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Life of a Skater

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“[Skateboarding] will always have a rebellious, underground edge to it because it is based on individuality.”

Tony Hawk



Skateboarding has long been practiced and has introduced a lucky few to a world of fame and fortune. For most skaters, it is an escape from a world that is crumbling around them. The art of skating is complex and dangerous. It is looked down upon by the suburban communities, in which it is most practiced. Skateboarders are considered rebels and most have been arrested at least once for riding down sidewalks and other public places in which they have been banned. Why, then, do they do it? Why do they fight so hard to succeed at something that has been labeled defiant and wrong by their community and even by their own family? The answer is in the question: to fight. In the suburbs, we are taught to conform to be like everyone around us; to be the same, even though every part of us longs to be different; to stop fighting.

They stand firm behind their lifestyle, but there are many in the community and even in city council that wish to limit them. They place high fines on skaters and cops follow them, waiting for them to cause the slightest bit of trouble, so they can take them in. But the main way that the city restricts skateboarders is through the skate parks. For years, cities all through the US and beyond have placed limits on the building of skate parks. They city gets enough people asking for a park, so they build one, but they keep it small and ignore any problems that it has. They are not willing to put in money because they believe that skateboarding is harmful to the community. But skaters are just regular people, trying to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, if the city continues to restrict their progress, those goals will never be reached.

This is the Life of A Skater.

Here is a quick history of skateboarding and the restrictions that cities have placed on skaters:

In the late 1950s, early 1960s, skateboarding, known then as “Skurfing” or “Sidewalk Surfing” was created. Kids back then couldn’t just go into a store and buy a skateboard, they had to build their own. They chopped up old pairs of steel roller skates and attached them to two-by-fours or any other piece of wood they could get their hands on. Skateboarding started in California and slowly moved its way across the country and up to Canada; by 1965 it was a full-blown craze. Their style resembled that of skateboarding’s surfing routes, as seen by tricks such as cross stepping, nose rides and bank turns. They were inventing the “Skateboarding Lifestyle”.

Skateboarders even had their own magazine, called “The Quarterly Skateboarder”. In spring 1965, commercial skateboards were being sold in stores. The skateboards had steel or clay wheels on a flat, surfboard-shaped wooden board, making it very difficult to control. The wheels were insufficient; any crack in the sidewalk or a pebble on the ground would bring down the skateboard and the person on it.

Even in its early years, skateboarding was looked down upon. Skateboards were deemed “un-

safe” and City Council members across the country urged parents not to buy them for their children. They did this because they believed that skateboarders had no control over the direction, speed, and stopping of the board; and because it was becoming a hazard to other people on sidewalks. Because of this, in 1965, City Councils banned the use of skateboards on any street or sidewalk. Back then, there was no such thing as skate parks, so kids were forced to ride in parking lots and on bike paths. There were a few reports of people getting injured, but not to the extent that the cities had feared. However, because of all the pressure put on skateboarders, the fad died.

In the 1970s, skateboarding had an underground following, led by the Dogtown movement. Pool riding and aerial maneuvers started being created. It didn’t really come back into popularity until the early 1970s, when the urethane skateboard wheel was invented by Frank Nasworthy. These new wheels gripped the road and allowed the rider a lot more control. Skateboarding slowly started gaining widespread popularity again and was big by the mid-1970s. By 1977, skateboards could be bought at places like Sears as well as other department and sporting goods stores. Pro-skating stores also began popping up.

Skateboarders would purchase the deck,

trucks, wheels, and bearings individually and build their own, custom board. They would also build their own wooden quarter pipes and jump ramps that they saw in the “Skateboarder Magazine”. Skateboarders took part in styles such as freestyle, slalom, high jumps, ramps, and bowls. A few skate parks were built for them to practice their techniques. Skateboarding contests were held all over the country and the sport continued to grow.

