Post-modern cowboys: The transformation of sport in the twentieth century

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POST-MODERN COWBOYS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF SPORT IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

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Bachelor of Arts
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ABSTRACT

Post-modern Cowboys: the Transformation of Sport
In the Twentieth Century

by

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During the twentieth century, sports that evolved in the American West transformed the landscape of American sport. Driven by combinations of technology, media, and human personalities, sports such as surfing, skateboarding, and mountain biking redefined the meaning of sport and eliminated the traditional limits to the “playing field.” As surfing, skateboarding, and mountain biking evolved, wartime technologies accelerated their progress. Those technologies democratized access to contemporary sports in two ways. Materials such as polyurethane eased the physical requirements of carrying equipment and catching waves. Contemporary sports also expanded access because they focused on individualized competition and participation, eliminating the need for other players as a prerequisite to participation. As contemporary sports evolved in the West, they gradually eclipsed the participatory dominance of traditional team sports.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1

ALTERNATIVE, ACTION, OR EXTREME: THE NEW FACE OF SPORT
IN THE 20TH CENTURY

I started skateboarding in Burbank, California in 1972. I was six years old. My first skateboard was a Black Knight my dad bought for me at the Sears Outlet store in San Fernando, California. It was 21" long, 6" inches wide and sported clay composite wheels that locked up and sent me flying if I hit so much as a cigarette butt. I remember liking the feeling of skating, but I was frustrated with the Black Knight’s inability to turn the way I had seen other skaters turn.

Finally, after various failed attempts at technological upgrades, I got a break. In 1978, at a family Christmas in San Diego, my Aunt Peggy and Uncle Doug gave me a new skateboard. It was nothing like the boards I had ridden up to that point. This was an Alva skateboard, 28.75" long, 7.75" wide, with Bennett Pro trucks and Cadillac urethane wheels. It was perfect. As I recall it now, it was the greatest day of my young life. My aunt and uncle lived in the hilly section of San Diego near Point Loma. Skateboard in hand, I rushed out of the house and barreled down the street. The wheels gripped the pavement like nothing else, and I carved that street like a god. About fifty yards into my first run with my new board, I got the speed-wobbles and ate the pavement. It hurt badly,
but it was perfect. That day I began a relationship with the new category of sports that evolved during my youth. What I did not realize was that I had also begun the research for this project.

In a way, this study is autobiographical. I have been, at various times in my life, a skateboarder, a mountain biker, and a surfer. It was always a curious thing to me, the way each of these sports drew me in and gave me a language and currency that I did not have before I encountered it. That is and always will be the most notable feature of sport in the West: here, the uniforms never come off. You are what you do, you live what you play. I know what it feels like to catch air in a pool, to drop into a wave’s barrel, and to bike down a twenty-degree single-track trail as though I were ten-feet tall and bulletproof. This study is something of an ode to sports I have loved and lived.

When I began this study, I was sitting in Hal Rothman’s office at UNLV, helping him get ready for a conference in Park City, Utah. Helping is not really the right word. I was advising him about what kind of ski clothing to take to Utah, as he planned to take advantage of the conference’s winter venue. Hal was interested in what kind of equipment he should rent for his day of skiing. I explained the differences between traditionally cut skis and the new parabolic (hourglass shaped) skis that had recently entered the market. We also talked about technologies such as K2 Ski’s new piezoelectric vibration dampening system, a declassified NASA technology that minimized wing vibration on the space shuttle. It helped that I had just finished four years working as a ski and bike technician at Gart Brothers, a sporting goods store in Cedar City, Utah. We also chatted about changes in ski clothing. I explained microfibers, hollow-core textiles,
waterproof-laminates, and other ski jingoisms. Eventually he turned to me and said, "You know, we really ought to figure out a dissertation topic that makes use of all this institutional knowledge." An hour later, The Extreme West was conceived. As my research commenced, I realized that many obvious fallacies awaited, the first of which was, "in the West, therefore because of the West."

The state of the literature at that point did not really figure the West as a piece of the larger landscape of sport in America. Important works, such as Benjamin Rader's American Sports or Steven Riess's The American Sporting Experience, drew a picture of sport that marginalized or trivialized anything related to sport beyond the 100th meridian. Other scholars, such as Daniel Mrozek, had carved a place for western sport somewhere out of the realm of exotica. Twenty years ago, the Journal of the West published a pair of special issues dedicated to sport in the West. The 1978 special issue, titled Sports & Recreation in the West contained three articles on rodeo and two articles on baseball. Some articles dealt with activities that were tenuous in their qualification as sport, such as dude-ranches or national park usage. Daniel Mrozek's article, "The Image of the West in American Sport," considered the relationship between perceptions of the

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1Benjamin Rader, American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983).


