

Surfers

Australian professional surfer Stephanie Gilmore's nickname is 'Happy Gilmore' and who wouldn't be happy at twenty two years of age with four world champion surfing titles already under your bikini belt, reports Rachael Oakes-Ash.

That's nothing, you say, Layne Beachley won seven world titles in her career. Yes, she did, but Stephanie Louise Gilmore is the youngest surfer, male or female, to ever win four world crowns back to back.

Plus Gilmore did it in style by winning four out of five Association of Surfing Professionals (ASP) World Tour events in 2010.

But don't be fooled by her happy demeanour and her trademark grin. Behind this laid back persona is a competitive young woman who likes to win.

Born in the northern New South Wales region of Murwillumbah, Gilmore grew up in the coastal town of Kingscliff where her surf mad father, Jeff Gilmore, taught her and her two elder sisters to surf. With access to some of the best waves in Australia along the New South Wales and Queensland border, Gilmore junior got to surf the best with the best.

"My Dad always brought me to Snapper Rocks, where I live now, it's the best beach for surfing due to its super long point break," explains Gilmore by Skype phone from the apartment she bought in

Rainbow Bay, Tweed Heads, after signing a million dollar contract with Rip Curl while still at school.

"There was access to so many pro surfers like Mick Fanning and Mark Occhilupo and I have been able to watch them my whole life. They were out there every day. I am part of the Snapper board riders club and all the pros were members too. Every second weekend the pros are at home and they'd be there hanging out with all of us grommets (rookie surfers).

It's why I live here now, in the same area, it's really down to earth and there are so many pro surfers around that you don't walk down the street with people wanting your autograph."

There must be something in the Tweed Heads water because at 17 Gilmore rocked the surfing world as a wild card entry to the Roxy Gold Coast Pro tournament at her home beach of Snapper Rocks, making news headlines as the girl from nowhere who beat world champion, Layne Beachley.

"It was the first event when I got to take a day off school," says Gilmore, who entered, and won, her first amateur competition at 11. "I was sitting



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at recess with my friends at school and we were laughing saying 'imagine if I won'. Then I got out there and I actually got past all the heats and then I was surfing against Layne. I kept thinking, if I make this next heat I will get a day off school, but instead I won the whole thing."

Her father and manager Jeff, remembers it well. "I guess I felt a moment of, wow, when she answered back to, at the time, six-time-world title champion Layne Beachley. I was thinking how exciting it was for Steph just to surf against the greatest woman surfer we know. But as the 25 minutes progressed Steph continued to build momentum, and the more Layne's scores improved, Steph picked up the pace. It wasn't that I thought Steph would win multiple titles, just that she was going to be a champion. It is hard to believe she is so young with achievements like this."

It is not every day that you can beat your hero in the first meeting. Growing up female in the male dominated world of surfing Gilmore looked up to fellow Aussie surfer chicks like Pam BurrIDGE, who won a World Title in 1990, Lisa Andersen, who won four back to back world titles from 1994 to 1997, and the most successful female surfer to date, Layne Beachley.

"The first two years I was on tour, Layne was still on tour too," says Gilmore, who considers Beachley her mentor. "She was a good one to watch as she is on a whole other level to other girls. She travelled by herself and did her own thing but she was very willing to open up and answer questions and share her wisdom with me. What I enjoyed observing was that she wasn't just a surfer; she's an athlete and a businesswoman. She was willing to speak her mind to the ASP and she wasn't afraid to speak to the guys about why women's surfing is so great and why we need the same respect. The total prize pool for a men's pro event is still about \$500,000 and total for women's is only \$100,000. The winners get \$40 to 50,000 and women only get \$15,000. I understand there are more men competing but at the same time we've spent the same amount of money as they have to get to these events."

The prize money may be uneven but Gilmore has still built a decent nest egg. She collected \$300,000 in prize money in her first three years of professional surfing, not to mention sponsorship dollars from Rip Curl, Sanitarium Up & Go and Ford.

Encouraged by her parents, she did get a complete education. "I hassled her enough to get her school work done," recalls her father. Gilmore credits graduating high school for her ability to handle the professional side of being a world class athlete – she has invested her money in three properties with occasional spending sprees on her other loves, fashion and music.

"I have played guitar since I was 10," says Gilmore who listens to music on tour for chill-out time. "I am an old soul, I listen to a lot of Jimmy Hendrix, John Lee Hooker and Jeff Buckley. My mum listens to a lot of that stuff including Bob Dylan, and I remember trying to play Dad's songbooks when I was younger, he's a pretty good singer. It's my back-up plan, music, I've even picked up a couple of electric guitars in my travels."

Not that she needs a backup plan. The fashion mad Gilmore shares her passion for edgier designer labels like Alexander McQueen and Alexander Wang with her sister,

A photograph of a female surfer riding a barrel wave. She is in a crouched position on her surfboard, smiling at the camera. The wave is a deep blue color and is curling over her. The background is a bright, overcast sky.

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Top: Mental strength is as important as fitness and skill in the competitive world of professional surfing. Gilmore gets her mental edge by training at the CHEK institute.

Above right: Giving back to the community is a part that Gilmore takes seriously. She is involved in numerous charities and supports children's surfing contests.

Above left: Gilmore poses with the Laureus World Action Sports person of the Year award that she won earlier this year.

