# Coach Rainos

## AMBASSADOR OF ALOHA

By Mike Latronic

There are athletes who chase trophies and there are athletes who understand what trophies are really made of. Rainos Hayes belongs to both categories, but his true calling is for the latter.

Raised on the raw, powerful stretch of O'ahu's North Shore, Rainos has spent nearly four decades earning a quiet but undeniable place at the center of professional surfing. A solid competitor himself, he was never the headline but he emerged as something rarer: the steady hand and surf coach behind some of the sport's most significant athletes and careers. Ask the World Champions, the Olympic gold medalists, the groms who came up under his watch — they'll all tell you the same thing. Rainos Hayes showed up for them. Fully. Every time.

As a kid he was a self-described rascal, a North Shore boy with saltwater in his veins who wasn't always walking the straight and narrow. He'll be the first to tell you that. Hard lessons came early, the kind that teach you about consequences, about real trust, and about what it means to have someone genuinely in your corner. What could have derailed him instead shaped him. Those experiences became the very blueprint for how he would one day show up for others.

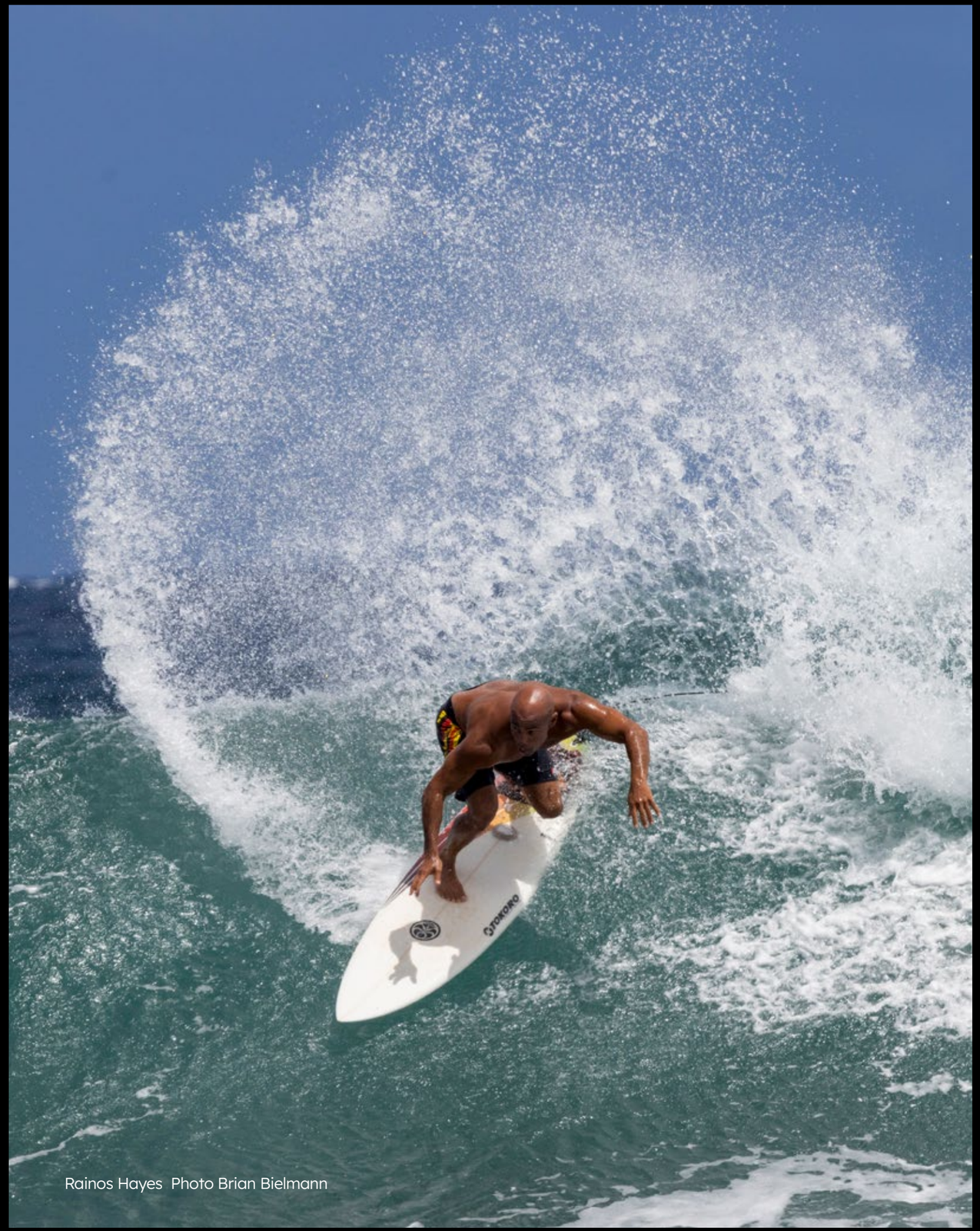
Somewhere along the way Rainos Hayes found his footing and with it a calling the sport didn't even have a name for yet.

Over thirty years his athletes have collected more than fifteen ISA World Junior titles, three World Team Championships, and an almost uncountable string of wins and finals across the ASP, WSL, and the North Shore and beyond. He has stood on beaches from Portugal to Brazil, Japan to Pipeline, and delivered the same thing every time: calm, clarity, and an unwavering belief in the person standing in front of him. That consistency, that humility, that genuine investment in people over accolades. That is what has made Rainos Hayes one of the most respected figures in surfing. Not just in Hawaii. Everywhere.

