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Making waves

Maverick surfing icon Laird Hamilton shuns apparel big shots, teams up his clothing line with low-cost retailer Steve & Barry's

By Jennifer Davies
STAFF WRITER

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When renowned extreme surfer Laird Hamilton decided to do his own clothing line, he didn't sign up with an action sports apparel powerhouse such as Quiksilver, Volcom or Hurley.

Instead Hamilton has decided to pair up with Steve & Barry's, a retailer that has made a name for itself by providing incredibly low-cost shoes and apparel. For a limited time, everything in the store costs less than \$9, from jeans to T-shirts to sneakers to dresses as well as Hamilton's new Wonderwall collection of surf-inspired shorts and shirts.



K.C. ALFRED / Union-Tribune
Steve Hendrickx checked out Laird Hamilton's line of apparel Thursday at Steve & Barry's in Horton Plaza.

It might seem an unlikely collaboration. The action sports industry usually focuses on what is "core" or has street credibility, and Steve & Barry's is hardly akin to a local surf shop. The chain started out selling college branded T-shirts at cut-rate prices in 1985 and now has 266 stores in 38 states, including two in San Diego County.

But Hamilton said the partnership meshes perfectly with his maverick philosophy – he never participated in surfing competitions because he thought it was impossible to judge the art of surfing – and his background. Hamilton, an icon in the surf business, is known for his death-defying rides of 70-foot waves, as well as for his high-profile marriage to Gabrielle Reece, a former pro volleyball player and model.

Coming from humble beginnings in Hawaii where his parents could only buy a couple of pairs of pants and shirts each school year, Hamilton said Steve & Barry's low-cost ethos also appealed to him. He sees the chain as a leader in teaching consumers about what clothes should cost, decrying \$125 sneakers or \$50 board shorts.

"A lot of things are just so falsely inflated," Hamilton said. "They (retailers) are charging three, four, five times what it actually costs to make and who eats that? The customer."

For Steve & Barry's part, the company knew it wanted to be a part of the lucrative surf/skate market, which rakes in more than \$11 billion a year in the United States alone according to BoardTrac, a market research

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firm.

Howard Schacter, Steve & Barry's chief partnership officer, said that when it was thinking of a face for a new action sports brand, Hamilton was the obvious choice because of his reputation and name recognition.

Key to the company's strategy is to work with celebrities such as Sarah Jessica Parker, Venus Williams and basketball star Stephon Marbury to appeal to important market segments as well as attract attention. As part of its cost-saving strategy, the company doesn't advertise and relies on free publicity.

"I'm not sure we'd be getting on Access Hollywood if Laird wasn't involved," Schacter said of some of the publicity the line has garnered.

To promote the new line, Hamilton will be signing autographs at the Steve & Barry's in Horton Plaza starting at noon today.

Marie Case, managing director of BoardTrac, said Hamilton makes sense because he is so well-known in surfing circles and beyond.

"It's a good strategy by the company to bring in someone like him who has such broad appeal," she said.

Still, it is unclear how Hamilton's reputation will translate into sales. Surfers and skaters who put a lot of stock in staying authentic might not be drawn to Steve & Barry's, which carries a smorgasbord of fashion niches from urban-inspired wear from Marbury's Starbury line to the more mature female fashions of Parker's Bitten brand.

Schacter said Steve & Barry's wants to appeal to everyone in the family, much like a department store. He said the Wonderwall line is not necessarily directed at only action sports enthusiasts, pointing to the strength of Hollister, a surf-inspired retailer based in Ohio that is scoffed at by many in the action sports business.

"It's more aspirational than anything else," he said of Wonderwall's appeal.

Hamilton said the whole core issue is nonsense.

"The whole thing about being core or not being core is all about insecurity," he said.

What will matter to customers of Wonderwall, the line he helped design, is the clothes themselves.

"The bottom line is you are talking about a good quality product, and that crosses all boundaries," he said. At the Horton Plaza store on Thursday, most of those checking out the Wonderwall line hadn't heard of Hamilton before and said the price is what attracted them to the garments.

Perusing the Wonderwall line, Wayne Schwartz, 60, said he's a regular at Steve & Barry's.

"I take pride in telling all my friends who buy the expensive stuff how little I pay," he said.

Schacter said the company is all about squeezing out any extra cost in the business, from having the clothes made in Chinese factories at off-peak times to having bare-bone offices to flying coach and staying at inexpensive hotels. All of those measures make it possible for Steve & Barry's to make a razor-thin profit.

Schacter said the company has been able to expand rapidly during an economic downturn because more people are looking for bargains.

"Affordable is cool right now," he said.

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