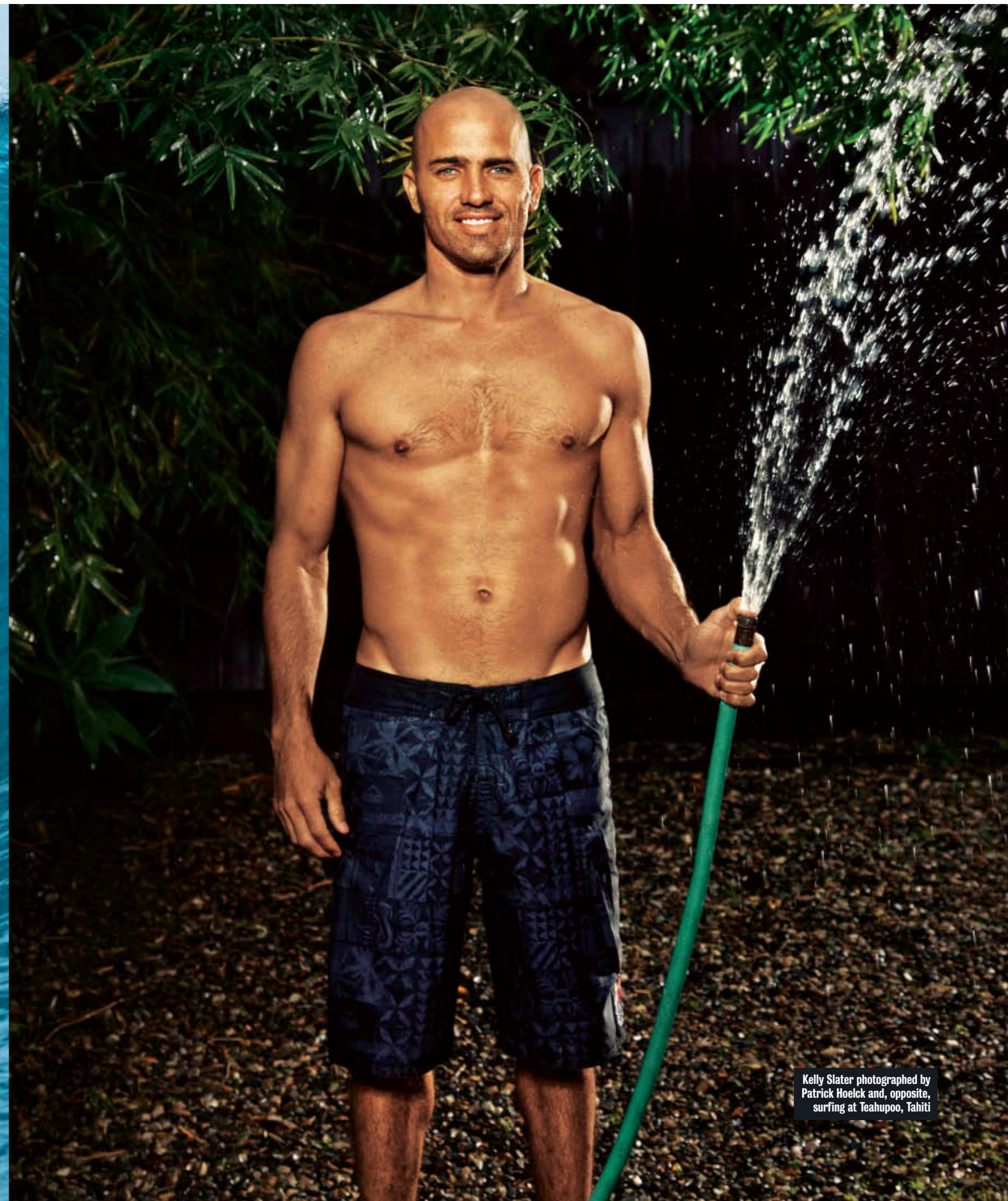


ON A ROLL: MEET THE WORLD'S GREATEST SURFER

For 30 years, one man has dominated surfing – no other athlete comes close to matching his record. Kelly Slater is the sport's global star and still its poster boy at 49. Helena de Bertodano meets the king of the board at his Surf Ranch in California