Now, for the first time in decades, he is taking pause. A lovely wife, a toddler, and another baby on the way. The perennial presence on the world stage is coming home for a while — not done, not even close, but recalibrating while he remembers what home feels like.

We caught up with Coach Rainos on the North Shore.

Photo Brian Bielmann



Rainos Hayes  Photo Brian Bielmann

**ML: You grew up right here at Sunset Beach. Do you remember your earliest surfing experiences?**
My first wave was at Earl's Reef on a bodyboard. I remember one time I pearled and went straight to the bottom and hit the reef. I told my uncle, "I hit the reef." He looked at me and laughed — "No, you didn't." That was Earl Morita's reef. Earl was the neighborhood yard man and rode that little 5'0 single fin, Lightning Bolt, yellow with the black lightning bolts on the side.

**ML: And who were you watching back then? Who did you look up to?**
My peers at the time, and a little older — Aukai Ferguson and Chris Angel. They were the leaders of the pack. Mike Hemperley could do laybacks. Christian Budroe, Ricky Irons would come down and put on a show. And then you'd have yourself, Ronnie Burns, Jason Magers and Noah Budroe roll through the lineup every once in a while on your way in from surfing Sunset out the back.

**ML: Was there a moment you realized surfing wasn't just something you did, but something you were going to do for the rest of your life?**
All I knew was it was the most fun thing I had ever done. I was instantly attracted to it and all I wanted to do was continue to do it over and over and over. There was nothing else I would have rather done. My first surfboard was this old kneeboard single fin that somebody had glassed at home — they spray painted a lightning bolt on it. The leash was surgical rubber tubing with a string inside. I rode it at Earl's Reef and I fell in love with it.

The first thruster I ever rode was Aukai's Ed Barbera. The minute I tried that, I realized there was a whole other world of surfing. The board was so much better than anything I'd ever ridden. I really understood that there was something to be said for equipment.

Hayes was a late entrant into competitive surfing — he didn't start finding his way to contests until he was around fifteen, long after peers like Sunny Garcia, the Irons brothers, and others had already built serious amateur résumés. But what he lacked in early reps he made up for in retention. Every tip, every observation, every small piece of competitive wisdom went straight into a mental archive he has drawn from ever since.

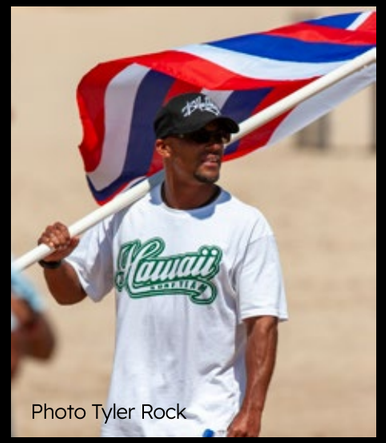


Photo Tyler Rock

**ML: You competed professionally. Was leaving the tour a failure, a choice, or just evolution?**
It was more of an evolution. I didn't quit surfing competitively because it wasn't enjoyable. What I finally realized was when I was running around the world, my boards weren't really built for that surf and I wasn't used to cold water and wetsuits. Every time I went to another place with super subpar waves, I was trying to surf stuff I never grew up surfing.

What I realized is when I came home, I had the upper hand. I could ride ten-foot Sunset and understand it completely. And all of a sudden it took the element of competing with the guys out of it and had me focus on what can I do with these waves? How can I position and select and perform in surf of consequence? That made the journey one of my own.

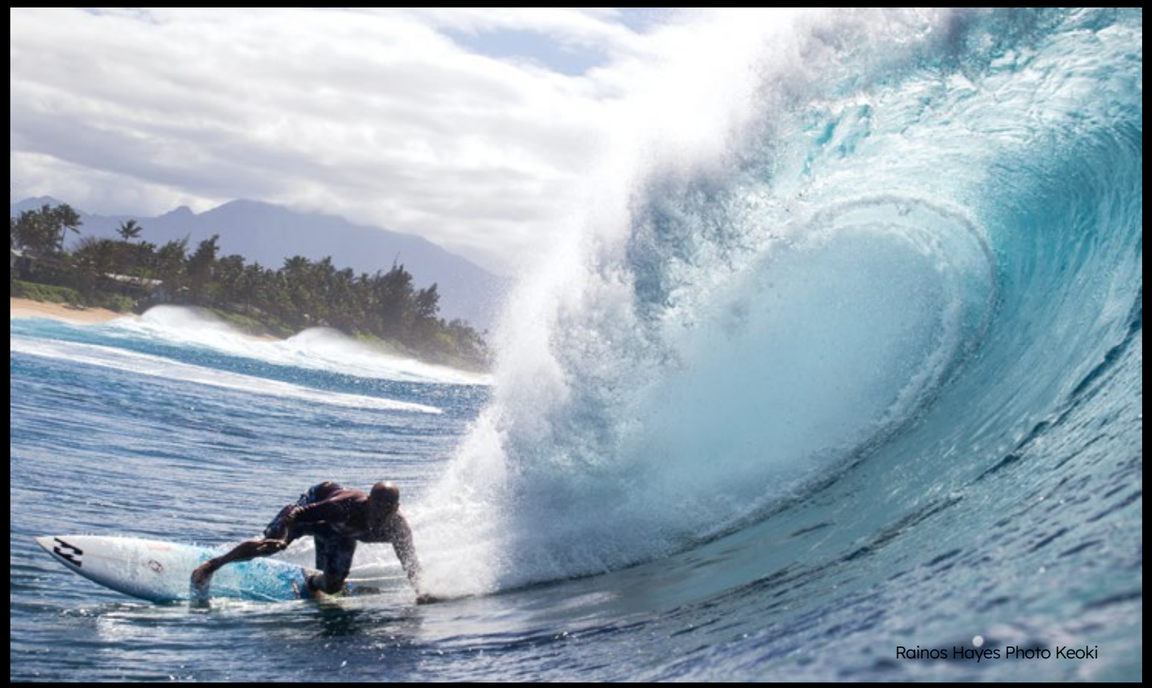
The other thing I found was I hated losing, but I didn't really care if I won or not. It wasn't important for me to feel better than somebody else. I enjoyed seeing other people succeed and I enjoyed helping other people. I knew that because of all the people who had helped me. I was a kid that never really had much guidance. I had to figure it out the hard way. So every time someone gave me a tip — a friend, an adult, someone who saw something in my surfing — it went straight into the memory bank. And I didn't mind sharing it.

