

Irons returns home on a surf break

Surfing champ taking time to reconnect

By Jon Letman
Kaua'i People

After a dozen years of being continuously immersed in the world of competitive professional surfing, three-time world champion and North Shore native, Andy Irons is home, if only briefly, to reconnect with the joy of surfing for the sake of surfing.

Since he was 18, Irons has been on the global surf competition circuit virtually non-stop. Last year, at the age of 29, things came to a head.

"I was scared that I literally didn't like the one thing I've loved and has given me everything in life. But just knowing I don't have to do a contest in two weeks has definitely motivated me," Irons says.

Irons has just come from surfing with a buddy, taking time to talk before heading back to the water on a breezy afternoon.

The son of a California surfer and a mother who grew up skiing in Aspen, Andy Irons and his younger brother Bruce were born in Lihu'e but were raised in Ha'ena and Hanalei. As a kid, Irons used to catch waves at Pine Trees surf spot at Hanalei Bay before school.

"There were a lot of really good surfers around," Irons recalls, reciting a long list of local

IRONS BROTHERS 8TH ANNUAL PINE TREES CLASSIC

■ **When:** Saturday, Feb. 28, 8 a.m. 'til sunset

■ **Where:** Pine Trees, Hanalei Bay

■ **Who:** Kids, families, everyone is welcome!

■ **What:** The Pine Trees Classic, organized by brothers Andy and Bruce Irons, their wives, families and friends, has evolved into an annual day-long event full of surfing contests, food, games, give-aways, autograph signings and fun aimed at young Kaua'i surfers, especially 10 years and under. Sponsored by Billabong, Von Zipper, Da Kine, Oakley, Red Bull, D.C. Shoes, Nixon Watches, Tamba Surf Shop and others, Pine Trees is all about kids and families having fun.

■ **How:** A limited number of entry forms distributed at surf shops around the island go like shave ice on a hot day – get ready early for 2010!

■ **Why:** Andy Irons says, "We wanted to do a contest that was free for kids who aren't sponsored, haven't done contests and aren't in the ratings yet. For most of the kids, it's their first contest. This is just for fun for the Kaua'i home-grown local group."

surfers he grew up with on the North Shore.

"My dad tried to get us surfing young, like four years old, but the ocean was so scary!" he says.

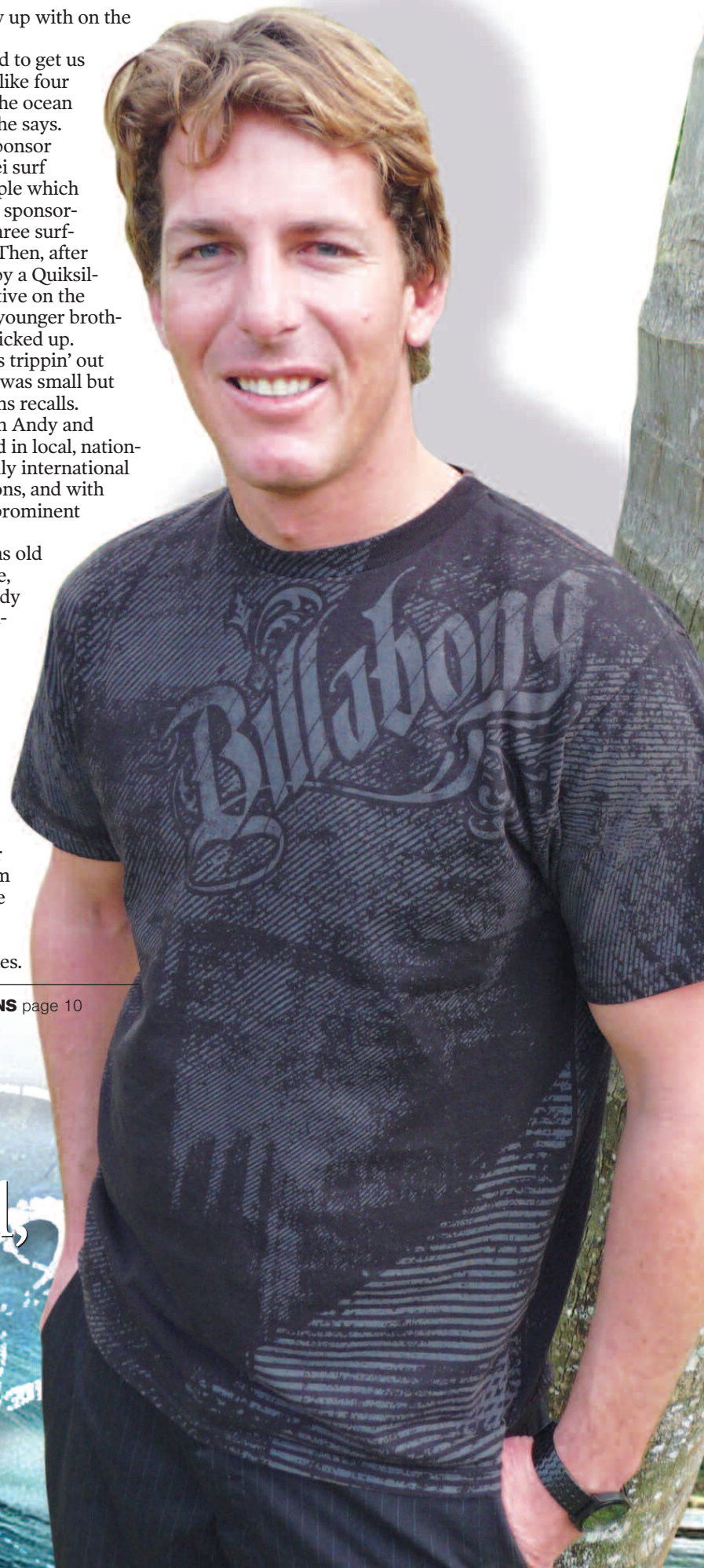
Irons' first sponsor was the Hanalei surf shop Sand People which led to a second sponsorship yielding three surfboards a year. Then, after being spotted by a Quiksilver representative on the beach, Andy's younger brother Bruce was picked up.

