Derek always wanted to do anything that was dangerous, so I had to watch him constantly!" His positive personality made the most of every opportunity, "Derek never complained about being blind," Lia recalls. "He was always happy and playful."

Beach boy

Rabelo was raised by the beach in the Brazilian town of Guarapari, nurtured by caring family and friends. As Rabelo says,



"The love surrounding me kept me going and enabled me to lead a normal life." The sea was his childhood soundtrack, beckoning him closer. "I could hear the waves from my bedroom window and wanted to surf more than anything." Rabelo was a typical inquisitive child — swimming, dancing, biking, climbing, gardening and playing often with his active dad. "I had many wonderful bonding times with my father, playing in the mud in the rain, on the tricycle, the boogie board and the motorcycle. I felt so blessed," Rabelo shares. Ernesto recalls, "He would always do things that would blow our minds!"

Rabelo rose above adversities such as bullying, schooling and life's bumps. As a child, Rabelo would crash into kids and they'd fight him, not realising he was blind. At eight, Rabelo hid his white cane out of embarrassment when kids teased him.

"After a few months I didn't care too much, but it still hurt me. I had to accept who I was. I don't go anywhere without my stick now. It's my eyes." He also has a golden Labrador guide dog called Serenity. "She changed my life, with her I have freedom, I don't bump into anything anymore. I find my way easier and I'm happier." Rabelo overcame challenges with his characteristic optimism. "I always feed positive thoughts into my mind. When I'm down I remember the spiritual principals, how God guides me so I can see through faith." Rabelo's deeply Christian mother prayed for him daily and shed tears every evening until he turned 10, when she felt divine consolation that Rabelo had a special purpose.

Fearless fun

It was Rabelo's dad who encouraged him to try new sports and adventures. Ernesto owned a surf shop and gave Rabelo his first surfboard for his 17th birthday. "This was my dream. I was determined to succeed at surfing," Rabelo remembers. Surfing became an addiction from the first splash, but Rabelo lacked

technique. After a few failed attempts to surf with family and friends, Rabelo signed up for surf school lessons twice weekly. It took an ocean of courage to float around the deep blue with little more than guiding words and a plank. Rabelo used his heightened senses to read the sea. "Through hearing and feeling I can locate myself in the sea and sense the waves."

Rabelo's confidence and competence grew as his patient teacher imparted the basics of surfing, staying by his side. One of Rabelo's endearing qualities is his acceptance of assistance, believing, "we're stronger as a team". As Carroll observed, "One thing I admire about Derek is that he asks for help. Derek is a living, breathing alarm bell to the universal urge to connect, to help each other, or to reach out for help." Boogie board champion Magno Oliveira became his coach in surfing and

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living, sharing a love for the ocean and God. Oliveira, who competed in Hawaii annually, planted Pipeline dreams in Rabelo's mind. His motivating stories spurred Rabelo on while overprotective people only provoked him to break boundaries. "When someone tells me I can't do something I use it as encouragement!"

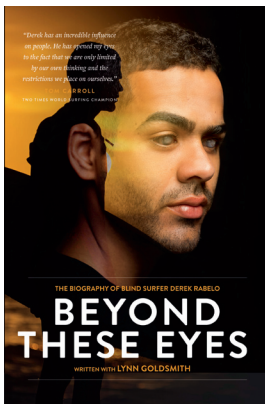
After graduating from high school, Rabelo studied diligently to graduate in environmental management. Despite poverty he was determined to travel to his dream destination of Hawaii. Raising the funds, he finally took his first frightening flight overseas. Hawaii cast a spell on Rabelo. "I knew there was something special between Hawaii and me. I could feel the sand around my feet, the ocean breeze, the power of the rainbows, the salty air on my face." Rabelo touched the rocks, reefs, plants and flowers to get a true impression of the tropical paradise. "I really wanted to make sure I could have an accurate image of Hawaii in my mind." Rabelo didn't sleep the night before surfing Pipeline. He knew it was very dangerous and he could even die, as some surfers had. He was worried about the huge waves and other surfers but remained optimistic by visualising riding the barrels smoothly. "Where there's a will, there's a way," is a saying that drives Rabelo constantly. But unfortunately, Derek had a disappointing day. "I was very disillusioned. There weren't any decent waves." Then, to top off the setback, Rabelo got sick for five days. On his return to the beach, poor surf and crowded conditions deterred Rabelo from catching any waves. It was only when



he met legendary surfer Eddie Rothman and his sons Koa and Makua that Rabelo got the gift of a new board and a local's VIP pass to ride any waves he wanted to, uninterrupted. Rothman said, "I just couldn't fathom how he could ride waves without being able to see. I didn't want to be responsible for anything going wrong. However, he proved sceptics wrong. He is amazing." At Pipeline, surfers respected Rothman's request that nobody should get on Rabelo's waves. "He will surf as much as he wants to, everyone must make way for him." Rabelo finally felt the power of Pipeline, "Once I was taking off on the wave, I felt something huge: guidance from God driving me through the wave. I felt there was a party inside my heart ... pumping ... feeling so blessed."