**ML: So how did coaching actually start? How did you go from competitor to coach?**
When I was twenty-four, I was airbrushing boards at Mark Townsend's studio to make money. The surf company Hawaiian Island Creations (HIC) came in and said, would you help the kids on our team? Come to this contest at Sandy Beach. The very first contest I went to, I got to coach this little boy from the Mililani–Ewa Beach area. It was Macy Mullen. The very first time I coached him, he won. And that's when I realized how much I enjoyed giving away everything I had learned the hard way. It made me feel good to watch kids elevate.

I stayed with HIC for seven years. Stephen and Jimmy Sukuyama, Bert Ishimaru, Jan Asuncion, they gave me a home, a house, a place. And we built the brand into something incredible. The team had athletes like Brock

Little, Todd Chesser, Clark Little, Cody Graham, Jason Bogle and ultimately Andy Irons. Later came Joel Centeio, Kekoa Bacalso, Hank Gaskell, Nalu Law, Andrew Oliver and others. I would grab these kids from the outer islands and take them to contests all over the nation, and they would win.

Before moving forward, Rainos pauses to look back. He keeps a list — not of results, but of people. The ones who showed up for him before he ever showed up for anyone else. Stephen and Jimmy Sukuyama, who gave him his first real footing in the coaching world at HIC. Jan Asuncion, who let him learn by working alongside him. Bert Ishimaru, his closest friend and constant road companion through decades of ISA campaigns, still in his corner to this day. Donald Pahia, whose quiet, selfless example showed a teenage Rainos what it looked like to genuinely support someone without ego or agenda. And Tony Moniz — whom Rainos calls one of the finest surf parents he has ever known — who handed his children over with complete trust and wholehearted belief, and watched every one of them grow into champions and, more importantly, into beautiful human beings. Seth and Josh among them. Then came Chris Hefner and Graham Stapleberg at Billabong, who trusted his vision and gave him the platform to build something lasting on the world stage.

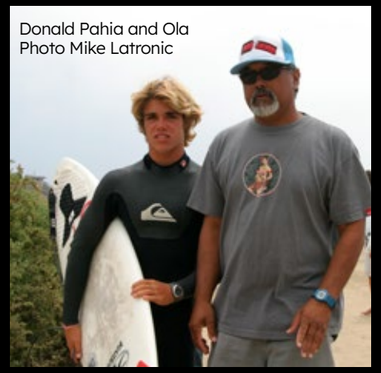


Rainos Hayes Photo Keoki

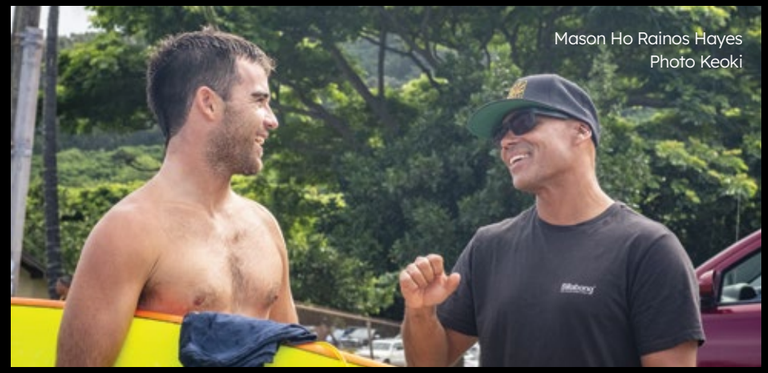
"I don't feel anybody achieves too much completely by themselves," Rainos says. "There's probably been just as much support given to me as I was ever able to give others. I just want those people to know I haven't forgotten."

It was also during this period that Rainos stepped into a role that would define Hawaiian surfing on the world stage for the next two decades. But to understand how he got there, you have to understand who came before him — and what it meant to inherit what they had built.

