



THE
SURFER
INTERVIEW

STEPHAN
GILMO



SIMON WILLIAMS

by kim stravers

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At only 19, Stephanie Gilmore already fits neatly into a number of journalistic boxes: Youngest girl to win a women's pro event (2005 Roxy Pro, Snapper). First surfer ever to sweep two WCT events as a wildcard (Snapper, then the 2006 Havaianas Beachley Classic, Manly). First female surfer to ink a potentially seven-figure contract (Rip Curl, 2005). Third girl in ASP history to spend only one year slugging it out on the WQS before qualifying for the elite ranks (2006).

Oh, and if she's to win the tour this year, she'll be the youngest woman world champ on record, sneaking in just past Frieda Zamba.

It's her rookie year, by the way.

It seems Steph's got all the makings of a world champ: She's talented, routinely taking out her competition with eerie precision. She's driven, coming from a hyper-athletic childhood where she shone in sports like field hockey and *discus*. And she grew up spinning around at Snapper with the Australian *crème de la Top 44*. Steph goes after what she wants, but her approach is less combative than it is simply *strong*. Calculated.

But it's not just a combination of predictable elements that could very well see this girl crowned come December. Her skill and competitive streak



WITH VERY REAL EXTERNAL PRESSURES (GILMORE'S EXPECTED TO WIN A WORLD TITLE IN HER ROOKIE YEAR AS WELL AS BRIDGE SURFING'S GENDER DIVIDE IN THE NEXT FIVE), HOW DOES THE 19-YEAR-OLD COPE? BY SMILING AND SURFING RIGHT THROUGH IT.





are tempered by the kind of humility and respect rarely seen in a teenager, much less one who's been thrust into the spotlight so quickly. Case in point: When I caught up with her after her Round of 24 heat at the U.S. Open this July, I asked her how she did. "Oh, I made it through, I think," she smiled shyly...when in fact she'd just trumped Rip Curl teammate and travel buddy Jessi Miley-Dyer by more than five points. (She'd go on to edge out Miley-Dyer once more in the quarters, on her way to winning the whole thing.) Before a visit to Mexico this past spring she'd never even been on a proper surf trip with friends, just for fun. At a time when kids who can't even meet the height requirements to ride amusement-park roller coasters are being shuttled off to the world's best waves to shoot with the sport's best photographers, this is refreshing.

Steph and I sat down over tacos that Friday afternoon in Huntington to have a chat about all this. That she's top-dog material there's no doubt; sitting next to her, you feel her energy rubbing off on you. But there's more to this Kingscliff, NSW, phenom than quick snaps and beautiful cutties. Like the fact that she plays guitar, compulsively, and not just Jack Johnson-style sing-a-longs, but The Black Keys, and the Stones. *Loud*. That she wanted to be an Olympian when she was a kid. That her nickname is The Grinch. ("Apparently I look and walk like The Grinch," she explains. "Jessi Miley-Dyer decided to call me that because she's a caffeine addict.")

Did I mention that there's a Stephanie Gilmore fan page on MySpace? Right. Here's more.

SURFER: It's your first year on tour, which has come after you became the youngest surfer to win a pro women's event, and the only surfer ever to win two ASP events as a wildcard. Do you feel like there's more pressure on you to win the title on your rookie year because of all these "firsts"? Do you think it would've been different if you had worked your way into the 'CT more

gradually, and maybe had done all this later instead of so young?

STEPH: Well, there's always "what if's" and "would've been's" floating around in my head, but I can't change what's happened so far in my career—not that I even *want* to change anything, because, in my eyes, it's been so far, so good! Yep, I'm certain that due to my young success there will be extra, outside pressures to take the title in my rookie year, but I'm expecting myself to win as well. *[Laughs.]* That's why I wanted to qualify, and that's what I'm here for: to win the world title. If I can do it rookie year with all the extra pressures and expectations, then just think how much sweeter the victory will be!