Rabelo continued to develop as a skilled surfer, chasing larger swells whenever possible. "I prefer bigger waves for the adrenaline rush. It's more extreme, more dangerous." Watching him surf, it's amazing that Rabelo knows which way to paddle, when to duck-dive under waves and when to speed up and stand on his board to catch a ride. Pro surfer Kelly Slater reportedly tried to surf with closed eyes and couldn't do it.

While in Hawaii, a video of Rabelo surfing went viral with more than 9 million views. Rabelo realised he could make a living by inspiring others. Soon after this, filmmaker Bryan Jennings approached him to make a movie. The process taught Rabelo patience and perseverance. After



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two years of filming, *Beyond Sight* was released and has been shown in around 40 countries since. "In that movie I realised God was using me as an instrument to change people's lives," Rabelo recounts some near misses, which reinforced his faith in divine protection. Jennings witnessed Rabelo's daring in the face of death-defying odds, "He knows God will protect him because he has seen it happen so often." Sponsors stepped up to support Rabelo so he could travel and touch the lives of more people. Rabelo managed to remain humble amid the hubbub of celebrity. "I don't care about fame. What is valuable for me is the opportunity to inspire and encourage people. Show people hope, and that being blind didn't stop me so anyone can do the impossible."

Hero for hope

Today, at 27, Rabelo is an ambassador for The Royal Society for the Blind and Stand Tall, which assists youth to make positive choices. It was formed in 2012 by mothers Angela Farr-Jones and Jeanine Treharne who were concerned about the drug abuse, bullying, depression, hopelessness and self-harm in high school students. Rabelo is a guest speaker at its events attracting thousands of students. He is also sponsored by Evoke Eyewear. Rabelo strives to use his life to serve others. "There is nothing

better than when someone comes up to me and says, 'Hey Derek, you really inspire me. It gives me hope when I see you accomplishing your dreams. It shows me I can do anything.' That's what I really love." At the end of the day it's not about sport for Rabelo, it's about pushing boundaries to enjoy a full life. It's also about inspiring others to feel faith in their inner light rather than shrinking in shadows of fear. Rabelo shares, "The only thing holding us back is ourselves. I want to tell people that we should be controlling our fear, not fear controlling us." As a newly accredited life coach, Rabelo is now helping others through online life coaching.

Wedded bliss

Rabelo describes himself as a romantic who believes in commitment and a deep connection. After a partying phase he decided to focus on his faith and a life partner. Soon after, during a Perth church service, a dancing girl literally fell for Rabelo, tripping over his foot. Ten months on they were married. Rabelo calls his German partner Maddy (Madeline), "the best friend, best wife and she'll be the best mum." Despite severe struggles, they're bound together by many miracles detailed in Rabelo's biography, *Beyond These Eyes*, by author Lynn Goldsmith. "Together we can overcome difficulties,

share experiences and help each other. Being with someone you love so much and who loves you so much is the greatest experience ever." Rabelo was ecstatic when Madeline announced her pregnancy on Easter Sunday. "It made me the happiest man in the world. We are having the baby's birth in Brazil. We are so blessed, living 500 metres from the beach on an island. Good weather, great waves, nice people. [It's the] perfect place for me at the moment."

Rabelo continues surfing the waves of his dreams. Conquering 50-foot waves in Nazaré, Portugal and 30-foot waves in Jaws in Hawaii only left him wanting more. "I really love adventure, the feeling of adrenaline and being in danger. I guess that's the way I'm wired. If everything is OK, it means there is still more life to be explored and the end hasn't come." He was also honoured to carry the torch for the Rio Olympics. When asked what's next, it seems even the sky is not the limit: "I want to do a lot of stuff. Maybe go to the moon!" 🌕

For life coaching sessions with Derek Rabelo, visit derekabelo.com.

*Many thanks to Lynn Goldsmith's permission to quote from her biography, *Beyond These Eyes*, available from Ark House Press and Amazon.*

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