The public began to complain about skateboarders on sidewalks and bike paths and injury reports increased. Because of this, City Councils decided to build public skate parks. They built them for beginners and left the major facilities to private parks. Skateboarding had another downfall. Some diehard skaters kept skating, but most quit and indoor skate parks closed down. However, in 1982 Tony Hawk and Steve Caballero entered the scene of skateboarding, and it became popular once again. The half pipe was in style and skateboarders were perfecting tricks like the Kick-flip, Ollie, and 540. Cement skate parks were replaced with half-pipes and wooden bowls. Skateboard shops were everywhere and people were starting to make their own videos of people and contestants skating. Skateboarding had really taken off; some pro skateboarders made 10,000 dollars from winning a contest. Contests were held everywhere because people were trying to get a piece of the fame and fortune.

In the 1990s, skateboarding got more technical and people focused more on street skating instead of vert. Skateboarding was even being featured on TV; the 1995 X-Games were shown on ESPN.

Today, skateboarding has hit another downfall. It is still thought of as unsafe and cities are not maintaining their skate parks or building new ones. Authorities give out harsh punishments for anyone caught skating outside of these parks. The facilities are the same ones that were built in the nineties. They were built for beginners and, because there are very few private parks, there is no where for intermediate and above skaters to go. But there are still people who want to skate. They work hard to learn from a young age and quickly surpass the limits that the current skate parks offer. Because they quickly outgrow the parks, they are forced to skate on streets and sidewalks. They are forced to rebel by the very people that call them rebels.

On April 13, 2007, I was given the opportunity to speak with John Marchant, a member of the Parks and Recreation Commission at Rengstorff Park. Here is what he told me about Rengstorff in his interview:

Q: How was Renstorff Park built?

A: "There was some public input to the City Council and parks and recreation division which led the parks and recreation commission to ask the recreational division to investigate what it would take to create a skate park here in our city. The recreational division did some studies; looked at whether it was a possibility, [and] created a report back to the parks and recreation commission. They approved what was being given to them in the staff report and that went forward to city council and, once city council approved to move ahead with what was called then a temporary structure, then the recreational division was given the go ahead to spend the allocated funds to make the original park happen."

"In 1997 the approval was given for the recreation division to create a 6,000 sq ft temporary facility and then, shortly after we actually made it, it opened and it was used by a lot of folks, adults and youth, as well. And so, in 1999, we were asked to move ahead and to come up with plans for what is considered a perma-

nent structure. We took surveys of current park users (what they would like to see as far as what the future holds for the park). Through those surveys, another report went back to City Council in the year of 2000 that stated what it was the skaters were looking for, what we could provide to the public, and for about a total of \$80,000 approximately, a permanent structure [could] happen. City Council said ‘Go ahead, move forward, find an appropriate person to come and bring permanent equipment.’ And before we decided what elements to create, not only did we do the public surveys, we also created seminars and open forum for skaters to come to. We posted it here at the skate park; it said that on this date we’re going to talk about what the skate park can have and what they would like to have so it was definitely a public input process. The public actually sat down with staff and the people that designed this park, as far as where the elements would be in the park in relation to each other, how they can go from one element to another. It was creative flow within the park, so it took the input, not only of the consultants [and] staff, but also definitely the public was the one that created this park. And that’s what we have today and it seems to be working out for the community.”

All skaters are different. They each have different techniques and styles, they each started skating at different times in their lives, and they each skate for different reasons. Here are some skaters I interviewed about the sport:



Matt Leos



Megan Conway

“Why do you skateboard?”

For fun.

For transportation.

“How long have you been skateboarding?”

A year.

Six years.

“Who taught you how to skate?”

“I taught myself.”

“My dad.”

“What type of skating do you do?”

Street

Street



Courtney (“Kay”) Ford

“I didn’t see many female skaters, so I wanted to show the guys that we could do it too.”

Thirteen years.

“My brother.”

Street

Some skaters start off young, some start when they are older, but they all have two things in common:

- 1) They all love to skate.
- 2) They all skate on the street.

When I asked them why they skate on the street, they all said the same thing: they do it because Rengstorff, while it is good for beginners, it gives no room for improvement beyond the beginner level.

Here is what John Marchant said about improving the skate park:

“I think, over time, if there is enough public input, other improvements can be made. However, right now, it seems like the public is pretty happy with the results.”