3Journal of the West 17, no. 3 (summer 1978).
West as a place of adventure or physical regeneration and the sports Americans popularized based on those perceptions.4

The editorial board may have felt they did not cover the topic in the kind of breadth it deserved. The Journal of the West dedicated another special issue in 1983, publishing it as a stand-alone volume with its own title: Sport in the West. Daniel Mrozek was that issue’s guest editor. The 1983 edition promised to move beyond modernity by providing an analysis of sports indigenous to the West. Sadly, nothing had changed from 1978. The range of subjects was little different from the 1978 issue.5

The idea of western sport was reduced to “in the West, therefore, because of the West.” But certain works stood apart from this generalization, as they focused on interpretive models that avoided the reductionist fallacies of generalists like Riess and Rader. Annie Gilbert Coleman did fine work on skiing as sport in the West. More than just an economic model for Western development, Coleman examined the racial and class issues associated with skiing’s popularization over the twentieth century.6 Coleman’s research moved the literature toward considering the dominance of non-traditional sports and recreation, like skiing, as causal factors in people’s decision making. So pervasive were these “other” sports, sports most closely identified with the West, that perhaps


another developmental model existed. There are many new ways of understanding the West and its particular model of development and culture: the success of ski resorts, Disneyland, Las Vegas, rap music, or California skateboarding. These are more than just powerful cultural influences—they are economic models and driving forces. Geography is only one of a host of factors which influences the contours of culture and the economies of sport.  

The role of the West in the larger genre of sports history was confusing at best, even dubious until the 1990s. Until World War II, sport in the West flowed from the east. Indeed, the West claimed some unique sporting endeavors, such as rodeo, but eastern sports still dominated the recreational, professional, and retail scenes. Not long after World War II, surfing began to capture national attention and a permanent place in the lexicon of American pop culture. By 1960, surfing morphed into skateboarding through a combination of western geography, sport, and technology. As it did so, it slowly but surely eclipsed the traditional sporting pursuits of American youth. By 1980, skateboarding, a sport born and perfected in the West, dominated. Cycling evolved in twentieth century America as a bifurcated sport: it was at once childish and Eurocentric. Cycling technology favored kids and road-racers. In between those two demographics were millions of people who wanted more than a single speed paper-boy bike but less aerodynamics than an Italian racing bike. Mountain biking was born out of the marriage of western outdoorsism and technology. As a technology it produced a bike that was

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versatile, comfortable, and affordable. Most importantly, it was accessible. As a sport, it offered participants another way of interpreting and using the natural world. Because of these attributes, mountain bikes took over the adult recreational cycling market.

Skateboarding and mountain biking technologies exemplified the versatility of western sport. Over time, mountain bikes became part of the urban landscape and skateboards donned off-road wheels and hand-held cable brake systems to negotiate single-track trails. One of the fastest growing segments of the current retail skateboard trade has become off-road boards. In an effort to assess and affirm some of the more post-modern elements in the discipline, this study confirms the overriding hope of scholars such as Iain Borden and Becky Beal: landscapes are only limited in their potential meaning by the technology employed to exploit them.

Much of the literature of sport uses the larger framework of American history to understand and explain sport as reactionary rather than revolutionary. Benjamin Rader’s *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* uses a traditional linear time line to create a model of historical continuity for viewing sport. Rader segments his study into the age of folk games (1607-1850), the age of the player (1850-1920), and the age of the spectator (1920 to present). While these are broad strokes to paint across America’s past, they are consistent with other classic modes of periodization. Rader argues that sport underwent its most drastic transformation between 1850 and 1920, much the same time that America moved from westward expansion, through Reconstruction, to the Gilded Age, and on to Progressivism. But Rader’s goal is
to give "greater attention to continuities in the American sporting experience." Nearly the same periodization appears in two other great topical studies of sport: Steven Riess's *The American Sporting Experience*, and David K. Wiggins's edited volume *Sport in America*. Living and surviving before the nineteenth century was a time-consuming business; as a result, Americans figured sport as recreation for after-work hours. Rader, Wiggins, and Riess make an effective claim that sport did not have inherent merit between 1607 and 1850. Sports were activities that people did for fun and only when there was nothing else to do. It was leisure in its purest form.

