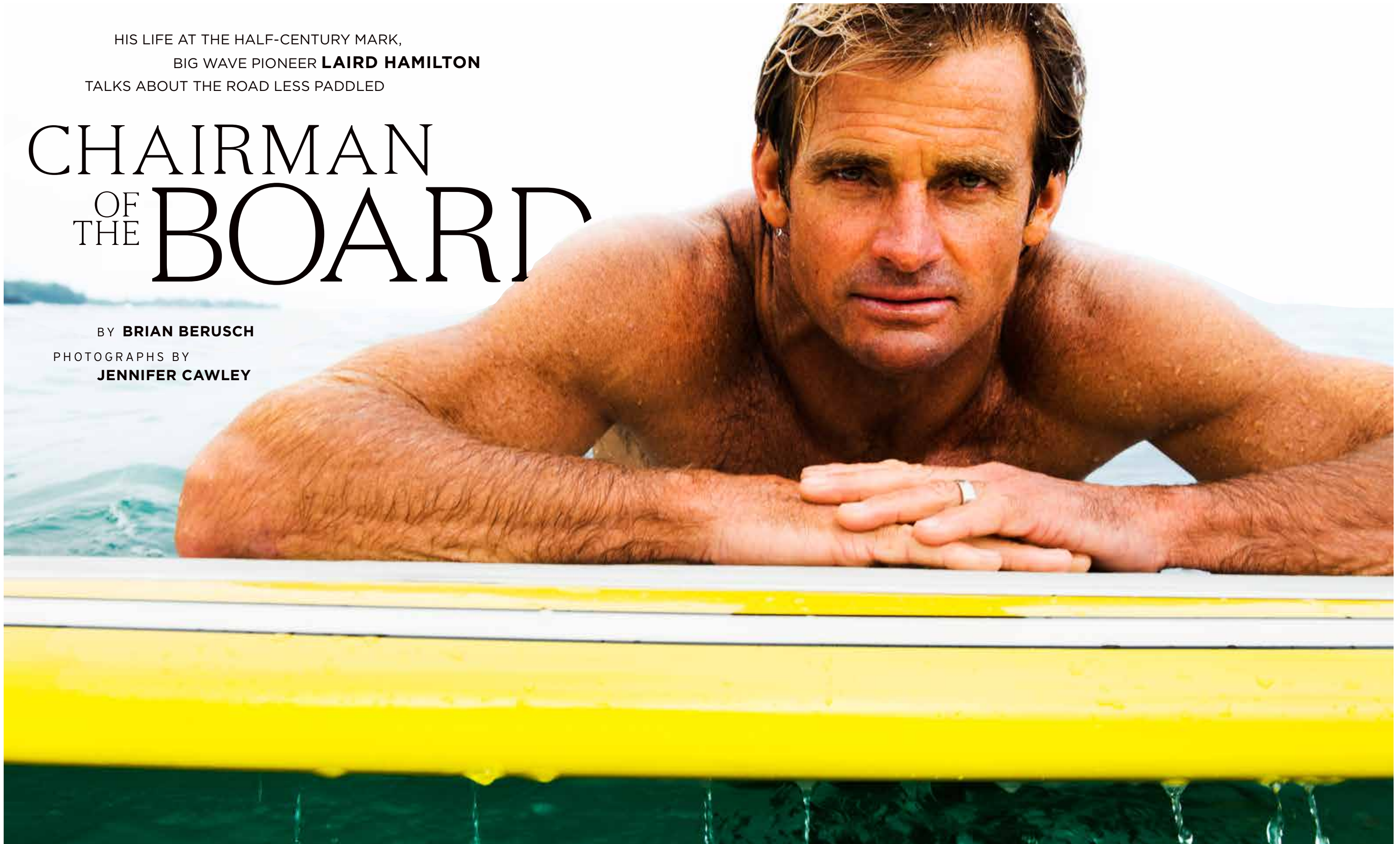


HIS LIFE AT THE HALF-CENTURY MARK,
BIG WAVE PIONEER **LAIRD HAMILTON**
TALKS ABOUT THE ROAD LESS PADDLED

CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

BY **BRIAN BERUSCH**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JENNIFER CAWLEY



LAIRD HAMILTON SETS THE BAR

You can see it in the magazine articles, feature film roles, TV segments and astounding video clips that feature the big wave surfer. You can feel it when he talks. This man is driven.

“As a kid I wanted to be the best. Not better than any one person. Just the best,” he says.

He’s pretty convincing: This is the man who crossed a 90-mile channel on a windsurf board, towed into a previously “unsurfable” wave in Tahiti, and biked and paddled across the entire Hawaiian Island chain with his pal, legendary surfer Dave Kalama. Now at the time of life when many men are settling into their corner offices, Hamilton, who just turned 50, is still fearlessly tackling unknown waters—literally and figuratively.