Kelly Slater photographed by Patrick Hoelck and, opposite, surfing at Teahupoo, Tahiti

At the Billabong Pipe Masters in Oahu, 2019



Practising at Oahu's North Shore, 2020



IT'S BEEN SAID THAT KELLY SLATER IS TO SURFING WHAT FRANK SINATRA WAS TO GROONING

Let's go catch a couple of waves," says Kelly Slater, 11 times world champion surfer, standing in front of me wearing only a pair of turquoise swimming trunks, surfboards tucked under each arm. For a terrifying moment I think he is asking me to surf too. I may have lived in California for nearly a decade but my surfing skills are minimal. Slater, on the other hand, is known in the surf world as the Goat, the Greatest of All Time. With his 11 world titles and 55 career victories, he is both the youngest and oldest world champion in history.

No other athlete comes close to matching Slater's sporting prowess for such an extended period of time. Not Michael Jordan, not Pelé, not even Muhammad Ali. As *GQ* magazine put it in 2014, "To find the proper analogy you need to look outside sport: Slater is to surfing what Sinatra was to crooning." Seven years later Slater, 49, is still competing at championship level – he is even first reserve for the Olympics, which includes surfing this year for the first time, having missed out by a hair's breadth in the selection process. The two US surfers who were chosen – John John Florence and Kolohe Andino – are both more than two decades younger than him. Slater may yet compete because both Florence and Andino are recovering from injuries.

But he is almost as well known off the surfboard. Named one of *People's* magazine "50 most beautiful" in 1991, he has modelled for Versace, starred in *Baywatch* and dated Pamela Anderson (long after they first met on *Baywatch*). He has his own eco clothing brand, Outerknown, and is passionate about helping the environment.

"Jump on the ski," Slater urges (to my relief he is not expecting me to surf). "Just take your

At Rip Curl Pro Portugal, 2019



sandals off. You shouldn't get wet." Seconds later we are roaring off on a jet ski with Connor O'Leary, a 27-year-old Australian pro. Slater quickly peels off with a board and expertly navigates a monstrous wave, gliding straight up its face before executing several perfect turns, including a 360-degree aerial, then tucking down for the long barrel ahead. For a few seconds he is invisible, the water arcing in a spray of diamonds over his body. He shoots out at the end of the tube and dives into the water. The jet ski wheels round to pick him up and he hauls himself onto it, then sits back to back with me, soaking my T-shirt, which is a relief as it is 42C out here today.

We are at the Surf Ranch in Lemoore, a 2,000ft-long basin in central California, which produces the best mechanical wave in the world. The brainchild of Slater himself, it opened six years ago and is reshaping the surfing world with its revolutionary wave technology. The best surfers from all over the globe have gathered here this week for a pro

contest, part of the 2021 Championship Tour, and Slater is back in the game after recovering from a back injury.

I had arrived at the ranch the previous day for this interview but Slater had not shown up – which, I quickly gather, is par for the course. No one knows when or if he is arriving, although there are clues. He has swapped most of his practice waves with individual surfers. "This is classic Kelly," says Erik Logan, CEO of the World Surf League, with affectionate frustration. "He's made it so f***ing complicated, nobody knows when he's surfing. Somehow he's figured out a way to win the day already."

"It's like wrangling a cat," says Will Dove, who oversees Slater's schedule at the ranch. Meanwhile Colin Carlos, his manager back in Los Angeles, is on the phone optimistically rescheduling me for a breakfast interview with Slater the following morning. Everyone at the Surf Ranch finds this hilarious. "It's not going to happen," they tell me. "Kelly is not a morning person."

My best bet, I am told, is to hang out late at the ranch. He has an Airstream trailer on the property, where he sleeps when he is here. But by 10.30pm there is still no sign of Slater and the three last surfers have finished their night waves. They offer me a lift back to my motel. Australian surfer Morgan Cibilic, aged 21 and currently ranked fourth in the world, is in the front. "You can interview me instead if you want," he suggests. OK, I say. How does he rate his chances against Slater this weekend? "Kelly's pretty good out there; he did build it," replies Cibilic doubtfully. Liam O'Brien, 22, an Australian wildcard, chimes in: "Morgan will beat Kelly. No doubt."

