FOCUS ON WINNERS: LAIRD HAMILTON

Looking for a partner to help it launch a new stand-up paddle board as a complement to its Mar Mostro craft in the Volvo Ocean Race, sports brand Puma looked no further than Laird Hamilton, the surfer credited with riding the heaviest wave ever.

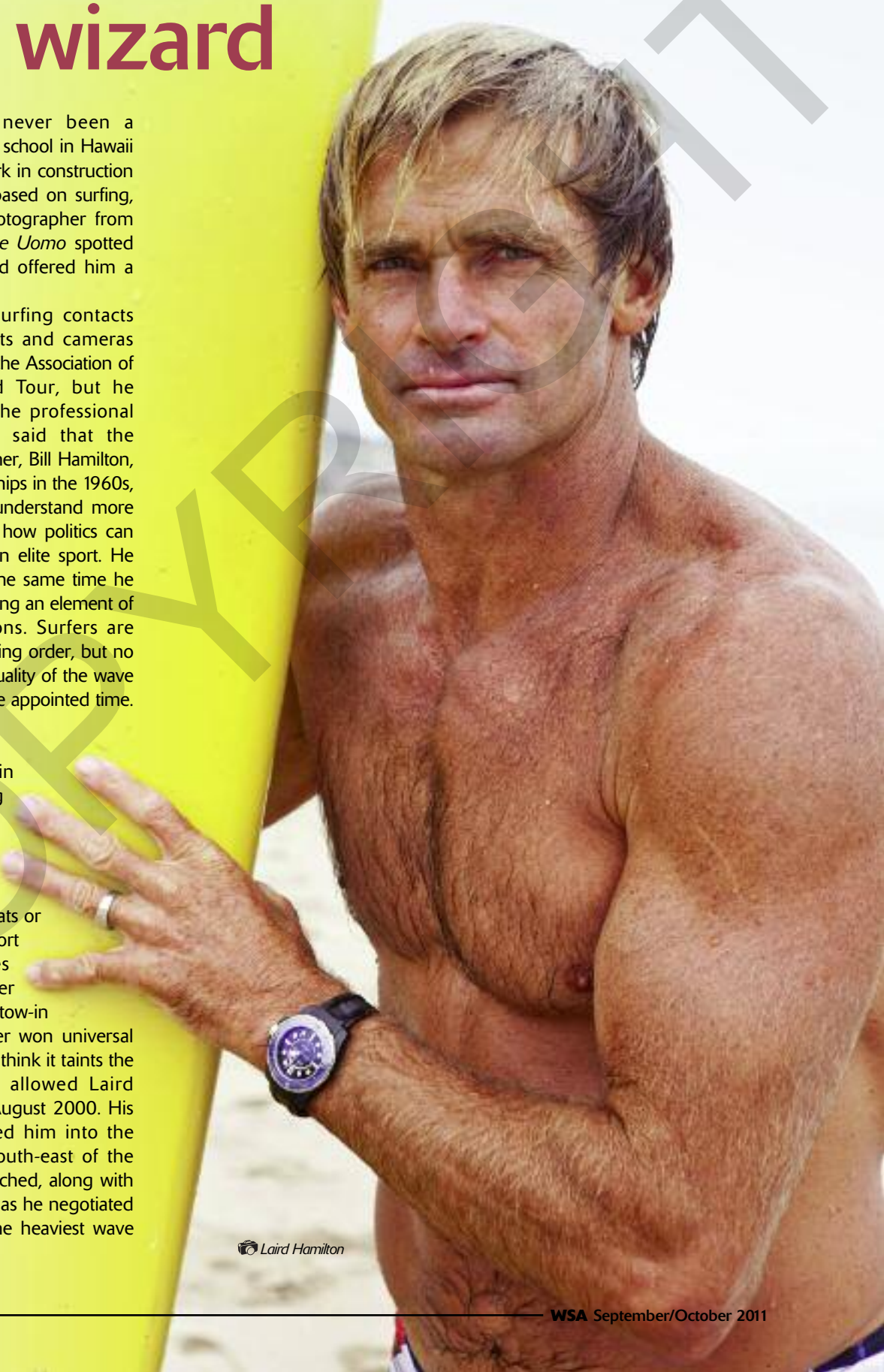
Water wizard

Laird Hamilton has never been a conventionalist. He left school in Hawaii at 16, ostensibly to work in construction to fund a leisure life based on surfing, but a year later a photographer from Italian magazine *Vogue Uomo* spotted him on the beach and offered him a modelling contract.

Soon afterwards, surfing contacts urged him to leave the lights and cameras behind and apply his talent to the Association of Surfing Professionals World Tour, but he preferred to steer clear of the professional competitive arena. He has said that the experiences of his adoptive father, Bill Hamilton, at early professional championships in the 1960s, had helped the young Laird understand more keenly than others of his age how politics can often play an important part in elite sport. He found this off-putting, and at the same time he argued that there was no avoiding an element of lottery in surfing competitions. Surfers are allocated a position in the running order, but no one on earth can control the quality of the wave each surfer will get to ride at the appointed time.

Work of art

Bill Hamilton helped instil in his protégé the idea of surfing as a work of art, leading Laird Hamilton to do things differently. With a small group of friends, he worked out ways of using inflatable boats or personal water craft to transport the surfer into bigger waves than paddle power could ever make possible, thus inventing tow-in surfing. The practice has never won universal approval among surfers (some think it taints the purity of the sport), but it allowed Laird Hamilton to make history in August 2000. His friend Darrick Doerner towed him into the waters of Teahupo'o Reef, south-east of the Pacific island of Tahiti, and watched, along with photographers and film crews, as he negotiated what is widely reported as "the heaviest wave ever ridden successfully".



