

Hanging 'ten' with dad



PHOTOS BY ALEX.SANCHEZ@STAUGUSTINE.COM

ABOVE: Blake and Sunny stand together at Crescent Beach. Sunny began teaching Blake, 12, and his brother, Chase, 16, to surf at an early age. Now, all three surf in competitions up and down the East Coast in addition to other locations in the United States and around the world. **BELLOW:** Blake and Sunny Stevens prepare to surf at Crescent Beach.

» Surf dads teach more than how to catch a wave

BY LAURA HAMPTON

laura.hampton@staugustine.com

Wiping out, dropping in, hanging ten. To the landlocked, spending an afternoon with surfers can be like visiting a foreign country, but 12-year-old Blake Stevens is familiar.

Blake grew up on the beach. Building sand castles and combing for shells were everyday activities for him. And since his dad, Sunny, was a surfer, it was only a matter of time before he tried his hand at it.

In fact, it was only a matter of months.

"I mean, I kind of remember when I first started learning everything," Blake said.

Sunny had both Blake and 16-year-old Chase in the water by the time they were 2 years old, so the memories blur together. Some things stick out, however.

"There's some stuff you could never forget, like your first wave," Blake said. "You could be my dad's age, and you still will remember that stuff."

His dad's age would be considered young by many standards, and though there are surfers of all ages, it's a little unusual to see fathers with teenage sons in surfing competitions.

"My wife thinks it's silly that I compete," Sunny



said. "But I'm like, 'If I can win, I'm gonna do it.'"

Sunny took a break from competing while the boys were young, but when Chase began to compete, he got back into it.

At 16, Chase is working on a professional surfing career and has a few companies that sponsor him, so he can free surf or "soul surf" — an opportunity he knows is a direct result of his dad teaching him to surf "at like 3 years old."

"My dad taught me the whole motions of paddling and then standing up and having your knees bent and keeping balance on the beach, and then we went in the water."

Now, Chase and Sunny are on an All-Star surfing team that represents the East Coast in competitions.

Competing is big in the Stevens family, not only with others, but also with

each other. There has been an ongoing debate in recent years about who is the better surfer, Sunny or Chase.

"I have to say recently I've taken him down," Chase said.

He quickly adds that it is hard to beat Sunny in longboarding. "He still to this day is looked at by people in town as really good at longboarding. It's definitely cool to have a dad like that."

Sunny is cool. And not only because he can ride the waves with kids half his age.

About once a month, he organizes a surf-off for the young surfers on Crescent Beach.

"It's like a pick-up basketball game, but for surfing," Sunny said.

The kids are matched based on skill level, and they compete in a fun, non-intimidating environment.

The event has grown over the years and now the parents come. Sometimes, a pro surfer shows up to provide a demonstration and pass out stickers.

"I just like getting to know the kids and maybe give them a pointer or two," Sunny said.

Sunny's pointers are not limited to surfing tips. While the kids are gathered, likes to throw in some sage advice.

"The kids kind of laugh about it," Sunny said. "I give them a little speech about bullying and being nice to other students that are new to school, but I always try to slip something in there like that."

A fifth-generation St. Augustinian, Sunny grew up on the beach himself. Though not quite as young as Chase and Blake when he started surfing, he had plenty of good teachers.

His mom was one of the

first surfers in St. Augustine, and his uncle, Tory Strange, is credited with popularizing surfing on Anastasia Island.

Strange opened his first surf shop in 1984. The Surf Station started out as a full-service gas station that carried surf boards and windsurfer sailboards.

Today, the gas station is gone, the business has gone viral and Strange has opened a second location in Crescent Beach.

Strange has two sons as well. Hunter, 15, is into video games — a pastime that is foreign to Tory since he does not even watch TV.

"For me to get close to him, I have to get into his world," Strange said. "But we've kind of agreed that he does his thing and I do my thing."

Carson, 13, however, is "super into" the surf shop, skateboarding and shooting videos.

As an instructor at the Surf Station's surf camp this summer, he is teaching students from age 3 to 40 what his father taught him.

"My dad would push me into almost every wave," Carson said.

Like the Stevens' boys, his memories of learning are a little vague. "I remember I was on a blue soft top, and I think it was my first time standing up ... It could have been a different time."

For these guys, it's a lot like taking their first steps. There was likely applause from the grown-ups around them, but walking has become second nature now.

As for life lessons, Carson says the most important thing his dad has taught him is work ethic.

"He says, 'If you want something, you have to work hard for it.'"

It seems to be a lesson Carson has taken to heart. He starts high school next year and could not be more ready.

"I'm excited for the future," he said. "I already have my college planned out and everything."

After graduation, Carson will be working hard on a film career at Full Sail University. He dreams of becoming a director.

While both father and son are driven to succeed, Tory said they still take time to enjoy the important things in life.

"If the waves are good, we all drop everything and we go surfing."



Sunny and Chase Stevens follow the trail to a surf spot in California.



ALEX.SANCHEZ@STAUGUSTINE.COM

Tory Strange and his son Carson, 13, share a passion for surfing.