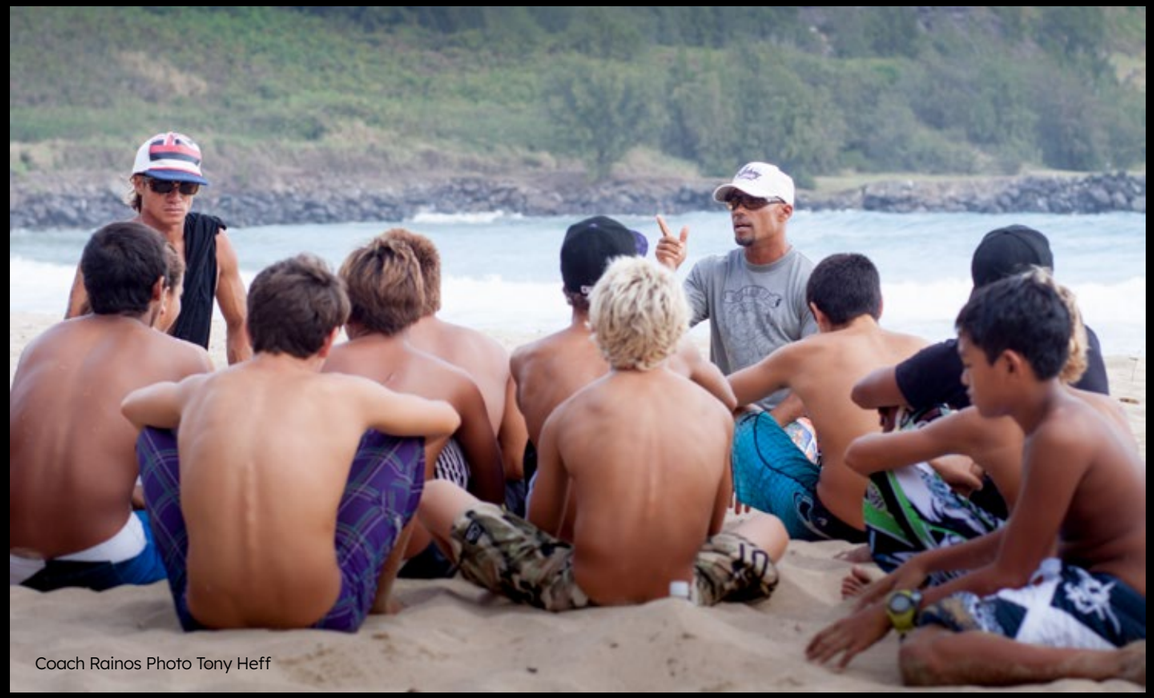
Before Ben Aipa ever stepped down as Hawaii's ISA coach to enable Rainos the role, he had already spent decades remaking Hawaiian surfing from the inside out. Aipa was a master craftsman and surfboard builder credited with inventing the very popular "Stinger" design and quite an impressive competitive surfer. Aipa took his experience and knowledge and worked with some of the best in the business. Names like Michael Ho, Larry Bertlemann, Sunny Garcia, Kalani Robb, Andy and Bruce Irons — Aipa coached them all, demanding excellence while earning deep loyalty. He was, by most accounts, the original Hawaiian surf coach — the man who first proved that Hawaii's surfers didn't just need great waves. They needed someone who believed in them and held them to a standard worthy of the islands they represented.



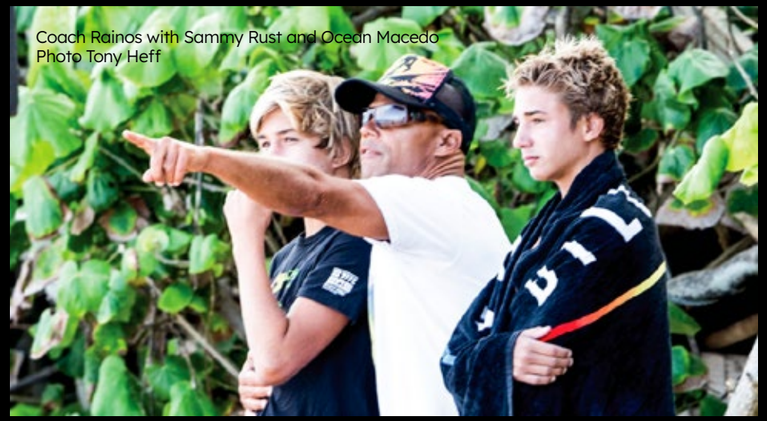
Donald Pahia and Ola
Photo Mike Latronic