Just after 8am the next day, I am back at the ranch, ready for my breakfast interview. It goes without saying that Slater has not

PREVIOUS SPREAD: TIM MCKENNA, CPLA/HEADPRESS/EVEMINE. THIS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES

arrived. I eat breakfast alone: a very nice lemon blueberry cake. So there is that. Logan, the CEO, passes my table. No, he sighs, no news: "It's Kelly's world. We just live in it."

I wander around the basin to his Airstream, just in case he has managed to sneak in quietly. But no. I take a photo of the Airstream for the hell of it. This reminds me of the time I resorted to taking a photo of George Best's wine glass; he had also bailed on an interview at the last minute. Are all great sporting heroes as unreliable as this?

But there is still hope. Slater has a practice wave scheduled at 10.08am and shortly before there is a flurry of activity. Someone has "eyes on the Goat". The news spreads fast and the energy of the ranch subtly shifts. Now the real competition can begin.

Driving a huge black SUV full of surfboards, Slater pulls up near the water and gets out barefoot, an apple core tumbling to the ground and his tiny dog, Action, scampering behind him. "He forgot his shoes," explains Kalani Miller, his girlfriend, who has done most of the driving from their home four hours away in San Clemente. Slater, it transpires, has only just flown in from Hawaii.

He has barely slept but exudes energy. He races to the boardroom (not that sort of boardroom), camera crews trailing him. As he waxes his board he banters with the other surfers, donning a Father Christmas hat that someone has left in his locker and updating everyone on conditions in Hawaii. "Sixteen foot waves. I may pop back over next week."

Slater's schedule is dictated by waves. If he wakes up and hears the waves are good in Mexico or Bali, he's off. "He flies by the seat of his pants," says Miller. "I always have my bags packed just in case. The number of flights that we miss, change, book on the way to the airport, I couldn't even tell you."

Slater tells me about the time he pulled up to the kerb at Los Angeles airport 17 minutes before a flight to Chile. "Luckily the flight manager was a surfing fan." Miller keeps the show on the road – just. "She's really organised. She makes lists every day of what we have to do. I'm like, 'Stop bothering me with lists!'"

The last year, of course, has been trickier for travel with pandemic and quarantine rules. Nevertheless Slater has managed to spend most of that time between Bali, Australia, where he has a house on the Gold Coast, and Hawaii, where he also has a house.

We're out on the water now and I'm trying to interview Slater on the back of the jet ski. Is it easier to surf here than in the open sea? "Surprisingly, no," shouts Slater above the roar of the engine. "It has anomalies. There are currents in here. And you rarely ride a wave this long in the ocean."

And then he's off, paddling out to the next wave; it starts well but he falls in the barrel



HIS FATHER DRANK HEAVILY. 'SURFING WAS A SAFE PLACE. I FITTED INTO THE OCEAN. NOTHING ELSE MATTERED'



Top: with Pamela Anderson in Australia, 1998.
Above: with his girlfriend, Kalani Miller

and admonishes himself. "I was a little lazy on it. I'm so mentally and physically exhausted that I couldn't really picture what I needed to do to get in the right place."

By his fourth wave he is back on form. Everyone has come out to watch. As he climbs off the jet ski the camera crews swarm him, peppering him with questions about the Olympics. "If the Olympics were to run today, I'm in. But I'm third man so I'm waiting in the wings..."

Back at his Airstream he is still fizzing with energy and picks up a BB air pistol, asking me if I have ever used one. "No," I say, sensing that I'm not going to get out of this one. A few seconds later we are at the water's edge and he is teaching me how to load the gun. "There's no one around so you won't shoot anyone," he says reassuringly. "Cock it all the way. Do it forcefully. Jam that thing. And turn your body a little more to the side, almost like you're surfing." He directs me to aim at a buoy on the water and

miraculously the BB lands nearby. "Oh my gosh," he exclaims. "Did you see it? It was so close." Now he's really enthused: "It's superfun. I'm always here at night by myself so I'll just shoot at stuff. This brings up my childhood: we had BB guns and we'd try to shoot the minnows along the side of the river."

