

I grew up surfing in southern California and came to the north coast in 1993. It took me 4 years to brave the frigid waters of Humboldt and I'm glad I finally did. If you know much about surfing you know about the rivalry between eleven time world champion Kelly Slater and three time world champ, Andy Irons. It goes like this.

In 1992 Kelly Slater won his first world title, becoming the youngest champion ever at age 20. He ran off a string of victories that produced five more world titles. Kelly Slater then retired with six world titles under his belt and few rivals. But in 2003 Slater was lured back onto the World Championship Tour by the ascent of a cocky young Kauian surfer named Andy Irons. Andy ascended to become world champ in 2002, won again in 2003 and made it a hat trick in 2004. To watch these two outstanding surfers go head to head from 2003 to 2006 was one of the best draws for professional surfing imaginable. Kelly Slater is a precision master: smart, smooth, calculating; his personal lifestyle is clean cut and well mannered. Early on he decided to stay away from drugs and alcohol, perhaps because his Dad had been an alcoholic. Andy Irons was big, brash, bold and cocky in both his lifestyle and his surfing. His first year on the World Championship Tour he partied so hard that he soon lost his spot on the WCT. With determination, he came back, surfing better than ever. Andy Irons was the first competitor to challenge Slater publicly, and the only one to back up his *braggadocio* with victories: including beating Kelly Slater at major events like the Pipe Masters. But Slater proved relentless: he surfed back and won a seventh world championship in 2005; Slater won again in 2006, making him an 8 time world champ, at age 34, the oldest ever to win the WCT. He won again in 2008, 2010 and 2011. Eleven world titles: a record unlikely to be matched. Meanwhile, in 2009 Andy Irons withdrew from the World Tour for personal reasons. He sought to come back in 2010, as a wild card, and won the Billabong Pro Tahiti held at the fierce break, called Teeaupoo. It looked like Andy Irons had a chance of returning to style and his winning ways. He'd married in 2007 and with a young son, perhaps was settling down. But in fall of 2010 he withdrew from a contest in Puerto Rico, flew to the mainland and was waylaid in Texas.... appearing very ill. Some said he had Dengue Fever. Andy Irons died on November 2nd, in Grapevine, Texas at age 32. The Medical examiner's office concluded that Irons died from a cardiac arrest; But, It lists a second cause of death--- "acute mixed drug ingestion."

I am not holding up Kelly Slater as a saint, but he *is* likely to watch his daughter grow up and he's still surfing at a world class level at age 43. The talented, Andy Irons, cut short both his career and his life, by choosing to use a fatal mix of drugs. I find the stories of these two surfers sobering—and sadly instructive.

This has been Dan Price for Community Comment