This is why sports that depended on individual prowess or exertion, such as skittles (bowling), swimming, or wrestling dominated public sport before 1750. During this period, however, sport also served the dual purpose of recreation. As a reward to themselves after a hard workday, Americans often pursued many activities as recreation with little concern for their sporting merit. Each author pays special attention to the geographic variations of sport in pre-Revolutionary America. Wiggins notes that "the divergent cultural traditions and religious beliefs brought by settlers to the New World converged with differing forms of labor, gender relations, and a host of other factors" to produce patterns of sport across eastern America. For example, those activities that constituted sport in the southern colonies, such as horse racing, were admonished as

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immoral in the Puritan northeast. This is very nearly David Hackett Fischer's argument in *Albion's Seed*. Indigenous American sport did not exist before industrialization. No sport culture beyond transplanted British gentrification was available. Americans had to move beyond their roots in British folkways to engender some unique form of sport, but that could not happen prior to industrialization.\(^{11}\)

What emerges from these surveys is an obvious effort by the authors to understand sport outside a vacuum. All of these scholars view sport as a byproduct of social evolution and expansion. The strongest argument made by each author is that sport in colonial America did not possess its own commensurate culture. Other developments, specifically urbanization and industrialization, were the catalysts that pushed sport into that particular form. As individual relationships to society changed, so did the types of sports people pursued and the venues in which they pursued them. In all three texts, the authors provide as much detail about the world surrounding sports as the sports themselves. The authors make new causal arguments for the transformation of sport as their individual treatments move into the period after 1850. Rader argues that all of the larger forces of change associated with the nineteenth century—industrialization, population growth, immigration, urbanization, and westward expansion—combined to produce a new set of social norms. These norms were typified, according to Rader, by the

evolution of a Victorian elite and an oppositional culture. Conflict became part of the American ethos.\textsuperscript{12}

The need for conflict translated into new sport and new venues for more technically driven sport. Public spectacle was the new norm for sport, played by both individuals and teams. As the gulf widened between affluent Americans and working-class Americans during the Gilded Age, the need for escape via sport intensified. The age of the spectator defined this era, as it was easier to find time or money or energy to witness athletic pursuits rather than participate in them.

Between 1850 and 1920, enormous forces transfigured America; those same forces also changed how Americans pursued sport. Rader observes that those currents made Americans more aware of themselves. Mythic notions of individualism and superiority prompted people to construct sport as an extension of their personalities. Sport became more organized and was played to win. In short, Americans started to keep score.

Mirroring America’s imperialist foreign policy of the late nineteenth century, sport exuded the same spirit of conquest that marked the period. As America prospered, sport expanded into professionalism and financial recompense. At the opposite end of the spectrum were the increasing numbers who practiced sport as a means of physical well-being. As a direct result of Victorian pretensions and educational trends, sporting culture split along a well-defined line. Thousands of Americans, young and adult, sought physical recreation outside the glamor of public spectacle. S.W. Pope wrote in The New

\textsuperscript{12}Rader, \textit{American Sports}, 31-32; Riess, \textit{The American Sporting Experience}, 58-60.
American Sport History, that not until after the "mid-nineteenth century . . . did a coherent sporting ideology evolve, as a Victorian Protestant avant-garde reconciled a deeply rooted ambivalence toward traditional recreations with the prospects of using sport as a moral force." In essence, Pope and other historians identified the transformation of American society as the point where sport developed purpose, either as spectacle or as a measure of individual moral suasion.

Mirroring the professionalism of Progressive America, sport took on professional status. No longer viewed as dilettantes, the majority of Americans regarded athletes for their ability to excel at some sport as well as their ability to entertain crowds of spectators. Riess is specifically concerned with the transformation of sport in the progression from a pre-industrialized and pre-urban America to an industrialized and urban society. Organization was the hallmark of American sport during the fifty years after Reconstruction. This period saw the formation of numerous groups dedicated to sport as a unique culture: the American Association for the Advancement of Physical Education; the National Croquet Association; the League of American Wheelmen; the national women's singles tennis championship series; the Amateur Athletic Union; the Davis Cup; the National Collegiate Athletic Association; and the American League of

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Professional Baseball Clubs.\textsuperscript{14} The clear impulse that inspired social organization during the industrialization and urbanization of America also permeated sports and sporting life.