Slater's childhood was not easy. Born in Cocoa Beach, Florida, he was the middle of three sons. His father, who owned a bait shop, drank heavily, leading to raging arguments with his mother, who was always trying to throw him out. "I remember one night when I was about eight and she was yelling, 'Get out of here,' and she was dead serious. I saw it in her face. I begged her not to make him leave. To me, that was like the end of life. I think she just tolerated another few years because of me."

Naturally an extrovert, Slater says his character altered as the situation at home became worse. "I was very outgoing. At school, I would show off and I was loud. And then there was a change in me. I realised it was real serious at home and I became insecure. I was terrified my mom was going to abandon us. I got separation anxiety really bad and she couldn't be out of my sight. She used to say [she would leave] too."

Fortunately by then he had discovered a passion for surfing: it was the one place where he felt in control. "Surfing gave me a safe place. I felt like I fitted into the ocean and the energy. Nothing else really mattered."

By the age of 11, he was already winning competitions. The home situation had become so bad that his father had finally left. "And things were better immediately between them. Literally the next day I remember him coming over with flowers for her."

Those early wins were better than any of the world titles that came later. "The best win emotionally was when I was 12 years old. I won the superheat, beating the juniors and the seniors. And I won a trip to Hawaii. I cried for an hour in the bath because I was so happy." He has tears in his eyes now.

"I get emotional talking about it. That trip changed my life. I made all my friends and won the US amateur title." The trip only included the plane ticket, so he slept on the floor of someone's house for \$1.25 a night. "And I now have a house on the beach in Pipeline [a famous surf reef break in Hawaii]. It's absurd."

Gradually he began to win more money and was able to help his mother. "At 13 I won two pro contests and I made a few thousand bucks each one. We weren't homeless but my mom was struggling every month. I didn't have a silver spoon. And so for me to make \$2,000 at a surf contest was like: I'm rich now. It was fantasy stuff."

It spurred him on to greater heights. "I've been very goal-oriented and disciplined my whole life since I was a kid. I started

realising, 'I can do something great with my life – if I don't f*** it up.'

At 20 he won his first world title. He ruled the waves between 1993-1998, winning five straight titles. "I probably sounded really brash to the seasoned competitors because I didn't think the level was very good." In 1999 he attempted to retire but found himself unable to resist the urge of competing against a new generation of surfers, topped by Hawaii's Andy Irons, and he rejoined the tour full time in 2002. Irons beat him for three years, with Slater reclaiming the title in 2005. "If you're going to go through more than a single generation in any sport, you're going to have to reinvent yourself," he says today. He won his 11th world title in 2011 at the age of 39. And he's still going strong, the standard rising to meet him. "I'm really happy with the level now. There are guys out there who blow my mind."

"The sport would not be where it is today without Kelly Slater," says Logan. "He is the most important person in the history of pro surfing. His ability to lock on and compete is unlike anything that has ever been seen. He was so singularly focused on winning. And still is by the way."

He was miserable doing *Baywatch* in the Nineties, feeling he had been pushed into it by his mother and his manager. "I didn't love it. And I hate doing things I don't love. I was so uncomfortable. The storylines were so silly."

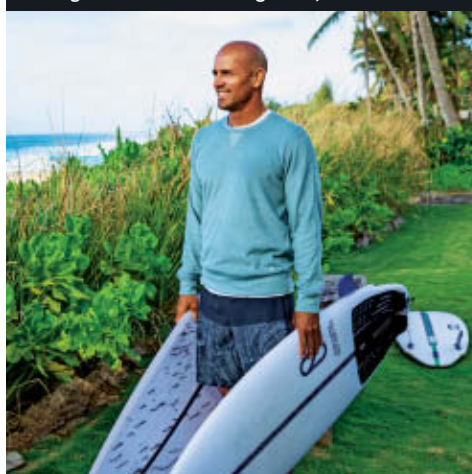
He also found the ensuing level of fame uncomfortable. "I'll meet people sometimes who can be crying, and it's so weird to me. I'm not always totally courteous and gracious. Sometimes I'm just a human in a bad mood... But there are many people a lot more famous and I've seen what they deal with. It puts mine in perspective. And I set out to have this life. I am living the life I wanted to live as a kid. I love it."

