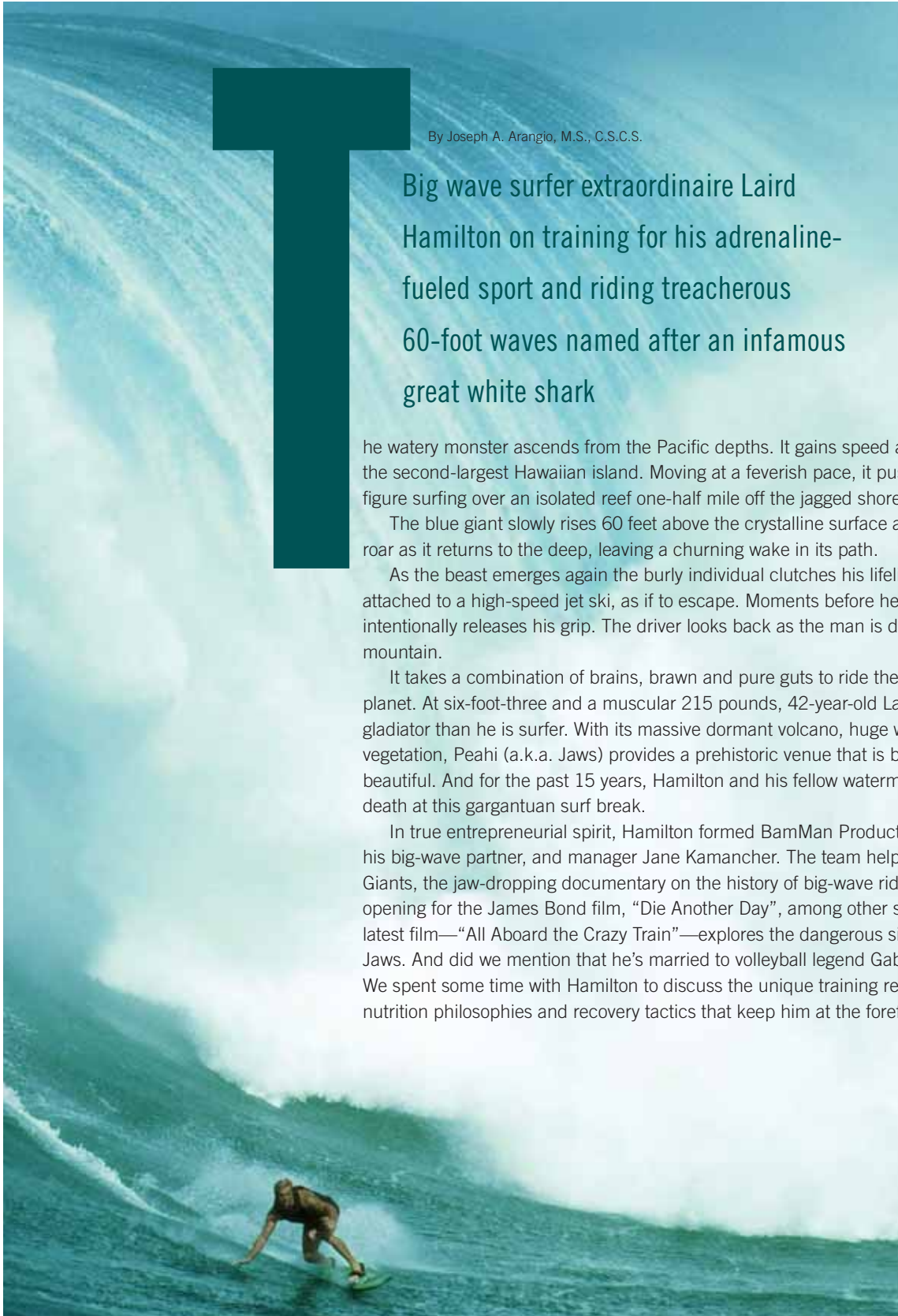


Chairman of the Board



By Joseph A. Arangio, M.S., C.S.C.S.

Big wave surfer extraordinaire Laird Hamilton on training for his adrenaline-fueled sport and riding treacherous 60-foot waves named after an infamous great white shark

The watery monster ascends from the Pacific depths. It gains speed as it looms toward Maui, the second-largest Hawaiian island. Moving at a feverish pace, it pushes toward a bronzed figure surfing over an isolated reef one-half mile off the jagged shoreline.

The blue giant slowly rises 60 feet above the crystalline surface and emits a concussive roar as it returns to the deep, leaving a churning wake in its path.