Right now you're tied with Chels for first, going into the third event, in Brazil. Do you think you've got a pretty good shot at walking away with the title? What do you think is going to be your biggest hurdle?

Everything has happened so quickly, and I'm usually looking back at the events I've won, just wondering how I actually accomplished them, so I figure that I'm not even thinking about what's going on, but just focusing on enjoying the present and the opportunities to showcase my abilities in front of people. So if I'm going to win anything else this year, then that's how it will be done: heat-by-heat, moment-by-moment. Of course, all the girls on tour are extremely hungry to kick my ass—especially Chelsea, because she wants that title back and we're one-for-one in defeats right now—so there are plenty of hurdles, but the biggest would be my own self. When I discover how to be in complete control of my mind and body, I'll get back to you! *[Laughs.]*

Most girls your age would be intimidated just to surf against women like Layne and Rochelle, but here you are, beating them in heats and then asking to hear their stories. What kinds of things have you learned from them?

They are intimidating old sea hags—jokes!—and

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ANDREW SHIELD

they still surf better than me! [Laughs.] I think Layne and Rochelle should just about own the whole tour—they’ve been traveling and competing, living the tour life, for a couple years shy of my entire life. It always blows me away to even think about it, so I just love hanging out, getting in their heads and being that annoying “big” groom that’s asking questions about what’s gone down over the last decade. [Laughs.] But that’s what’s so good about the older girls on tour: They are all so happy to share their knowledge and experience with the younger generations. They have all worked so hard to get the sport to where it is today, and they still strive to see it continue to rise and gain such great support from companies that they had only dreamed of back in the day. That really inspires me when I see how much passion they put into helping set things up for the next generations. I’ve learned that you can’t always think about what’s in it for yourself...and never underestimate the old ducks! [Laughs.]

Do people give you the stink-eye because they know you have a big contract, and that you have the support that you do?

Well, I was expecting a few stink-eyes maybe from the older girls who struggled for many years on the tour. They’ve had no support from companies because it’s been so male-dominated, so I was expecting a couple stink-eyes because I just rocked up, like, “Here I am, woo! Winning contests, okay! Get all this money, let’s go! Life’s amazing!” [Laughs.] I walked up to the scene pretty much at the most perfect time possible. But not at all—I think there’s a couple quotes from Layne Beachley saying she was just so stoked to hear that the companies were actually stepping up [with sponsoring their female riders]; she’s

REARED ON AUSTRALIA’S RIGHT-HAND POINTBREAKS, GILMORE’S WELL STEEPED IN THE PROPER USE OF THE INSIDE RAIL.



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stoked to see that she’s putting hard work into women’s surfing and it’s paying off for the next generation.

You came into this at an interesting time, because even three or four years ago, when Pauline Menczer was on tour, she had no sponsors.

Yeah, a world champ!

And I heard recently that Adriano de Souza is kind of supporting a buddy of his who’s on the ‘QS, because he doesn’t have sponsors right now and can’t afford to travel to the contests.

That’s awesome! I think Silvana [Lima] and Tita Tavares, they used to, like, sponsor their whole town. I think Silvana sponsors their soccer team. That stuff’s so cool. It’s just really inspiring and definitely motivating me to do more.

If you could grab someone to help her into the WQS right now, like Adriano’s doing, who would it be?

Ah, there’s so many girls...actually, one that springs to mind is probably Dara Penfold. She’s so talented; she’s one of my favorite female surfers, for sure. I just remember as a

grom, watching her boost and land frontside airs, one in particular at Snapper one day—it was probably the first girl I had ever seen do one, so it definitely got me excited. She’s so humble, too, and I love that trait in a person. She was so awesome, surfing like a guy, and then all of a sudden she disappeared off the face of the planet. Billabong just got rid of her; she went from World Junior Champ and then just disappeared. I mean, that was world-champ material right there.

It’s really discouraging to continue to see women get screwed out of sponsorships, even now.

