



Peahi 'Til Dusk

Dropping in on Laird Hamilton's sup gun project

By Ekolu Kalama • Principal Photography by Allen Mozo



“I’ll be out there with you next year,” I told Laird over breakfast. The day before, Laird Hamilton had tackled “real” Jaws on a standup board for the first time.

The wave faces must have been upwards of 40 feet. Dave Kalama, Don King, and I were the audience, but Laird was the only one surfing... this was his wave, his day.

I was sincerely impressed and immensely humbled... up until then I had only seen video footage of Laird standup paddling small Peahi (15-20 ft). This day was easily double that. I was in complete awe of Laird’s athleticism, power, and grace.

I congratulated him on his exceptional performance the next morning at breakfast. And that’s when I told him I’d be out there with him soon...

Laird’s reaction to my bold statement surprised me... he nodded as if he believed I was speaking the truth. That’s the way I read it, anyway.

Don King, on the other hand, hid his eyes behind his prescription glasses as if I spoke with french fries in my



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Laird's Sup Gun Progression

March, 2005 (Above left) "Laird started with just a regular, all around 12-foot board."

December, 2005 (Above right) "The first transition, this yellow board, is 12 feet and more gunny as well as glassed very heavily."

January, 2007 (Below) "The red one is 14 feet, really pulled-in, a total gun shape and heavily glassed."

2008 "The latest gun is a tri fin and is heavier than the previous one, a single fin, also 14-feet long." —Ron House, shaper

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12'1" 11'6" 11' 10'

Laird



Two boys out. Everybody else watched from the cliffs.

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nostrils. Whether they believed me or not, at that moment I made it my goal to stand-up paddle Peahi.

Almost exactly a year later, I found myself in Maui with the opportunity to make good on that promise.

I got a phone call late in the afternoon. It looked like a good opportunity. And the voice on the other end (Laird's) was excited, like a little boy who's been given permission to have a second bowl of ice cream.

So on the phone I said confidently "Yeah, we've got enough time to paddle out and get a couple."

"A couple?!?" Laird immediately corrected me. "If you get ONE, you're lucky! If you get TWO, you're greedy!"

We laughed (or at least I did) and hung up.

I arrived at Laird's house with my heart rate well above idle. We began preparing our equipment, and all the while I kept a half-cocked smile not to show my nervousness. Laird's two huge boards were lying in his yard and he asked me, "Which one do you want to ride?"

I looked at both boards and answered silently to myself, "Which ever one is most stable." These boards were long, but not very wide. In calm water most people could stand on these board blindfolded. But at Peahi, the water moves like you're surfing in a washing machine.

Laird lent me his more stable board, thankfully. We strapped the boards on Laird's 4x4 vehicle and drove off. Don King filmed us from the bed of the vehicle. We made

our way through the pineapple fields and down a washed-out road until we came to a small cliff near the water's edge. We unloaded our gear and waxed up our boards.

Laird told me again, "Don't even think about catching a wave. If you catch one, you're lucky. If you catch two, you're greedy. If you catch three you might as well retire!" Not wanting to retire just yet, I set my mind on catching two waves.

After the short climb down the rocks to the water's edge, while waiting for a lull in the action, with nearly 50lbs. of board on my shoulder, it hit me. I thought, "How the heck am I going to get off these rocks without dinging my board or my body?"

Laird waited for a surge of water and jumped in. He immediately popped to his feet and successfully paddled through the shorebreak with ease. I jumped in on the next surge and wisely remained in the prone position. There were waves visible and I knew I didn't have time for a slip up.

I had to put my head down and paddle fiercely for the outside. Just as I looked up to see where I was, the first wave broke over me and pulled me backwards. I knew I was in a desperate position so I put my head down once again and paddled even harder. The second wave stood up in front of me but didn't break until I had launched over the top of it.

The instant I knew I made it past the shorebreak, I breathed a big sigh of relief. It was a very short sigh of course. Giant swells on the horizon required my immediate attention.

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I took my cues from Laird and watched his every move. I sat just inside of him—off to the shoulder—on the Jaws lefts. It was after 5 PM and I knew I had to climb the learning curve quickly if I wanted to get a wave before sunset.

Laird got two or three while I flailed in the light offshore breezes. I thought to myself, this is a lot harder than Teahupoo or Pipeline, which I had standup paddled a few months earlier.

Laird saw my struggles, paddled up to me, and said again, “Don’t even think about catching a wave. DAY ONE – you jump off the rocks, paddle around a bit, and climb back up the rocks. That’s DAY ONE!”

After two failed attempts, I realized I was sitting too far on the shoulder and decided to take off deeper. A set came through and I opted for the last one of the bunch just in case I didn’t make it. I saw my wave and started paddling with deep and powerful strokes, the hardest I’ve ever paddled. The take-off wasn’t as steep as Pipeline so I wasn’t worried but I was awfully tired so I kept telling myself “don’t fall.” I rode it for a short while making sure I got to the shoulder and out of harms way. With my first successful ride under my belt I paddled out for a bigger one.

Once again a set on the horizon appeared and I chose to watch the first two waves from the shoulder to see where they were breaking. By the time the third wave came, I had made my way to the peak and found myself in a sprint to

RON HOUSE



the cliffs. Because I was deeper, I got in earlier and felt a sigh of relief over my tired body. I made the bottom turn, did a couple more turns and “shot the rock” on the inside left. I could hear hooting and clapping from the cliff and would have hooted myself if it wasn’t for lack of breath. I told Laird, “I can’t imagine falling on a wave out here. You’re heart rate is through the roof because of fright and

Laird’s 2008 board features a heavier glass job than used over the previous three years of Peahi gun development.



MOZO

Ekolu calling it a day, on heightened alert, trying to avoid the Peahi rock dance: “It didn’t help that it was nearly dark by the time we came in.”

adrenaline. Then you have to paddle the hardest you’ve ever paddled to even get on the wave. Now that you’re on the wave, you’re totally out of breath and lactic acid is burning in your arms. If you fall, you don’t have an extra 20 seconds of air if any at all. You basically go to sleep. The next time I do this, I’m definitely going to be in better shape.”

The paddle back towards shore was picturesque, with the sun setting at our backs. The light was failing, which made our final task of climbing up the rocks even more nerve racking.

Once again, I watched Laird for visual clues. But I was left with little help after seeing my hero and his board being tossed on the rocks. In my mind, I was the next victim. All I could do was say a prayer and trust in my years of experience in the ocean.

I waited for a lull in the surf and chose to ride the back of a smaller wave on to the rock. The surge left the board and me high and dry, with only a tiny scrape on my leg to speak of.

I did, however, have some of my ego broken... I was so winded from the whole ordeal that when I got onto the rocks, Laird had to carry my board back to the vehicle for me. It was getting dark and Laird didn’t even give me a chance to catch my breath.

The drive back to Laird’s, up the washed-out road and through the pineapple fields, was a happy one for me. Laird and I laughed and talked about our session as Don kept the camera rolling behind us.

I smiled the entire way back to the house, knowing that if someone was to ever ask me, “How did you do your first time at Jaws?” I could answer them:

“By Laird’s standards . . . I was greedy!”

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