As the beast emerges again the burly individual clutches his lifeline, a 25-foot tow rope attached to a high-speed jet ski, as if to escape. Moments before he is pulled to safety, he intentionally releases his grip. The driver looks back as the man is drawn into the rising liquid mountain.

It takes a combination of brains, brawn and pure guts to ride the largest waves on the planet. At six-foot-three and a muscular 215 pounds, 42-year-old Laird Hamilton is more gladiator than he is surfer. With its massive dormant volcano, huge waves and thick tropical vegetation, Peahi (a.k.a. Jaws) provides a prehistoric venue that is both menacing and beautiful. And for the past 15 years, Hamilton and his fellow watermen have been defying death at this gargantuan surf break.

In true entrepreneurial spirit, Hamilton formed BamMan Productions with Dave Kolama, his big-wave partner, and manager Jane Kamancher. The team helped produce *Riding Giants*, the jaw-dropping documentary on the history of big-wave riding, as well as the opening for the James Bond film, “Die Another Day”, among other surf-related projects. His latest film—“All Aboard the Crazy Train”—explores the dangerous side of big-wave surfing at Jaws. And did we mention that he’s married to volleyball legend Gabrielle Reece?

We spent some time with Hamilton to discuss the unique training regimen, back-to-basics nutrition philosophies and recovery tactics that keep him at the forefront of the sport.

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Laird's favorite exercise is stand-up paddleboarding, which works his entire body.

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LE: How is big-wave surfing different from traditional wave riding, in terms of equipment?

HAMILTON: Traditional surfboards were very large, around 12 feet, for paddling out to the wave. Today, the boards we use and the boards that a professional surfer rides with are very similar, except ours are equipped with foot straps. Our boards are between 5' 10" and 6' 4" in length. A top surfer would ride this style of board in 8- to 10-foot waves, and as the surf got bigger you would need a longer board in order to paddle. We ride a similar-dimension board, but in waves that are six to eight times larger.

Plus the big-wave board is a lot stronger in order to deal with the increased speed and pressure. They weigh more and they're thinner and narrower, so they have less flotation than what world-champion surfers, Andy Irons or Kelly Slater, would be riding.

Unlike traditional surfing where you paddle out on your board, we use a motorized vehicle to get to the wave. We have a jet ski, like what a lifeguard would use in a rescue situation. It has a water-ski handle connected to a tow rope. We're also using flotation vests. They act as body armor to protect you from impact and keep you afloat.

LE: Provide a play-by-play description of a typical day in the water.

HAMILTON: In the old days, if you spent the entire day trying to catch eight to 10 great waves that was considered a phenomenal day. We ride somewhere between 30 to 50 waves in a day. So the volume of waves we catch is greater. And the speed of a big wave is greater. Every time a wave increases 10 feet in height, it also increases in speed by about 5 miles per hour. At times the waves are moving at 30 miles per hour or more, before they hit the reef. That simple fact eliminates the ability to paddle out through the surf to catch this type of wave.

LE: Describe the sheer magnitude of big wave surfing.

HAMILTON: It's difficult to describe the power of one of these waves—it's like trying to describe a color.

On any given day we can have waves ranging from 50- to 80-foot faces. As far as distance is concerned, you'll be covering a few football fields on a single ride. And we'll hit speeds of over 40 miles per hour.

LE: Where do you spend most of your time in the water?

HAMILTON: I'll spend most of my time at a place in Maui, called Peahi, otherwise known to the world as Jaws. We initially started towing on Oahu's North Shore. We refined our skills there. This big wave, until that point, was unriden. It was an unsurfed wave until we started the whole tow-in surfing concept back in the early 90s.

LE: How do you get to the wave?

HAMILTON: This wave is near a rugged cliff-lined coast with big-boulder beaches, so it takes as much risk to enter and leave the sea as it does to ride the wave.





We'll enter the water from a harbor or a secluded beach about 4 to 5 miles away, and motor to the location. At this spot the waves break about one-quarter to one-half mile offshore. Of course there are places in the middle of the ocean that have big waves, too. But this particular wave at Peahi is probably the most challenging big wave in the world, as far as the size, skill required to ride it, unpredictability of the conditions and ruggedness of the location. When the surf is big here, this seems to be the wave that is most challenging in the surfing world.

LE: What makes the surf at Peahi so unique?