Adding to sport’s social legitimacy was the recognition by certain academics that it was an integral part of understanding American history. In 1917, Frederic Paxson’s essay, “The Rise of Sport,” suggested that it was not coincidental that the rise of organized and strenuous sport came during the closing of the American frontier. Sport was one of the first safety valves for post-frontier anxiety. Sport was the last open space where people were limited only by their own ability. Regardless of the analytical problems with the much beleaguered frontier thesis, Paxson’s essay demonstrates an awareness of the importance of sport in the larger landscape of American history.\textsuperscript{15}

This shift in mentality among Americans is the causal source of transformation in sport in Donald J. Mrozek’s study, \textit{Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910}. Mrozek suggests that the complexity of \textit{fin de siecle} American life led Americans to complicate everything, including sport.\textsuperscript{16} Millennial anxiety, frontier anxiety, and class anxiety stimulated by industrialization led Americans to seek sports that mirrored their everyday lives. As a result, organized baseball, football, and basketball exemplified the shift toward more complex team sports after the turn-of-the-century. But Mrozek, like other

\begin{itemize}
\item Wiggins, ed., \textit{Sport In America}, 117; Pope, ed., \textit{The New American Sport History} 9-11; Riess, \textit{The American Sporting Experience}, 139-140; Rader, \textit{American Sports}, 47, 63, 79, 98-105.
\end{itemize}
historians, also noticed the rise of individualized sporting pursuits during the same period.

Mrozek borrows much of this analytical framework from Jackson Lears. In *No Place of Grace*, Lears associates complexity in life with a reactionary recreational movement, a shift toward simplicity. The evolution of outdoors clubs, national parks recreation, and physical education for personal improvement were not the result of Victorian subversion of previously bourgeois sporting attitudes but a direct response to the social chaos among working-class and middle-class Americans. Lears noted that the larger force at work in the late nineteenth century was corporate capitalism's displacement of entrepreneurial capitalism. The effects of unchecked economic growth propelled Americans toward sports and recreation as antimodern relief from the soulless economic determinism that pervaded everyday life.\(^\text{17}\)

The popularity of the bicycle mirrored the unfolding industrialization that promised everything to everybody. The consumer price revolution, though it did not affect bicycle prices as much as people hoped, still drove the price down sufficiently for slightly more affluent Americans to purchase upward of a million units annually by 1900. Technological advances, including the evolution of the safety bike, favored both women and the young, which expanded the market and amplified sales.

The same period of American history that Mrozek sees as paramount to the transformation of sport is the subject of Steven Riess's second history of sport, *City*
Riess's more recent study focuses on urbanization and its effects on sport. In his introduction Riess argues that the evolution of the city has been the most important influence on the development of organized sport and recreational athletics in America. He develops this central thesis by exploring three dimensions of urbanization that profoundly shaped American sport: the physical structures and spatial patterns of cities; social and political organizations; and, urban value systems. For Riess, American cities did more than just provide the setting for sport—they also profoundly shaped its growth and were in turn influenced by trends in athletics. City Games divides the development of sport in urban America into three eras, each of which featured distinctive spatial patterns dictated by that period's dominant mode of transportation. The first period traces sport in the "walking city" (1820-1870). Riess then turns to sport in the industrialized radial city (1870-1960). This section comprises the bulk of his text. Finally, Riess examines sport in the suburbanized metropolis (1945-1980).

The period Riess identifies as having the most significant transformative influence on sport is 1870 to 1960. Riess focuses on the Reconstruction to Progressive period for most of his analysis. But Riess sees most of the effects of urbanization as unidirectional: as cities urbanized more intensely, sports enthusiasts simply responded to external pressures. Riess deals more with the changes in sports venues and the rise of city parks movements than with the effects of urbanization of actual sports. This is mostly due to his argument,


\[19\text{Riess, City Games, 3-6.}\]
which conflicts with his historical analysis in *The American Sporting Experience*, that most if not all of the organizational and structural growth associated with sport occurred before urbanization. All that really changed after the 1900 was where sports were played and less the way sports were played. People involved in sport were fundamentally reactionary rather than innovative.20

The geographic determinism of Riess’ *City Games* is apparent throughout. He skirts over causal movements like anti-modernism and influences like frontier anxiety as though they were no longer valid. In fact, these causal relationships and more were especially relevant to Riess in his first history of sport. Inconsistencies aside, Riess does provide an exceptional study of one subset of factors in his look at urbanism and its effect on sport. One is never left to wonder why small municipalities across the nation ended up building sports complexes of their own, in the endless pursuit of emulating their more urban neighbors.