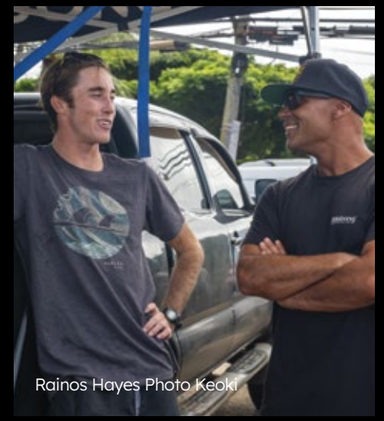
Mason Ho Rainos Hayes
Photo Keoki



Coach Rainos Photo Tony Heff



Coach Rainos with Sammy Rust and Ocean Macedo
Photo Tony Heff



Rainos Hayes Photo Keoki

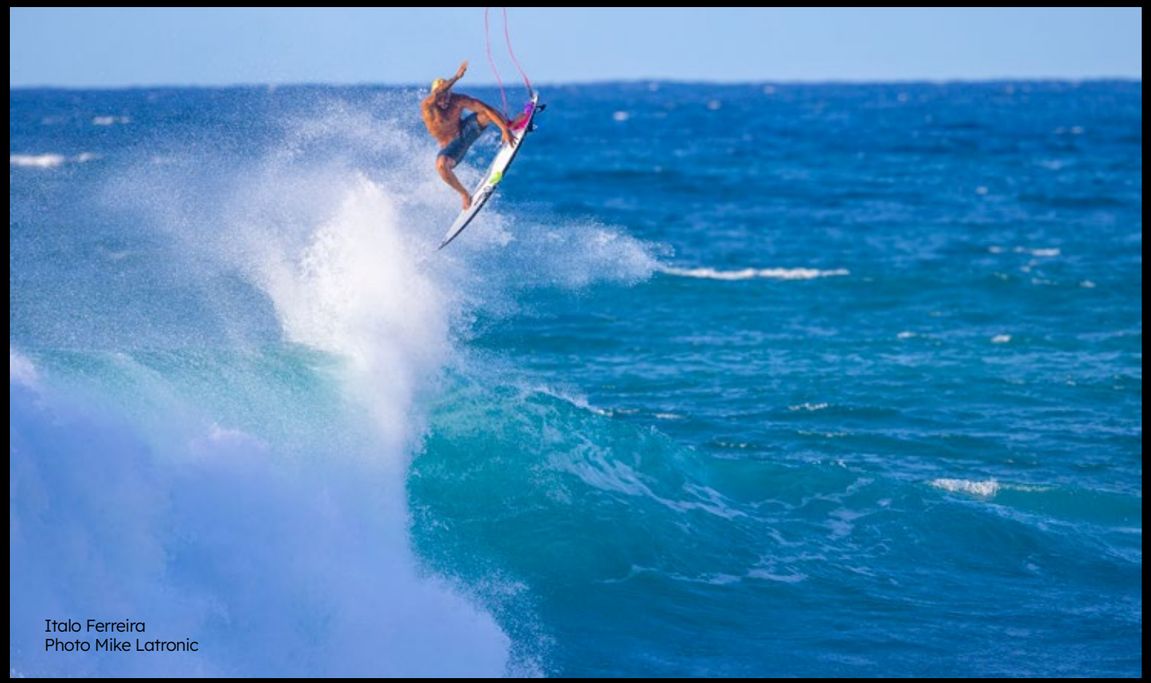
When Aipa eventually stepped back from his role leading the Hawaii ISA Junior team, the shoes left behind were enormous. The person who stepped into them was Rainos Hayes.

There was a path that led to that moment, and Rainos traces it carefully. Before Ben, there was Donald Pahia — a name that won't appear in any surf magazine rankings or contest results, but one that Rainos mentions with genuine reverence.

Then came 1996 and the first ISA World Junior Championships — where Rainos showed up as Ben Aipa's assistant coach alongside Dave Riddle, whose organizational knowledge and understanding of international competition structure gave Rainos the mechanics to complement what Ben was providing in spirit. He was there to learn. He learned everything he could.

us, consistently, and made sure we felt supported and valued. I was a kid who didn't have a lot of that kind of guidance, and watching him operate, the way he carried himself, the way he treated people — that went deep. A lot of how I try to show up for my own athletes traces directly back to him.

And then there's Ben. Ben Aipa taught me the foundation of all of it. He was strict — make no mistake, but he was easy to be with, and you always



Italo Ferreira
Photo Mike Latronic

Pahia was the Quiksilver Hawaii team manager during the years a teenage Rainos rode for the brand. Soft-spoken, deeply caring, and rooted in the Hawaiian values of quiet service, Pahia was the kind of presence a young man with no real roadmap could look to and understand: this is what it means to genuinely support someone. There was no ego in it. Just steady, consistent care. Rainos absorbed that template and never forgot it.

**ML: Talk about what Ben Aipa and those early mentors meant to you — and what stepping into that ISA role actually felt like.**
I have to start with Donald Pahia. People might not know that name, but I do, and I always will. When I rode for Quiksilver at sixteen, seventeen years old, Donald was the team manager. He was one of the most humble, soft-spoken, caring Hawaiian figures I've ever been around. He never made it about himself — ever. He just showed up for

felt like he saw you. He had this rare ability to make you feel like the most important surfer on that beach, and then send you into a heat feeling ten feet tall. I watched how he carried himself with those kids at the ISA worlds in 1996, and I didn't miss a thing. When he couldn't attend in 1998 and I had to step in as head coach in Portugal alongside Bert Ishimaru and Dave Riddle, that was a humbling moment. I felt the full weight of what Ben had handed forward. I didn't want to let him down. I didn't want to let Hawaii down.



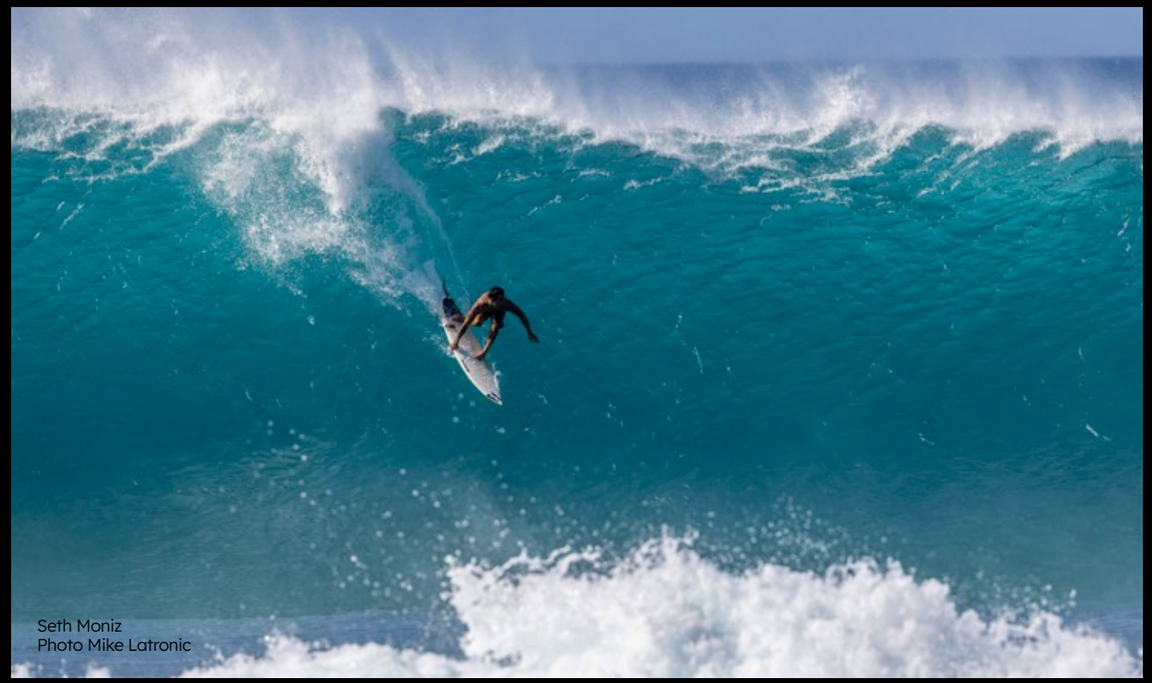
Those ISA years meant everything. Hawaii competes as its own nation — separate from the US team — because we are the birthplace of surfing. That's not just a fact, it's a responsibility. Every kid on that team wasn't just representing themselves. They were carrying a legacy that goes back to Duke Kahanamoku. My job was to make sure they understood that, carried themselves with Aloha and then went out and surfed like