HAMILTON: A combination of the topography of the ocean floor and its location. It faces exposed, due north, to the open Pacific. Some of the largest ground swells in the world hit it dead on, and the landscape of the ocean floor magnifies the volume of the surf to the point where it can double or triple it. Plus Maui is one of the windiest places in the world—we get tons of refraction off of the cliffs, which make the surface of the water choppy. I don't know if it's coincidence or not, but it lies at the base of the largest dormant

volcano in the world. Peahi also has warm water and reasonable accessibility by rescue personnel. So it's as safe as it can be under the circumstances.

LE: Talk about foilboarding, and how it is the next step in the evolution of surfing.

HAMILTON: Basically it's an efficient wave-riding instrument. A foil is like a miniature airplane that is connected to a board by a strut. But this airplane is flying under the water.

You control the plane in a coordinated balancing act; you lean back and the plane rises, lean forward and the plane dives. The main objective is to keep the foil right below the surface and not allow it to leave the water; otherwise you'll lose all of your lift.

It allows you to ride waves that aren't breaking and ride them for minutes at a time.

LE: In big wave surfing, the possibility of falling off of a wave is not a question of if, but rather when. Describe, mentally and physically, the feeling of falling off of a big wave.

HAMILTON: Imagine having an Olympic-sized swimming pool of water dumped on top of you, in a few seconds. Guys break their eardrums, snap their femurs, pull their shoulders out of joint and have all



Laird and his wife, volleyball legend Gabrielle Reece.

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of these heavy injuries just from landing in the impact zone of the wave.

Honestly, I don't do a lot of falling. Our surfing revolves around not making those mistakes. Faulty equipment, other people, a wave doing something that you don't expect—which does not usually happen unless someone affected the wave—causes a lot more accidents.

Getting hammered by a big wave is like a fight; if you know that you're going to get hit, you exhale and brace yourself for impact. You breathe out, take a huge breath of air and prepare for what we call the ride after the ride.

And then you're spinning around in space. When I'm under, I'll close my eyes because I can feel where the surface is. Opening the eyes can be disorienting. If you're down deep and start to swim up after the wave let you go, then I'll open my eyes. Or if I'm diving under a giant wave and I'm trying to avoid the explosions... there are these underwater columns of air coming down at you. If you go into them you get pushed to the bottom. So you definitely avoid those. Sometimes you get rag-dolled, like a dog shakes a toy in his mouth, and the arms and legs go everywhere.

You need the ability to relax, like in wrestling, when you're being pinned. You fight until the guy lets up. When the wave lets up you try to get to the surface, where the air is. And there's a way to keep your arms

and legs spread open so you don't get pushed as deep. If you curl up into a ball, you'll get pushed really deep—sometimes 30 to 40 feet below the surface. It's the unappreciated art of crashing and surviving. Every athlete who is good at what they do, no matter what sport it is, knows how to crash well. But the greatest art of crashing is not crashing at all (laughs).

LE: So, how far are you traveling under water when you fall?

HAMILTON: You may travel the length of a few football fields under water, but that's not good. As the wave breaks on you, you could be 30 to 40 feet down and be driven to the surface instantly, and then sucked right back down again.