The literature that traces the history of American sport is extremely broad. At the same time, there are literally thousands of sub-disciplinary studies of sports history. Specific sports aside, these other works cover every possible facet of sport from nearly every possible academic viewpoint. But as mainstream study goes, the historiography of sports history has glaring gaps. Until very recently there was little or no analysis of the phenomenon of new sports or the evolution of traditional recreational pursuits into extreme activities. There are almost no regional studies of sports in the American West. Given this dearth of information, one is left to assess sports history scholars as somewhat

20Riess, *City Games*, 238, 253-257.
parochial in their viewpoints. There is no paucity of data that compares northeastern and southern sports/society. But once sport moves west of the 100th meridian or into the late twentieth century, sports historians, including those discussed here, retreat to traditional interpretations that exclude as irrelevant or fleeting anything beyond the landscape as it was mapped up to 1945.

There is little doubt that sport is a wonderful and colorful barometer of American change and self-perception. But the case studies that dominate the literature do not move far beyond the accepted constructions of urbanism, religious reform, race, class, gender, or adolescent development. The general texts utilize the larger framework of American history for understanding changes in sport, but the history they actuate is less than dynamic. For example, three of the six surveys presented here refer to the “closing of the frontier” as though it were fact rather than theory. Frederic Paxson is cited uniformly as having formulated the frontier thesis while he was a student of Frederick Jackson Turner’s in Wisconsin. As a result, these studies provide as much historical continuity as they perpetuate gaps in the facts.

The study of sport in America demands broader analytical constructs to do justice to both sport and American history, constructs that expand the landscape of sport to include America in all its complexity and ugliness. We need to examine the fact that as the West became more dense, people gravitated towards individualized sports. The democratic promise of team sports was lost on American youngsters who were not blind to racial, gender, and class-based limits to access. The late 1950s and 1960s produced kids and adults who made choices based on the reality of participatory exclusion. Surfing,
skateboarding, and mountain biking co-opted people with the genuine promise of access. This, not baseball attended by the working class, was the genuine democratization of American sport. Why these sports and not others needs to be part of the complex of new analytical constructs applied to the larger landscape of sports history.

As this study progressed over the last four years, it was obvious that the research presented in these pages begged more questions than it answered. Perhaps that is as it should be. The phenomenon that has become “extreme sport” or “action sport” or “lifestyle sport” is a long way from being understood, in large part because of the sheer immensity of the subject. Far from being marginal or isolated, contemporary sport has been permeated by non-traditional and non-team activities. This work traces much of the footwork that gave contemporary sporting America its particular character and shape. The hubris of this kind modern sport is unlike any provided by traditional (or core) sports.

This study also operates from a fundamental and unapologetic perspective: the sports that dominated America in the late twentieth century and continue to eclipse traditional sports are not alternative. This will undoubtedly be an unpopular claim, especially among participants. They will principally object to any claim that they are in the center because there is less potential for that undefinable quotient of “cool” in the middle. The middle has always been occupied by team sports participants and old people and dilettantes who think they are cool. This should not be interpreted as demeaning to the revolutionary character of contemporary sport. The mainstream address of so-called “alternative” sport does not and should not belittle its cachet. The new face of sport was born toward the middle of the twentieth century and has matured to the point of needing serious study and
consideration, but consideration without continued dependence on some manufactured
otherness. Ignoring or denying the centric position of contemporary sports risks
permanently stigmatizing them, obfuscating their inherent worth and importance to
American culture and commerce.

Modern sports, by virtue of their capacity to endure change, to survive over time, and
their potential for both expression and competition do not need a rogue identity to be
legitimate or cool. They are not rogue by virtue of their extensive participation rates and
enormous position in the general economy; and they are still cool. Even though sports
labels such as “alternative,” “extreme,” “action,” or “lifestyle” litter the modern American
cultural and economic landscape, those sports are anything but “other.” Skateboarding,
surfing, and mountain biking were and still are participatory magnets, attracting millions
of enthusiasts to their ranks, with millions more to come. The raw participation numbers,
presented in more detail later in this chapter, reveal an American sporting landscape
driven by sports that were disdained early on as freakish or childish at best. At worst,
observers refused to acknowledge them as legitimate sporting endeavors.