Ben Aipa taught me the foundation of all of it. I learned from watching him, from the way he carried himself with those kids. I never forgot that.

The HIC and ISA experience established the template. But it was a phone call from a struggling pro named Pancho Sullivan that launched Hayes into the wider professional world. Pancho was on the edge of losing his Rip Curl

Pancho said, I'm going on tour — will you come with me? I said, I'll come, but we need to rally about five guys so everybody can help cover the costs. I said if I get five guys together, one of them is going to make the tour — I can guarantee it. That group was going to be Sean Moody, Fred Patacchia, Joel Centeio, Kekoa Bacalso, and Pancho.

Right as I was getting ready to go, the opportunity to work for Billabong



Seth Moniz
Photo Mike Latronic

they believed it. We brought home gold in 2005, 2012, and 2014. More than fifteen individual World Junior titles over the years. But what I'm proudest of isn't the trophies — it's that almost every single kid who came through that program went on to do something significant. The ones who didn't win a title still came home better surfers and better people. That was the standard Ben set. I just tried to honor it.

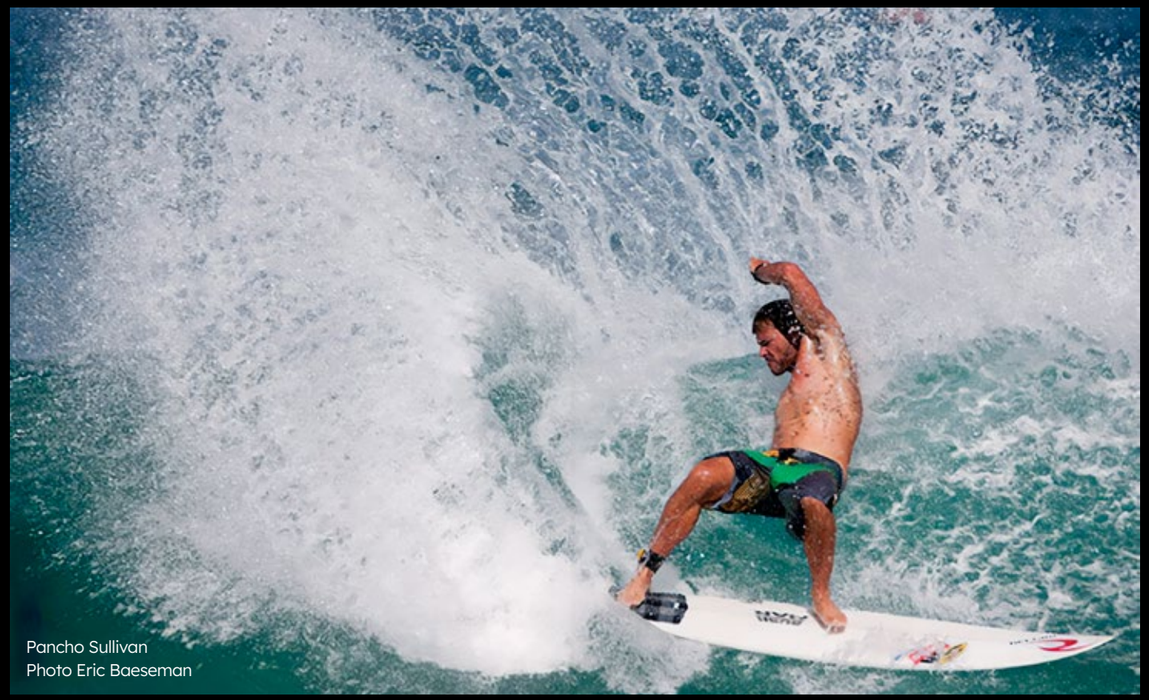
sponsorship and needed to win the final event of the North Shore season to climb the rankings and save it. He came to Rainos. What followed was one of the most dominant stretches of North Shore surfing in recent memory — Pancho racking up multiple event wins across Sunset and Pipeline, ultimately clinching the 2005 Vans Triple Crown title and earning his spot on the WCT.

**ML: That Pancho run was legendary. How did the Billabong opportunity come out of that?**

came. Graham Stapleberg was looking for a team manager. I put together a proposal, pitched it to him, and he watched me surf at Pipeline — that kind of solidified my position. They gave me the opportunity to not just support their team on a promotional level, but what was most important to me was the coaching.

