

Ponte Vedra Shorelines



Even after major stroke, he 'never quit'



Jerry Petroni poses with his wife, Reidunn. Jerry Petroni's 2006 stroke and recovery inspired Sunday's Never Quit Beach Fest in Jacksonville Beach.



Photo by **MAGGIE FITZROY**/Staff

Professional surfer Karina Petroni gives Daisy Melly-Jones, 10, of the West Beaches a surfing lesson during the Never Quit Beach Fest. Petroni almost gave up surfing after her father's stroke, but she kept at it after he awoke from a coma and wrote "Never Quit" on a piece of paper

Atlantic Beach survivor inspires fest dedicated to healthful living

By **MAGGIE FITZROY**
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Reidunn Petroni always knew her husband Gerard as an energetic, accomplished and healthy man who'd piloted thousands of ocean-going ships around the world, served in the Korea and Vietnam wars and kept in shape running, weight lifting and long-distance swimming.

After a stroke in late 2006 put him in a six-month coma and almost ended his life, she and her children watched and supported him as he worked to overcome physical limitations with a never-quit attitude.

Sunday, with the help of many others in the Beaches community, the Petroni family of Atlantic Beach hosted a Never Quit Beach Fest in Jacksonville Beach to educate people on how to avoid strokes, heart disease and brain bleeds. And how to make healthy life choices and embrace a full life like Gerard "Jerry" Petroni.

Professional and internationally acclaimed surfer Karina Petroni, 21, gave surf lessons throughout the day, as did many other volunteer surfers from the community.

The festival inspired by her dad also featured a 5K Run/Walk, beach games, a U.S. Navy obstacle course, first aid demonstrations by the American Red Cross Volunteer Lifesaving Corps guards, free health screenings, food and drinks, and meet-and-greet opportunities with cardiac physicians and other health-care professionals.



American Red Cross Volunteer Lifesaving Corps lifeguards demonstrate a mock spinal cord injury rescue



MAGGIE FITZROY/Staff

Jim McQuillan (front) participates in a U.S. Navy-hosted obstacle course with his daughter Lauren, 9, during the Never Quit Beach Fest on Sunday in Jacksonville Beach.

Never Quit

Continued from Page 1

"We had over 500 runners this morning," organizer Tonya Hunt of Ponte Vedra Beach said shortly after noon.

"When Karina's dad went into a coma, she was going to stop surfing," said Hunt, whose daughter Katie is president of the Ponte Vedra High School Surf club.

After he awoke and wrote "Never Quit" on a piece of paper, Karina Petroni took his advice, but the family struggled

with enormous medical bills.

When Katie Hunt learned about their challenges, she e-mailed Karina in December to ask if there was a way the surf club could help. From that, the idea for the Never Quit event was born.

Proceeds helped raise money for Jerry Petroni's bills, the American Heart Association and local high school youth programs.

"We've got everything," said Tonya Hunt, who praised all the organizations involved.

"We've got the Jaguar cheerleaders, gymnasts and a three plane fly-over this morning

with P-51 Mustangs vintage planes that flew over the ocean at the start of the race."

Jerry Petroni, 74, ran the beginning of the race, completed the middle of it in a beach wheelchair pushed by family members, then ran the final few blocks from the city pier to the Casa Marina Hotel beachfront where the event was held.

"Captain Petroni is one of the most amazing men I've ever known," said William Freeman, Mayo Clinic stroke neurologist, who treated him for a "deadly stroke" that has a more than 50 percent mortality rate.

"He had un-diagnosed high blood pressure, which can be a silent killer, and in his case, the first sign was brain hemorrhage," Freeman said. His story alerts people "to the importance of knowing the risk factors for stroke and heart attack."

His story also inspires, said Freeman, who was impressed that "Captain" ran in the race.

"His enthusiasm for recovery is a testament to stroke treatment, recovery and rehab," he said. "And a family's love of their father."

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NEVER QUIT BEACH FEST



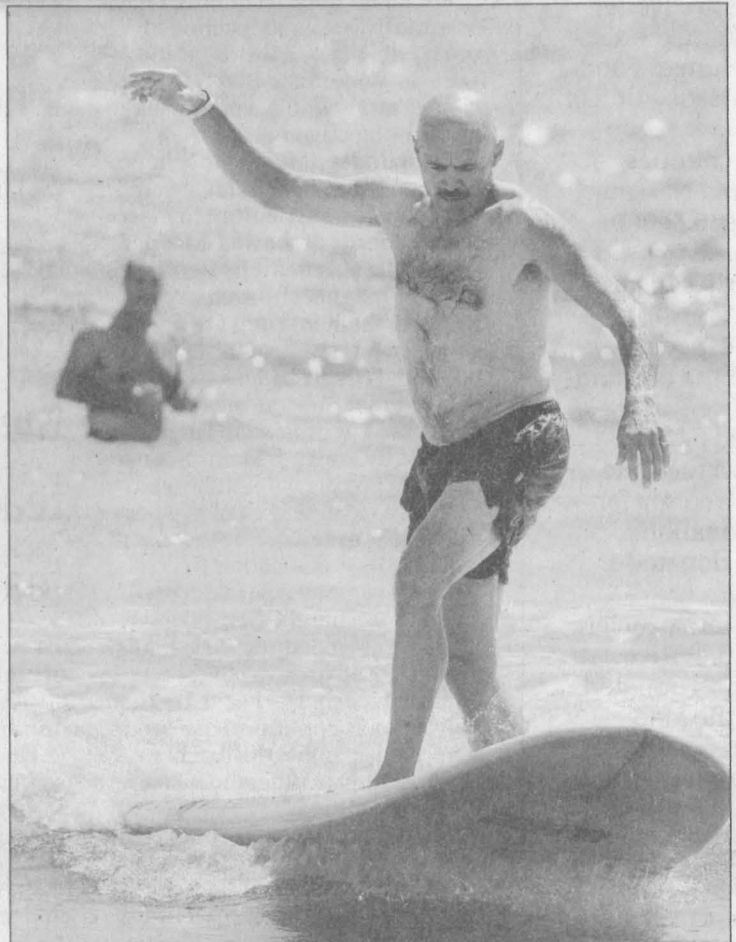
Photos by **BOB SELF**/The Times-Union

Instructors work with their students during surf classes Sunday morning in shallow waters off Jacksonville Beach. The Never Quit Beach Fest, part of professional surfer Karina Petroni's Never Quit tour, featured a 5K walk/run, an obstacle course, vendors and displays, as well as the highlight of the day — surf lessons for children and adults. Petroni used the event to stress the importance of making healthy life choices, setting goals, fulfilling dreams and building character during challenging times.



Above: A young surfing student gestures to a classmate Sunday as she rides a wave into shore.

Right: Tony Byatt of Jacksonville Beach rides a wave as he tries surfing for the first time during classes. "That was a hoot!" Byatt said of his new sport.



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GALLERY: For more photos of the surf classes at the Never Quit Beach Fest, go to our Web site: jacksonville.com/photos

VIDEO: Bob Self shows you the action at the Beach Fest. jacksonville.com/video