So much of that has to do with image. And that’s what sucks. That is the most painful thing, I think, to see so many girls who surf so well, but they can’t get sponsors or they can’t, you know, get *anywhere* because they don’t look great in a hot-pink bikini. That’s so sad. Sex sells; it’s just the way it works in this world. You’re almost expected to look the part and fit the stereotypical beach-girl image and win world titles as well. No, it’s not that bad, but I know of some extremely talented female surfers who just didn’t fit their sponsored company’s beach-girl image and, well, they no

longer can travel the world and blow minds with their talents on a surfboard. I mean, you see so many top guys, like skaters or whatever, that are just so ugly and so unmarketable, it’s ridiculous, and yet they’re still getting money and they’re in ads everywhere. *[Laughs.]*

You’ve been sponsored by Rip Curl since you were a kid. Now you’re two years into your five-year, rumored-to-be-seven-figure contract...how much loyalty do you feel to Rip because of this? Would you leave if you were offered something more lucrative with a different brand? Do you think other companies are more apt to follow suit with their female team riders now that you’ve set a bit of a precedent?

Rip Curl sponsored me when I was 12, and I’ve been a part of the “family” ever since. They have been extremely loyal to me, and I feel the same toward them. But business is business, and no one knows that better than the company you’re dealing with. As much as signing a big contract with a company can increase the stresses of performing well, I think it can really boost your confidence in knowing that you’ve got talents that companies can see enormous potential in and want to support—and, in the



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WITH A PRONOUNCED DISTASTE FOR LEFTHANDERS (TOP), THE YOUNG PHENOM DOESN’T SEEM TO HAVE A PROBLEM HANDLING AIRDROPPING WITH THE BOYS.

outcome, help you along the path to achieving your dreams and goals. If a more lucrative deal were to come along, no doubt it would be from a corporate, out-of-industry company, which I’ve heard has happened for some of the top male surfers. I’m not sure how that would go down, but the positives would really have to outweigh the negatives. For it to be of any benefit to myself and my career, I’m sure we’d have to go about the contract without being starstruck by big, green dollar signs. As for setting a precedent for other companies, it was going to happen—it was just a matter of when, and the entire sport is growing like crazy. New talents and potential faces of the sport are shining through so often now that all the companies must step up with it.

What about your own competitive nature? You were saying that even when it comes to guitar, you’d obsess over a song until you learn it, and that you’re not satisfied unless you’ve won.

Yep, I’m a weirdo! I had never really noticed my competitive nature until the last couple of years or so, and I’d recall back to when I was a grom, playing cards with my sisters or learning the guitar with my dad. Still, to this day, if I hear a cool song, then I’ll print the tabs off the Internet, go into a trance, and obsess over it until I’m able to play it without looking at the tabs. Almost a perfectionist kind of thing. And I guess it shows through in my competition surfing, because I’m not a happy camper until I’m in first place.

Along those lines, you’ve said that, in terms of improving your surfing, you’d rather watch a video of yourself than work with a coach. Why?

Everyone has different preferences and I just like to pick up on things myself. I think it’s important to be able to watch footage of yourself and pick up on areas of your technique that need improvement. Of course it’s always good to have a second opinion, too, but watch

a video of your favorite surfer before you watch your own footage, and you’re guaranteed to notice different aspects of your own style and how you can move your body in new positions to surf better.

You also mentioned that you really like performing for people, so to speak. What is it about surfing in front of a crowd that motivates you?

I’m not totally sure if it’s “performing” for people, but more *impressing* them. So when I know I’m in rhythm with the ocean and I’m feeling comfortable with the surf conditions, then my confidence is on fire, my boards feel glued to my feet, and the rest just flows along. Sure, I’m nervous as hell, but it’s so exciting, and I just love that feeling of being in the spotlight doing something that I love, as well as I know how, [because] for sure it’s gonna stoke someone out. And knowing that makes me tick. 🙌