This means either that the skaters that dislike Rengstorff haven’t said anything, which, by a skater’s nature, is unlikely; or the people in charge of the park haven’t listened to them.

For the skaters that start out very young, they need to be able to improve, and the city should be able and willing to help them do so.

III. Heidi

It was a hot day; it felt like it was mid-July rather than the beginning of March. The wind was still and the sun beat down on me with all its scorn; I continued forward towards the chain-link fence. The place emitted a heavy smell of sweat and the sounds of plastic scratching pavement echoed loudly in my ears. I was surprised by the amount of figures that stood in front of me. Why are so many people out here on a day like this?

I walked through the gate and was surprised by the age of most of the skaters. From a distance, the people had looked so much older, flipping in the air and sliding down rails. Looking closely at their faces now, it was obvious that most of them couldn't be much older than fourteen. There were at least 20 of them in the small space, obviously over-crowded, but that didn't stop them. They bumped into each other, fell down, and got right back up and continued to plunge down the wooden ditches. It was clearly very dangerous, but they didn't even flinch when they let themselves fall. Among them was a small child.

Her clothes were stained with dirt, and her pants were sagging. Atop her head was a small, black helmet that wrapped around her chin. From it, her hair fell in curly, golden waves down her face, where a large, toothy smile was spread. Her cheeks were stained with a blotchy red color, indicating her excitement as she picked up her skateboard. Even though the board was slightly smaller than usual, it was almost as tall as her. She placed the end of it at the edge of the ramp and stood on top of it, leaning forward for the plunge. She fell downward, her

feet glued to the board and her arms extended at either side of her tiny body. The board made it to the middle of the ramp and began its rise to the top of the other side. It made it only half way and her little arms reached out in front of her. She grabbed the edge of the ramp and pulled herself up the rest of the way. Once she made it up to the top, she grabbed her board and pulled it up as well, her smile growing even wider. She flipped the board around and placed it, once again, on the edge of the ramp, ready to go again, not a hint of fear on her face or in her sparkling blue eyes.

I found her father in the crowd and asked for his permission to talk to his daughter, who told me that her name was Heidi. She came down off the ramp to talk with me. She was shy, but her face still had that same smile plastered on it. I asked her how old she was and she told me, with that cute, shy smile, that she was five and that she'd been skating since she was three. I asked her what her favorite thing to do was, and she told me that it was skating and going down the ramps. She told me that her father taught her and that her older brother skated as well. Her father told me that the reason they were at Rengstorff Park was that the other parks were closed that day and that place was their last option, but the park is small and limited. This is how most parks are today. When I was finished with the questions, I let her go back to skating. I asked her and her father if I could take pictures of her. They agreed and she posed for me several times on her skateboard with that unwavering smile of hers.

Many skaters start at the same age as Heidi, learning to do tricks and practicing them until they get it perfect. That is how all pros start out, but, nowadays, it is very difficult to become a pro because of all the restrictions, and because the cities are unwilling to upgrade their parks.









Conclusion

When I asked John Marchant if he was going to upgrade Rengstorff Park, he said, “I think, over time, if there is enough public input, other improvements can be made. However, right now, it seems like the public is pretty happy with the results.”²

Unfortunately, the public, the skating public, at least, is not happy with the results. They want changes to be made, but there is nowhere to go to express this wish because the public forums and surveys no longer occur.

There are so many skaters out there that want to continue doing what they love, but are held back by the limitations placed on them. What

will happen to skaters like Heidi who want to continue to progress and become professional, but have nowhere to go to do so?

In a country where we are taught to celebrate our differences, we are also discriminated against and bound by those differences. But, skateboarders defy this. They continue to express themselves even when authorities do everything they can to suppress them. This is the will that America was built on, and these are the ideas that we need to keep alive to remain individual.

People need to stop putting pressure on skateboarders and petition the city for better skate parks. Skaters need to be given the freedom to express themselves. Because, if there is no hope for them to do so, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Save freedom.

IMPROVE OUR
SKATE PARKS.