More than 20 years after they split, many fans still want to talk to him about Pamela Anderson. "I understand why it's interesting for people, but it honestly seems like another lifetime or almost like someone else lived it." He does say, however, that he was surprised at the way his relationship with Anderson ended. "It was kind of embarrassing or maybe just strange, because I was dating her when she got married. I heard about it on the news and I was like, 'Wait, what just happened?' Ha ha."

Scarred by his parents' relationship, he is wary of marriage himself. "I know so many people who get married and then straight away get divorced. Maybe it's just fear, an idea stuck in my mind for some dumb reason."

His relationship with Kalani Miller, 33, is the happiest – and longest – he has ever experienced. "Kalani's a lot younger than I am. We started dating when she was 20 and I was in my thirties. But I was way less mature than her. Kalani has her shit together.

Wearing his sustainable clothing brand, Outerknown



'LET'S GO CATCH A COUPLE OF WAVES,' SLATER SAYS. I'M SCARED. MY SURFING SKILLS ARE MINIMAL

"She is definitely a fighter. And she has a good family. That really attracted me: it was just calm in their house. They might fight but they work it out. They're talking that same day. Whereas I've had fights with my family and not talked to them for six months or two years."

For many years he did not get on with his older brother, Sean. "I thought he was an asshole. He thought I was an asshole. It got to a point where I didn't know if we were going to have a relationship in the future. Now I kind of agree I was probably an asshole too. You just mature."

Slater has a daughter, Taylor, now 25, from a relationship in his twenties. "We're close now. When she was a teenager she got angry. Now she's asking the questions and ready to hear the answers. It's become a very transparent and open conversation between us." Recently she became engaged. "I was talking to her fiancé and channelling that competitive thing in me. [I told him,] 'I'm going to be a really good f***ing dad from now on.'"

There is an honesty and vulnerability to Slater that makes him very engaging. He's an emotional man and is close to tears several times while we talk. He has lost many close friends in recent years, several to suicide, and is not afraid to contemplate his own mortality. "I would never want to sound like a dark person, but none of us is getting out alive and I think we all need to be comfortable with death. And it's almost like the goal of life is to live a great life so that when you're gone, it was all done as good as could be."

He worries about the environment. "I go surfing in Bali and it's heartbreaking to see

how polluted it is. There's so much garbage in the water and it's sinking down and fish are eating it. For a few years now I've been thinking that we can never turn back the clock. Then recently I had a conversation with these schoolchildren and they were so motivated to find solutions. They're connecting the dots. They gave me hope."

As well as his clothing brand, Outerknown, which only uses recycled materials, he is trying to make a recyclable surfboard. "Because no one's done that yet."

Although Slater has a reputation for being ruthless, he says that much of this is myth. "Everyone thinks I play mind games on tour. But if they have that in their head, I don't have to do anything; they're already losing the game."

Nevertheless I get a glimpse of Slater's competitive side when I recount my car journey with Morgan Cibilic and co the previous evening. I tell him that Cibilic's friends reckon he is going to beat Slater this weekend. Slater is riled. "I'm planning on smoking him," he says tersely, and two days later he does just that. Cibilic is out while Slater goes through to the semi-finals. Slater finishes the competition in fifth place out of 36. Cibilic comes in ninth.

Mid-afternoon, I tell Slater I have to leave to catch my plane. "What time is your flight?" he asks. I tell him 5.10. It is now 3.20 and the airport is nearly an hour's drive away. "You've got another 30 minutes here," says Slater firmly. I can't believe I'm taking flight advice from you, I tell him. Slater shrugs. "If you get there early you just wait in line; if you get there late you just run on."

He's right of course, although I only just make it. When I speak to him again three weeks later, he is adjusting to the realisation that the Olympics is probably off the table. "It hit me today and I haven't processed it yet. A few weeks ago I got pretty excited and started practising and thinking about what equipment I was going to use. Then just a couple of days ago I found out John [John Florence] was surfing again and is really motivated."

He is sad but philosophical. "In the prime of my career I would have been torn apart, but John earned his spot. I had the chance and I didn't make it happen. The number of times in my life things have gone my way is remarkable. The number of times the right wave popped up for me at the right time and I won a world title. That's just the way competition is. You can't cry about it."

Anyway, it's a long way from over for Slater. "I have friends who are still surfing in their nineties. You constantly have to have the belief that maybe your best days are still ahead of you." ■

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