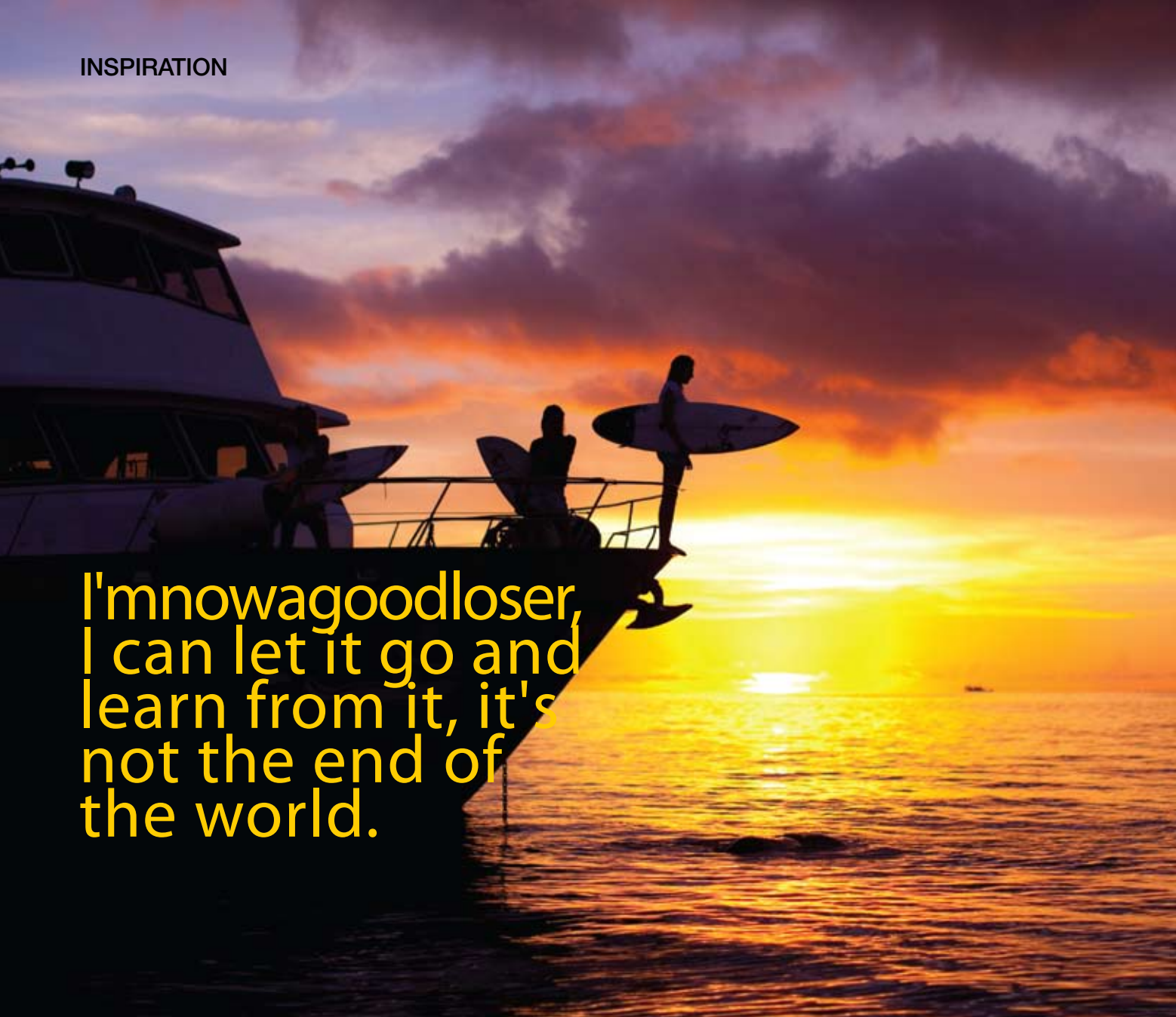
Whitney, who she describes as the 'glamorous one'. Her own fashion label, Stephanie Gilmore for Rip Curl, is now on the cards as she is working with Mary Miller, the head designer.

"It's going to be a globally distributed brand. It's not hardcore surf and not high fashion but it is definitely higher quality than just board shorts," laughs Gilmore.

Professional surfer and fashion designer, Gilmore takes it all in her stride and still finds time to give back to the community. Her smiling face is often seen at the local community kids surf contests and

she is an ambassador for the Surf Life Saving Clubs of Australia and also for the Black Dog Institute that helps people with depression.

"Being active and physically healthy is so important, especially to young girls," says Gilmore when asked about being a role model. "Being healthy and being skinny are two different things. I love to look at the tennis athletes, they work really hard and they're on the red carpet looking healthy, fit and like young girls having fun. That represents the perfect role model for girls as it's achievable and not an unhealthy, 'starve yourself' image."



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Wrestling with her own demons on the competition circuit has taken some concentrated work with Jan Carton at the CHEK institute (Corrective Holistic Exercise Kinesiology) on the Gold Coast. Gilmore trains with her for three hours at a time, three times a week.

“Ninety minutes of what we do may be physical and the other ninety minutes may just be talking, head space is so important to winning or losing,” says Gilmore. “I’m now a good loser, I can let it go and learn from it, it’s not the end of the world. For a long time I used to do the replay in my head of what I did wrong but I have learnt an incredible amount of sports psychology from Jan.”

Gilmore is aware she is blessed and in her humble

way claims ‘luck’ to play a big part in her success. “In the ocean I feel there is a lot of luck involved with waves but I also believe you can make your own luck,” explains Gilmore. “You’d be surprised how often a wave pops up when you need it if you are in the right head space. Currently I love competing but I know that I have so much room for improvement. You can win a world title but in whose eyes are you the best surfer in the world? Yes, I would love to win another world title. But there’s no set number, if I am not enjoying it anymore that’s when I will move onto my back up plan and become a rock star.”

Her laugh gives away the joke but we suspect if she plays the guitar like she rides a surfboard, she’s got a hit recording career ahead of her. ❖

Above: The ASP World Tour takes Gilmore to some of the most exotic locations on the planet. She plans to continue competitive surfing until the day she stops enjoying it.