And then came Billabong Bloodlines — possibly the most talent-infused coaching and experiential surfing program ever created at that time.

Sasha Stocker — a world junior champion himself — came up with the idea. He said, let's bring the kids from all over the world to Hawaii, because if they don't learn to surf here, they're never going to make it. He knew this. He came up with it and I helped him execute. Eventually it all ended up in my lap. The Liam O'Briens, Ryan Callinans, Felipe Toledos, Kolohe Andinos — they all came through it. Jack Robinson. Keanu Asing, Seth Moniz, Josh Moniz. There really aren't too many who came through that program that didn't go on to achieve something.



Pancho Sullivan
Photo Eric Baeseman

Of all the athletes Rainos has shepherded, perhaps none illustrates his philosophy more completely than Seth Moniz. Their relationship didn't begin at Billabong or Bloodlines — it began when Seth was just a keiki, at a local contest, at a time when most coaches weren't even looking at kids that young. Rainos saw something and stayed close. He was present at virtually every contest Seth entered over the next decade-plus, quietly building the foundation that would eventually take Seth all the way to the Championship Tour.

**ML: Seth Moniz is a good example of how long this process really takes. Talk about that journey.**

I had Seth since he was seven years old. We took him all the way through the WSL qualifying process — a second in Japan, a second in Ballito, quarters at Huntington, semis at Haleiwa — and that run secured his spot. When he qualified, I made a decision: I'm not going to hand this kid I love to somebody else who might fumble him. I'd watched that happen before. Coaches who didn't understand what had been built, who unraveled years of work without even realizing it. I wasn't going to let that happen with Seth.

So I went on tour with him. His first event was on the Gold Coast and he reached the quarterfinals. That first year he finished ranked twelfth in the world — rookie of the year. That's not an accident. That's a decade of work paying off all at once.

The thing people don't see is how much coaching happens away from the contest. It's the conversations at dinner, the equipment decisions at midnight before a big swell, the phone call when a kid is in his head and needs someone to talk him back to himself. That's the job. The beach work is just the visible part.

**ML: You've been coaching for over thirty years. How would you describe what you actually do — the gift, if you call it that?**

The gift I have — and I credit my great-grandfather with this — is I can get people to win. I could lift

people. There was no bashing. There was only empowering. And I've never really changed my formula since. There's been no need to.

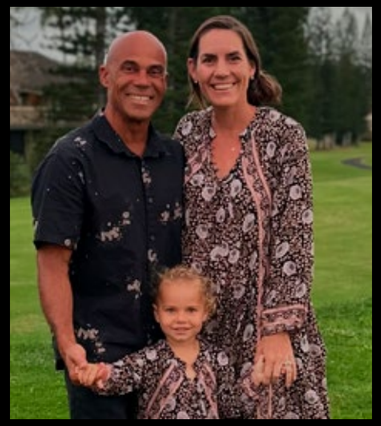
What I made sure of was that I was never a bad influence in these kids' lives. I realized how fragile that relationship was. My job was always to keep them safe. If there was a hard part of my job, it was making sure that these kids got to come home in one piece to their parents. I held that as the number one thing, regardless of results. And I think that's been a large part of my success — it was nice to be able to be trusted.

**ML: You've watched surfing evolve for nearly four decades — from the North Shore rascal days to coaching world champions. Has the performance level really changed that much?**
Pound for pound, the athletes and the sport have come a long way. It's become truly a sport — and I mean that in the most respectful way possible. You can't just rock up and be a surfer anymore. You actually have to be an athlete. That's not a criticism of the old days, it's just the reality of what the sport demands now.

Think about what you're watching at a place like Snapper. That's almost a thousand yards of lineup. Surfers are going down the point eighteen times in a single day, doing ten-foot airs and then snapping full rail turns at speed. By the end of a thirty-minute heat, you are physically gassed if you're doing it right. The level is so high that you have to show up — and show up on demand. Not on your best day. Every day.

What's impressed me most in recent years is how the sport has narrowed itself down to pure quality. Not just who has the best style, not just who has the best flow or rhythm — though those things still matter — but who can consistently produce the highest quality surfing under pressure, in any conditions, on any given day. You can't hide anymore. And in order to deliver at that level, you genuinely have to train for it. All of them are in the gym now. All of them are working on their bodies like the athletes they are.

Style and rhythm alone won't cut it anymore. I say that with love — some of the most beautiful surfing I ever saw was built on style and rhythm. But if you showed up today with style



Rainos and family

and rhythm and nothing else, the tour would eat you alive. World champions are not normal people. They are very special individuals who are extraordinarily driven — and on top of all the natural talent they were born with, they apply themselves twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The ones who make it and stay there are the ones who understand that the gift isn't enough. You have to do the work.

Italo Ferreira — already a World Champion and Olympic gold medalist — came to you. What was that like?

It was an honor. I knew it was a challenge. And I knew that's my specialty — helping people to reinvent themselves. Something was broken, I knew I could help them find a solution out of it and get to the performance they wanted, if they were willing to climb in and do the work.

What about Andy Irons? You weren't technically his coach but you were both major figures in the Billabong program. Talk about that relationship and his surfing.

I first saw Andy as a young man at the 1996 ISA World Games — the very first worlds I attended with Ben Aipa. I wasn't his coach then, I was just watching. But even at that age, it was obvious. Andy was not there to lose. He had no other vision besides professional surfing, and he was going to win competitions. That was simply who he was.