"The rep was trippin' out because Bruce was small but he ripped," Irons recalls.

As teens both Andy and Bruce ascended in local, national and eventually international surf competitions, and with success came prominent sponsorships.

Before he was old enough to drive, Irons had already surfed competitively in South Africa and France and earned major sponsors. At 17 he won the HIC Pipeline Masters at Pipeline on O'ahu's North Shore and after graduating from Kapa'a High, he went straight into the World Qualifying Series.

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"All you need is a passport, credit card, driver's license, three boards and a pair of trunks."

– Andy Irons

Irons: set to host kids' surfing contest

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The next dozen years were to be defined by participation in the World Championship Tour which runs every February through December. With two contests a month, a new country every two weeks and no more than 10 days at home at any one time during the year, the demanding schedule is relentless.

The routine is comprised of back-to-back contests in Australia, Tahiti, Fiji, then South Africa, California, France, Spain, Brazil then back to O'ahu, with short breaks on Kaua'i broken up by promotional video shoots around the world, depending on where the waves are best.

When Irons was 16 there was nothing cooler than getting a new board every three months, but he's 30 now, married, and wants to be near his family.

Irons describes the pro surf circuit like "being around a circus."

It's fun, he says, "but after 12 years, I want to get off this ride.

"I got to a point and thought 'What are my real priorities?'" he said, adding that his break is temporary and he plans to return to competitive surfing in 2010.

When asked where he likes to surf, there's no hesitation - "Pine Trees. That's where I learned to surf, it's Hanalei Bay, it's right in the middle, it's a beach break, it changes, it's left, it's right, it's a re-form, it's closed out, it can be long - it's just a variety.

"There are other spots but they're secret," he says with a boyish smile and a laugh.

Having surfed all over the world, from the cold waters off Chile to some of the biggest, baddest and most popular waves on the planet, perspective has given Irons a keen appreciation of Kaua'i's surf culture.

"O'ahu is like New York City. It's just so intense during the contest season. There's this weird buzz around, it's almost like . . . really aggro (aggressive).

There are a lot of pro surfers, a lot of good surfers and some really territorial surfers."

"On Kaua'i we have our local spots and everyone gets along, everyone takes their turn, where on O'ahu it can be down and dirty. Kaua'i's crowds are a lot less, the people are a lot more mellow, it's not so aggro. There aren't all these cameras on the beach so there aren't all these



photo by JON LETMAN

Lyndie and Andy Irons are enjoying more time together on Kaua'i during his break from the professional surfing circuit.

egos flaring."

Irons says surfing Pipeline on O'ahu is intense. "You've got to be so aggressive and so on your game to catch a wave."

Outside the U.S., Irons says he loves surfing Tahiti because it reminds him of home and has "really big hollow blue beautiful awesome waves." He calls Australia "playful" with nice point breaks and white sand beaches, and mentions Bali,

Sumatra and Japan as favorite places to surf.

Beyond the board, Irons loves experiencing other cultures and outlooks on life. "Seeing how other people live is the best education in the world."

Even while off the circuit Irons surfs constantly. It's a Thursday afternoon and Irons announces, "I might go to Tahiti on Saturday. It looks like it's going to be pumpin' out there."

He credits highly accurate surf forecasting for allowing him to plan last-minute surf trips.

"All you need," he says, "is a passport, credit card, driver's license, three boards and a pair of trunks."

This kind of spur of the moment excitement offers a welcome break from the predictability of constant competition and is good for Irons' own inner wave.

Even on a chilly winter North Shore day, Irons is stoked to get off the land and back in the water. His cell phone rings and he confirms an afternoon surf with a friend as soon as the interview is pau.

"It's only been a month or two and I feel 10 years younger just staying away from the mecca and hype," he says.

"The buzz is coming back for sure."