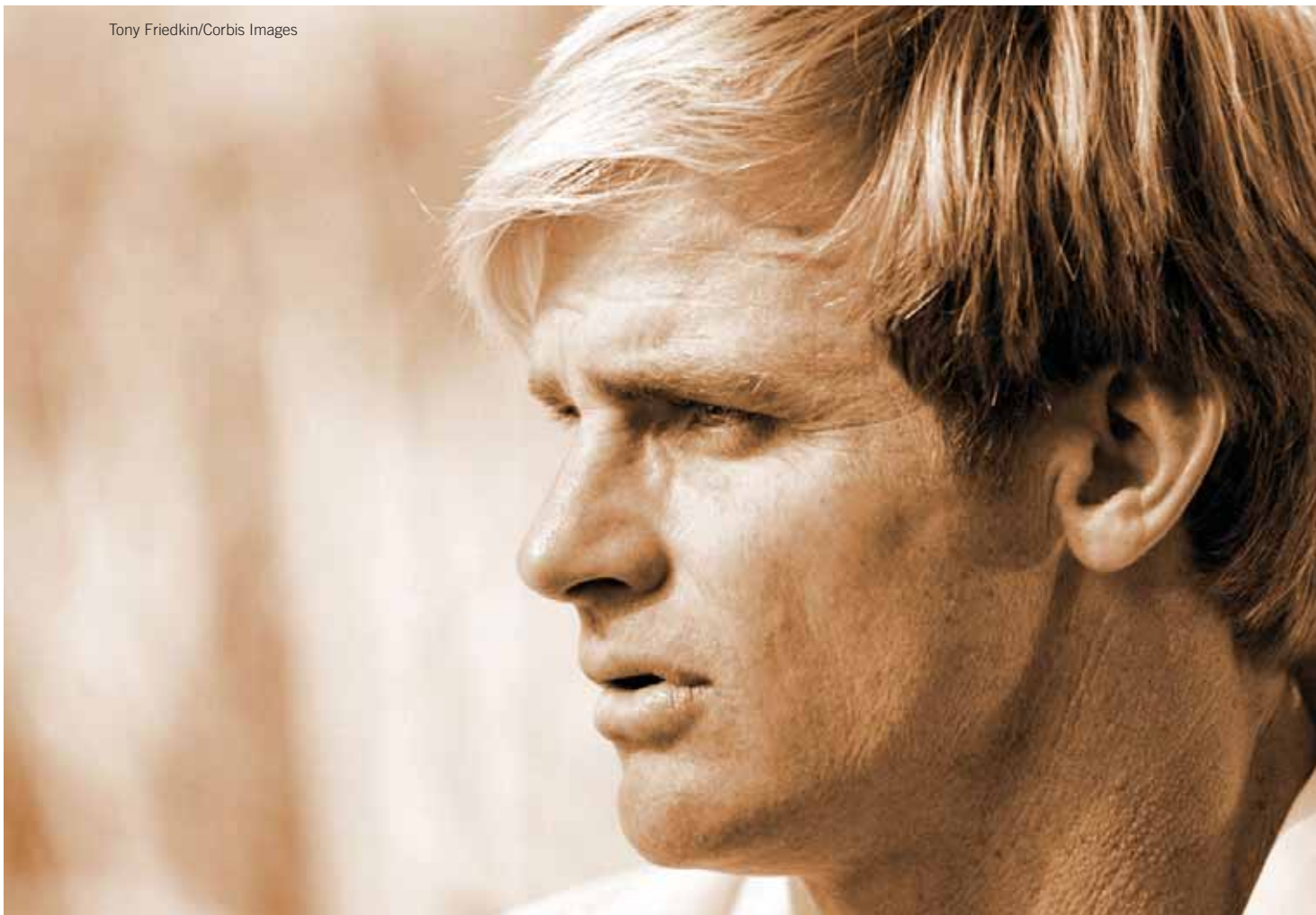
LE: How do you prepare your body and mind for the rigors of the sport?

HAMILTON: I'll typically warm up with a light run. But if the surf is giant, I'm not very good at warming up because my adrenaline is pumping so hard.

I've done a lot of ashtanga yoga to improve my flexibility. I'll hold specific yoga positions, while riding a smaller wave, on a bigger surfboard.

We drag logs in the sand, carry logs in the sand and do exercises with heavy rocks. When you pick up a heavy rock, it's tough to get a good grip. This

Tony Friedkin/Corbis Images





instability helps to train the muscles in a new way.

We'll sprint up steep sand dunes on the beach—it exhausts you to the core. Plus, swimming is an all-around total-body workout. I also have a 90-pound mountain bike that I use for hill climbing. And I'll ride for distance on a road bike.

But the single greatest all-around exercise that I do is stand-up paddleboarding, where I stand up on a long surfboard and row with an extended outrigger paddle. It works my entire body, from toes to neck. Because you're balancing the whole time, and you're paddling, you really hit your core muscles. And the paddling helps you work the upper body, since you paddle as you ride waves on the board.

We're starting to ride bigger waves with the paddleboard and I have done a few 40-mile, 7-hour channel crossings. This week I'm crossing the English Channel on the stand-up paddleboard. The first day I'll cycle for 80 miles and then I do a 26-mile channel crossing. The second day I'll do a 150-mile bike ride.

When the surf is not big at Jaws I'll put on a mask and fins and swim out, just to get acclimated to the environment. That way I learn every nook and cranny, so that when you get washed up on the rocks on a giant day, you're mentally comfortable with the surroundings.

LE: Do you do any resistance training?

HAMILTON: I do an incredible weight-lifting circuit with Don Wildman, the founder of Bally Total Fitness. He's like 73 years old and still a total animal in the gym. The circuit takes over two hours. I use really high reps with most of my lifting. We'll do 20 exercises in one circuit. For example, upright rows to shoulder presses to leg presses, and so forth. The first round we'll do 30 reps of each movement, second round is 20 reps, third round is 10 reps, down to about 5 reps per move. Then we'll come back up from 5 reps back to 30 reps. We always set the resistance so that we fail around the desired number of reps.

During resistance training activity I use a complete range of motion, or even hyperextended range of motion. This prepares me for the extreme body positions that I may experience in the water.