Our relationship grew over the years through HIC and then Billabong. I think because I was so consistent as a person — I always showed up the same way, no drama, no agenda — Andy grew to trust me. And that trust meant everything, because Andy's world wasn't always simple. What I became for him was what he needed me to be at any given moment — someone he could depend on. Not always as a coach in the formal sense, but as a constant. Someone in his corner who he knew would tell him the truth and be there when it mattered. He came to understand I could be a piece of his puzzle, a part of his entourage that he could genuinely rely on. That relationship was one of the honors of my life.

As for his surfing — Andy's surfing was the most raw I've ever seen. Absolute aggression. His will to be the best he could be and to take on the gnarliest situations was pretty much unmatched. He was a fierce competitor once he really hit his prime. He would attack things, and if it didn't go his way, he would wrangle it until it did. Some people have a special ability to conjure things in the ocean — Andy had that more than anyone I've ever seen.

There was a moment in Tahiti where it was two feet and flat. Andy was so upset that it was flat, he basically conjured a six-footer out of nowhere, got barreled all the way across the reef, got in the boat, and screamed let's get the F out of here. We all jumped and chased him to the boat as fast as we could. Andy was done. He commanded respect with how willing he was to risk his life in the surf. And he commanded loyalty — mine included — with who he was as a human being when the cameras weren't on.

**ML: Last question. If you could give one piece of advice to the kid you were — the rascal from Sunset Beach — what would it be?**

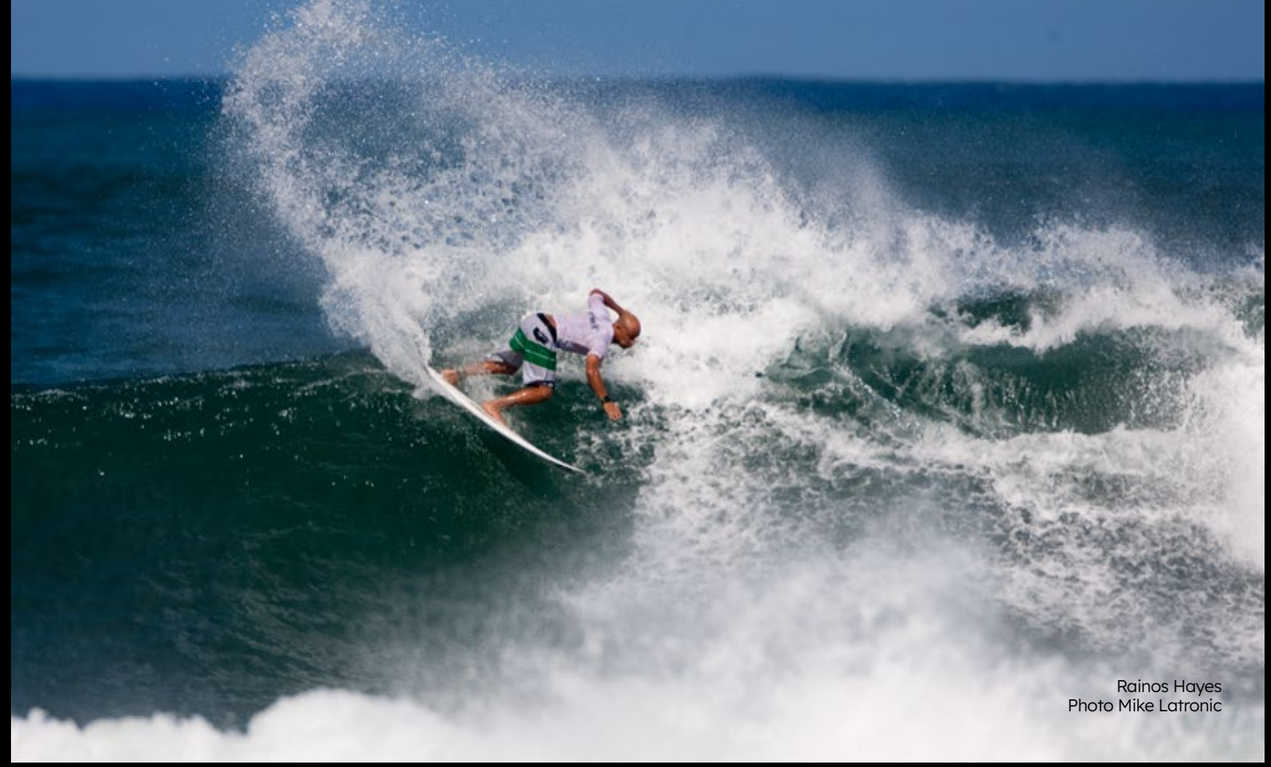
Would I change any of it? No. Because it put me in the position I ended up in. I understood how precious life was, and what a gift surfing has been — a place of rest and relaxation and exertion, my mana my whole life.

The thing I've enjoyed about myself is I've always been an ambassador of aloha. That alone helped me build friendships around the world. And it was genuine. It was never fake. There's a fine line between fighting for what we want and hanging on to what we got — and keeping it by sharing it. They can't take away my relationship with Sunset Beach. So I can share it with everybody else and not be afraid of that.

Rainos Hayes has spent his entire adult life standing at the edge of the water, watching other people surf. To the uninitiated, it might look like he stepped back. To anyone who knows the sport, it's clear he stepped forward — into something quieter, more durable, and ultimately more meaningful than any contest result could capture.

The reef is still there. Sunset is still breaking. And for the first time in a long time, Rainos Hayes is home. He has a wife, a young child learning to walk, and another on the way. The world's beaches will be there when he's ready. For now, this stretch of the North Shore — the one that made him — gets to have him back.

Some things you don't give away. You just share them.



Rainos Hayes
Photo Mike Latronic