

SALife

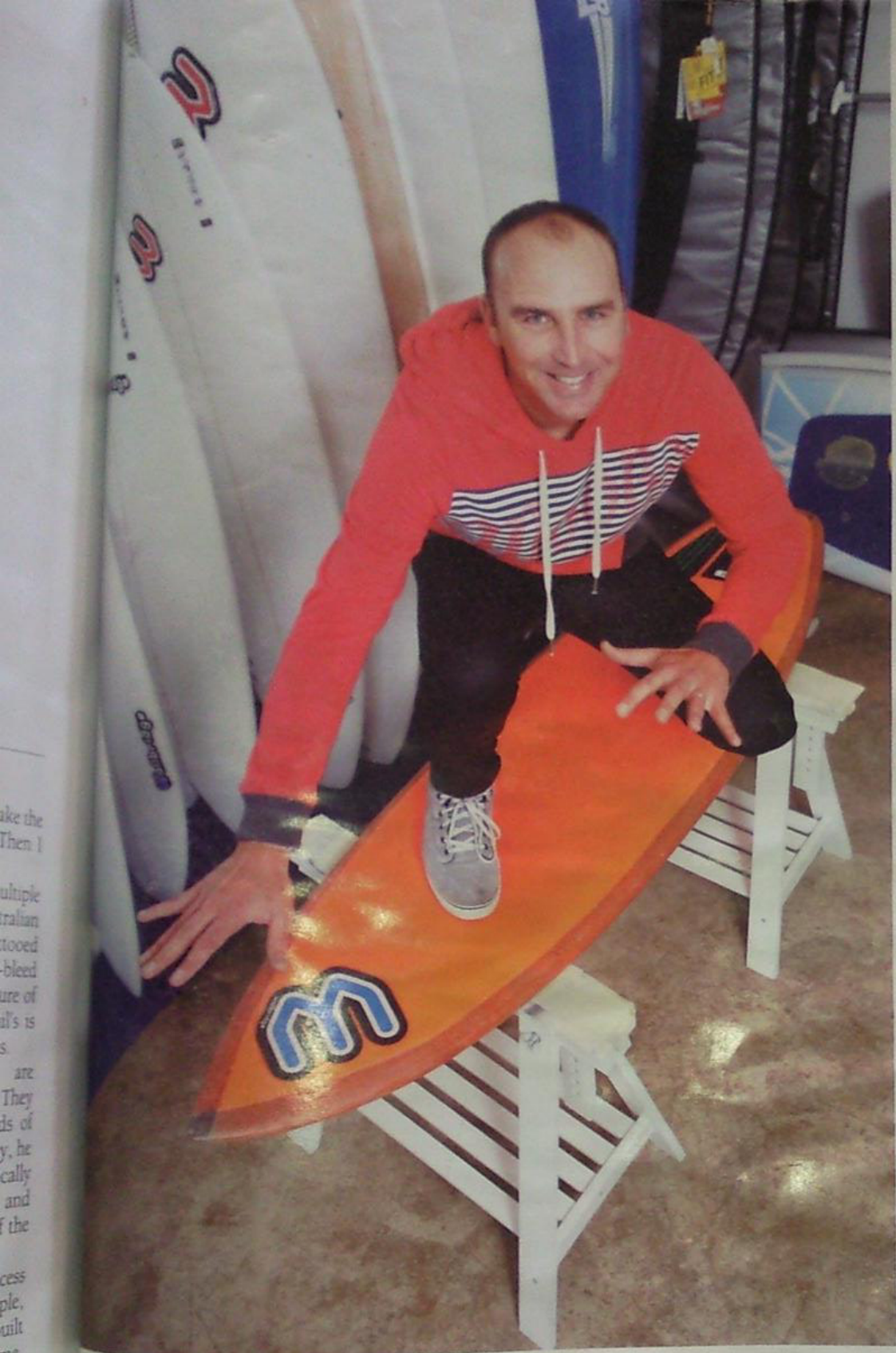
The best of Adelaide and South Australia September 2010

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Above: Ben Wallbridge gives one of his boards a dry run. Left: Peter Walker works on a hollow-framed wooden board.

BEN WALLBRIDGE HAS BEEN competitive in state titles all his surfing life. He studied design for three years before heading for Yamba in northern NSW at 20 to find out about "the world's best shapes". There, he did his own work experience on making surfboards. "I'm pretty much self-taught," Ben says. "Glass, shape, spray - all aspects." He had discovered his love of the sea at his grandmother's place at Port Hughes on

the west coast of Yorke Peninsula. Three years after Ben started riding surfboards, he was making them. Today, he sends boards to Europe, Japan and all over Australia. Respected surfer and surfing writer Nick Carroll recently named him Australian shaper to watch. Hawaiian pro Pancho Sullivan is a fan. On the same wave are 16-year-old Tyler Wright, who Ben believes will be the next women's world champion, and fellow Australian Asher Pacer.

The Australia's *Surfing Life* board bible top-rated Ben for "most radical materials" in a test. His boards are in the *Surfing World* design issue. Son Finn, 8, and daughter Louella, 7, have taken to surfing "like ducks to water". For them he has created "six foot and six foot two boards with round noses and safety fins".

It seems 15 years of dust and sweat and fibreglass are paying off for Ben. "I'm probably one of the last of the hand-shapers," he says. "You can get short boards from every corner store on the Gold Coast, but I've always wanted to create them with my hands, every one of them different. Being a surfer shaper is an integral part of me. I can feel what a board does out in the surf and interpret what I find out into the next one. There are designers out there who don't even surf."

With local contractors mainly drawn from young men and women who have graduated from school work experience with him, Ben makes longboards, shortboards, pipeboards, paddleboards, nipperboards, skimboards, tow-in boards, wakeboards and now stand-up paddleboards for Adelaide's smaller metropolitan waves.

Although to have a world surfing champion ride a Wallbridge would be the ultimate, Ben isn't stuck in the rarefied reaches of the sport of surfing. "It's about travelling to spots off the beaten track, sharing waves and having a ball," he says. "The right board allows you to do that." The right board also gives you the pleasure of those places mainly familiar only to surfers, such as the state's Far West Coast, where Ben finds "45C days, beautiful sunsets, the deep blue Southern Ocean and the most challenging waves".

Traditionally, making surfboards is a complex exercise, which is where the science comes in. Fibreglass has its hazards, yet there is no disputing that it gives surfboards their structural strength. Ben is hoping one day to replace it with a natural product, such as hemp. He also has moved to greener materials such as recyclable expanded polystyrene foam, plantation balsa and low-volatility epoxy resins. "With the new materials, we are trying to make a better extension of the old product," he says.

All will allow him, like Peter Walker in a different way, to continue to experiment with different surfboard shapes and designs. "In this day and age of imported goods, people still want something unique and handmade, which is great and it keeps me going," he says. "A surfboard is pleasing to the eye. But in the end it has to perform."

There is something holistic about creating a beautiful thing that allows you to go out and do a beautiful thing as well.