I'll stand on a BOSU ball while I do most of my movements, for the added balance and stability challenge. And we keep the core muscles turned on by combining all seated movements with an abdominal exercise.

LE: So you're not really bulking up with this type of training.

HAMILTON: It's tough to build a lot of mass with the super-high volume of training that we do, but we get very strong. I'll start with 50 pounds, in each hand, for a dumbbell shoulder press at 30 reps; by the last circuit, I'm using 80 pounds for 5 reps.

But if I do 3 sets of 12 reps with 60-second rest intervals between sets, I start to build too much muscle mass. If I'm even 10 pounds over my ideal bodyweight,

I lose about 20 percent of my cardiovascular capabilities. So at 225 pounds I'm sucking wind more than at 215 pounds.

LE: With all of this activity, when do you give your body a break?

HAMILTON: The most difficult thing for me to do is take days off from training, but my body benefits if I have recovery time. And I never compromise my sleep—I'm in bed by about 10:30 every night. Good sleep allows me to push myself like I do and recharge between workouts.

If I'm exhausted after a huge workout it's good to do a little cardiovascular activity to speed my recovery. Being out in the ocean is also very therapeutic for me. It helps me recharge mentally and physically.

LE: What role does nutrition play in your overall training plan?

HAMILTON: I am very disciplined when it comes to my diet. Paul Chek has a huge influence on my nutrition philosophies. I follow his nutrition guidelines. Like if you can't pronounce it, don't eat it. If it wasn't here 10,000 years ago, don't eat it. Aside from my espresso and pinot noir, I eat very clean. No dairy, no wheat, no pasta or bread and barely any grains. And no refined sugars. When you avoid refined sugar for a long period of time, you begin to realize how sweet many foods are naturally.

Most of my diet consists of a portion of lean protein—like fish, beef or chicken—and a fruit or vegetable portion. I eat foods with high water content, too. If you eat like this you walk away from the table feeling satisfied, not stuffed.

I have a few friends who are totally psycho about their diet and it consumes a big part of their life. For me it's about balance. Occasionally I'll eat a baguette with cheese. Because I don't want my cadaver to be too healthy [laughs].

Plus my wife cooks excellent healthy dishes. I love wild poached salmon with fresh spinach salad.

LE: Do you ever use meal-replacement shakes?

HAMILTON: Before a morning training session I'll drink a shake or eat a bar or something that does not require too much energy to digest. I don't like to train with food in my stomach.

I did some mountain biking with Lance Armstrong a few weeks ago. We're riding up this hill and my heart rate was about 185 beats per minute and we're having a conversation. He looks over at me and asks me where my water bottle is. And I say, "I don't have any, I don't bring water." He looks at me like I'm crazy (laughs). But I drink a ton of fluids in the morning...

I grew up surfing and we would go surf for 4 to 6 hours in a session. We never drank anything in the water. It's not like you're surfing and say, "where's my water bottle?" I'm not saying that this practice is good for you or you'll get maximal performance, it's just the

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nature of surfing. And I've conditioned myself over the years to surf for several hours without fluids.

I've also been training myself to handle cold water. So no matter where I am, I always do cold showers after the hot shower. It helps me recover from a workout, too.

The last paddle I did was a 7-hour, 40-mile endurance paddle. Every 30 minutes I drank fluids and ate bars to keep my insulin levels stabilized. It's all about how much demand you place on your body.

Basically it's potato chips in, potato chips out. If you eat garbage, you'll perform like garbage. There's another saying: A hot fire burns any kind of wood. In other words, if your body is highly conditioned, a piece of cake will burn up in a flash—it's metabolized quickly. Again, there must be a happy balance in your eating plan. If you eat too clean all of the time, and then you splurge on bread and cheese one day, it's like your body won't be prepared to deal and may react adversely.

If you look at most vegetarians, they don't look that

healthy. I see these guys and they look sick yet they're supposed to be eating so healthy. But we have canine teeth and we're supposed to eat meat. Our body is designed to digest it.

LE: How about nutritional supplements?

HAMILTON: Many foods nowadays have fewer nutrients than they did years ago, so you need supplements to make up the difference. I notice personally that if I don't take fish oil and vitamin C, my performance drops.

LE: Describe your perfect ride.

HAMILTON: My perfect ride never ends [laughs]. It's effortless and I'm in perpetual motion. And every moment is the only moment that exists. As I drop in, I'm projecting to the next move and turn. I'm looking ahead but I only exist in the moment. There are no people in my way and no thoughts in my mind. For me, it's about the purity of the ride itself.