Laird Hamilton

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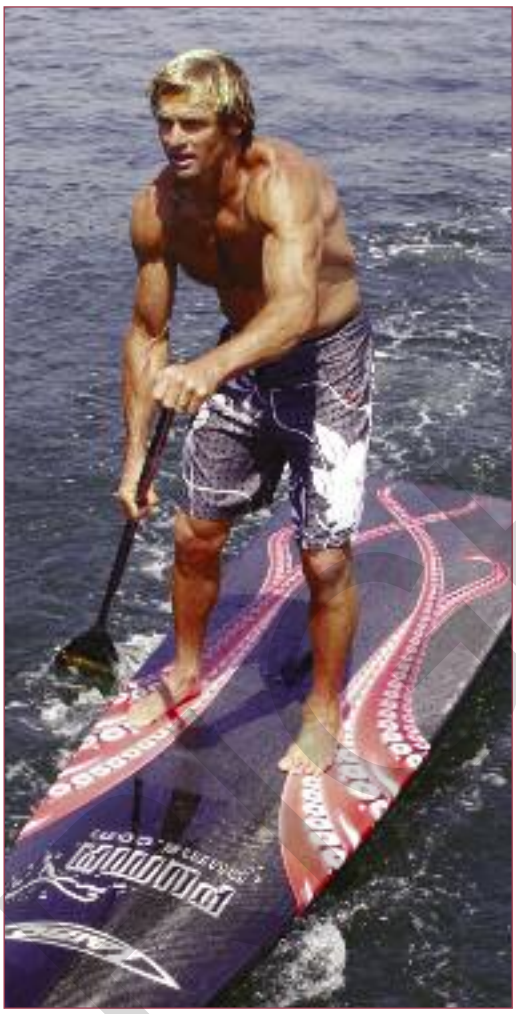
Take a stand

Towards the end of the last decade, he annoyed the purists again by becoming an advocate for stand-up paddle (SUP) surfing, for which riders require a long board, a long paddle and large amounts of strength and skill, perfectly in keeping with the ancient traditions of Hawaii, Laird Hamilton argues, although SUP is also becoming increasingly popular on inland waterways. Both options are good, according to Mr Hamilton. He says: "Naturally, the ocean is a broader and larger canvas, with surf and greater buoyancy because of the salt. Fresh water paddling carries with it different sensations, not necessarily better or worse, just different."

He combines life on the water with media work and an increasing role in campaigning on ocean environmental matters, but he has worked on product design too. Having worked on clothing collections with French surfwear brand Oxbow and his own apparel label, Wonderwall, he was happy to play a part, with prominent Argentinean boat designer Juan Kouyoumdijian, in designing an SUP board to help Puma promote its participation in the 2011–2012 Volvo Ocean Race. The result, the Puma Laird Board, is a limited-edition carbon fibre board, which has the same same Volvo 70 boat hull design, using the same ultra-lightweight materials and the same ergonomic design, as on the Mar Mostro, the yacht Puma has entered for the nine-month round-the-world race, which starts in Alicante on October 29 and will continue until the sun goes down on the event in Galway Bay, Ireland, sometime in July 2012. The Puma Laird Board even has the same red tentacles painted onto its shell as the Mar Mostro. Unlike the yacht, it will go on sale to the public at the start of 2012 at a small group of select specialist retailers. Laird Hamilton says the aspect of the board that has pleased him most is its manoeuvrability. "A board that size, with the unique boat hull design component, you wouldn't think was capable of being fast and responsive, but it is," he says. "It rides waves more than sufficiently."

Honorary team member

As a result of the relationship, Laird Hamilton has been named as an honorary twelfth member of the Puma Ocean Racing Team and when the latest race gets underway, the official team will spend part of its time monitoring wave patterns and tracking where the world's biggest rogue waves are breaking. This is with a view to helping the surfer plan new challenges and continue in his quest to "ride giants" around the world. They will find the waves; he will fly in and surf them. "This will work as a tribute to communication and teamwork," the surfer says. "I will primarily be



Laird Hamilton played a part in developing a stand-up paddle board to help Puma promote its participation in the Volvo Ocean Race.

Puma/Bizuayehu Tesfaye

off Mar Mastro, but will be employing both the weather instruments and communication systems on board, as a supplement, of course, to the eyes and ears of the crew. I envision the partnership to really be an effective combination of my desire to ride giant waves in unique ocean locations with the ship's task of navigating ocean, wave, and swell conditions. In terms of racing responsibilities, there is potential for me to participate in in-port races, which do carry point values for the final tally."

His love of the ocean is life-long, helped by being born in Hawaii, growing up in the islands and still living there, in Maui, or in Malibu, California, when he's on the US mainland. He says that, even though 80% of all life on earth is in the ocean, most of us know little about it primarily because it's underneath us. "It literally is an 'out-of-sight-out-of-mind' thing," he explains. "But humans are composed mostly of water, so it's always been appealing for me to partake in something that is both inherent in and reflective of who we are. That is the biggest reason why I love water sports. Secondly, water sports have always afforded me feelings that land sports simply don't offer. For me, participating in water sports helps to create a relationship with the environment, and that has always invigorated my spirit."

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