In print, Hamilton is often portrayed as all brawn, the sun-bleached-but-grumpy old guard of the sea. But at this moment—on a gusty day at an organic farm and café on Kauai—he’s showing all sides of himself. He’s the devoted family man as eager to talk about home schooling his two youngest daughters as he is about the foil technology he hopes to use to successfully career down the face of a 100-foot-plus wave, or the interest Larry Ellison has taken in Hamilton’s research for use in his Team Oracle racing yachts.

“I’ve been getting better at channeling my comfort zone, shifting gears into being a good father,” he says. Hamilton’s wife is the former professional volleyball player Gabrielle Reece. “We’re all about the experience.”

Here on the island, he’s a man at ease. He’s also very punctual; his schedule demands it. For our meeting he’s chosen a table directly in front of the café entrance, allowing every fan and admirer to register his hulking, 6-foot-3-inch frame and

interrupt our interview to thank him for all he does. It happens a lot.

Hamilton was brought up to be gracious. As a boy, “all the guys I respected were really good men,” he remembers. “Great watermen, but good fathers first, eager to help people, and generous. This was what my mom taught means ‘being a man.’ All my values came from her. She would say, ‘I don’t care if you become a street sweeper—do it with the most honor and integrity that you can. And if you do it to the best of your true ability, the rest will

take care of itself.”

Hamilton’s father had left the family before Laird’s first birthday, and his mother, Joann, left California for the surfing life of Oahu, plunking a 3-year-old Laird down in a predominantly Polynesian scene that didn’t take kindly to a tow-head in its playground. “I think this is why Gabby and I continue to have so much in common, starting off as outcasts,” he says. They grew up in similar situations: she in the British Virgin Islands—6 feet tall at 10 years old—and he a “blonde haole [not of



ABOVE: ENDA ITAM, VE NDA CULLA UI SEDI ILO ETQ ATIEH. RIGHT: CUL QVE QVELDFG AFSDBORER UORER UM Q UI CON CONYTSDFG SDFG QVENUIFG EIHEFE FIHE

Polynesian descent] in 1960s Hawaii.”

FOR HAMILTON, BEING THE best meant fitting in. “I thought, if I could be respected as the best, it would be a way to create equality,” he recalls. “You may not like me, but out there, you’ll need to respect me. If you ever want to be good at something, go where the best people are. I pursue my goals to ride the biggest waves, the fastest waves, the farthest distances. And they are not going to stop being my goals.”

Young Laird introduced his mother to her future husband. A graceful surfer and board shaper, Billy Hamilton had taken the boy under his wing, introducing him to notable watermen in the late ‘60s. Hard-charging Pipeline surfer and lifeguard Butch Van Artsdalen, and school principal, surfer and free diver Jose Angel are two that Hamilton still recalls fondly.

But early on, Hamilton saw the toll surf competition took on his new father, which is why he resisted the world of competitive surfing. “I chose my own path at first because I saw how my father was subjected to the system. One day he was number one, and the next, judges decide, ‘You’re now number ten.’ I didn’t want to subject my art to that group. If it was up to them, I’d be miserable. I want to subject it to me first, then the audience. When people tell me they love what I do, then their admiration is more trophy than I need.”

He continues: “The first step was not caring what people think. I’m not surprised when people don’t like me—that’s where I started. But there are settlers and discoverers. And I really like the process of discovery. Of having an idea, thinking it’s possible, implementing and developing it until everyone is doing it. And then you’re like, ‘Good, I’m not crazy.’ But sometimes”—he pauses, stares, and then his energy and thoughts come flooding back like a fresh set of waves—“you never know if you’re going to walk off the end of the world. And sometimes you do, and when you make it back it gives you this confidence that you can survive a fall off the edge of the world, and you’re

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willing to go again. You think, ‘I survived the last one.’ And you discover stuff along the way, especially when you fall, which makes it worth it.”

HAMILTON HAS BEEN PART of some notable surfing innovations. On the advance of tow surfing with a personal watercraft into 50-, 60- or 70-foot waves, Hamilton is forthright: “I knew early on I didn’t want to be a board shaper—I wanted to be the test pilot.”

He shares a story about the first time he took a hydrofoil—a surfboard with a three-foot metal pole mounted beneath it, anchored with a “wing” that lifts the surfer out of the water for long periods of time at high velocity. He was strapped to the board with heavy snowboard bindings

and found himself pinned to the ocean floor 35 feet below the surface. “I thought, ‘This is not a good place to be.’ But while I was down there I realized I needed more flotation. And bindings that release.”

On the horizon for Hamilton is the rollout of a new line of clothing to be sold under the Laird Hamilton–Force of Nature label, a product called the Golfboard that is like a motorized skateboard for use on the golf course, expanding his line of nutritional supplements and a workout he’s been testing with Navy Seals.

In California, he’ll also develop Force of Nature obstacle courses, much like the Tough Mudder events that pop up around the country, aiming to do 20 this year. “In Hawaii I’m focused on my training and surfing. In California it’s all about the