Put simply, the sports examined here are the rule rather than the exception. How they
became the rule is the primary focus of this study. In the introduction to their anthology
on modern sport, Robert E. Rinehart and Synthia Sydnor observed that, “motifs
associated with these sports are ubiquitous in everyday life—they decorate our backyards,
street wear, language, lunch boxes, the Worldwide Web, MTV, ESPN, and advertising of
every sort.\textsuperscript{21} Government found the nexus of culture and sport in modern sport and codified its legitimacy with a postage stamp. Rinehart and Sydnor noted that in summer 1999, the U.S. Postal Service issued 150 million stamps that featured various “extreme” sports. In conjunction with the kick-off of the fifth annual X Games competition in San Francisco, the United States Post Office celebrated action sports by issuing the “Xtreme Sports” postage stamp series. The stamps honored BMX biking, inline skating, skateboarding, and snowboarding.

Numerous standards for evaluation bear out the truth of contemporary sport’s mainstream address: revenues, iconography, lexicon, and raw participation statistics. Much of the data presented and replicated in this study bears out the contention that mainstream sport includes everything from baseball to BASE jumping, from cycling to surfing, from basketball to BMX. What has absolutely lost currency is the notion that true sport is team sport. Many would argue that modern sport locates its significance in media hype rather than the physical landscape of participation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

There has been a curious tendency among contemporary sports historians, sociologists, and analysts to use descriptors that perpetuate the myth of alterntiveness or difference. This has been one of the great discursive drawbacks to many contemporary studies that try to understand and explain modern sport. Various academics continue to rely on descriptors like “alternative” or “extreme” or “lifestyle” as though these terms still

had currency, as though they were still relevant in the twenty-first century. Continued use of labels like “alternative” among scholarly treatments of contemporary sport begs the still unanswered question: alternative to what? To some mythic mainstream? That is very nearly Robert Rinehart’s suggestion, that contemporary sports “either ideologically or practically provide an alternative to mainstream sports and to mainstream sports values.” The term “lifestyle” may possess some usefulness, an idea that underpins Belinda Wheaton’s edited collection, Understanding Lifestyle Sports. Even though the contributors to Wheaton’s volume rely whenever possible on “lifestyle” as the definitive label for sports like skateboarding or surfing or rock climbing, even Wheaton falls back on labeling contemporary sport as “alternative.”

Trying to decide on how contemporary sport should be labeled occupies a good portion of the recent literature. Recent analyses of sport are very caught up in categorizing the subjects of their study. Wheaton uses the term “lifestyle” because “it is an expression adopted by members of the cultures themselves, and one that encapsulates these cultures and their identities, signaling the importance of the socio-historical context in which these activities emerged, took shape and exist.” Wheaton concludes that the term “lifestyle sport” “reflects both the characteristics of these activities, and their wider socio-cultural

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While the scholars in Wheaton’s collection make a valuable contribution to detailing the complexity of contemporary sport in the current landscape, they also unnecessarily perpetuate fictions about the sports they examine.

There is no need to frame skateboarding in terms of its becoming “more commercialized” because it is already deeply embedded in the retail and media market economy and has been since the 1960s. Of the $31 billion in sales generated by the overall sporting goods market in 2003, total skateboard related retail sales exceeded $5.7 billion—almost twenty percent. This kind of hard sales competition makes a fairly compelling case for skateboarding’s centric position in the domestic and global sports economy. Moreover, observers used to gauge the “growth” of contemporary sports based on the level of mainstream media coverage they garnered. Even this distinction is no longer relevant. By the end of 2004, there were four cable networks dedicated to non-traditional sports, such as FUEL, EXPN, Action Sports Channel, and the Extreme Sports Channel, carried variously in markets across America. In addition, “mainstream” sports channels such as ESPN or Fox Sports broadcast syndicated shows like Blue Torch TV or 54321 on a daily basis. Even modern radio, in its new subscription incarnation, is catering

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24 Wheaton, “Mapping the Lifestyle Sport-scape,” 2-3. Wheaton, like many others, vacillates almost randomly not only between descriptors but also the way those descriptors are presented in text. Various, the word lifestyle is presented in quotation marks, italicized, or some combination of the two. The end result is continued exceptionalization of sports through exceptionalized presentation of their modifiers.

25 Marie Case, Managing Director, Board-Trac Market Research, e-mail message to author, May 24, 2005. Sales data reflects purchases of skateboard decks, trucks, wheels, and helmets. It also includes sales of T-shirts, skateshoes, sandals, jeans, sunglasses, watches, backpacks and shorts.
to contemporary sports fans. "We have ‘Faction,’ which we created for our younger
listeners that has all kind of action sports athletes, such as Tony Hawk, Bodie Miller,
Kelly Slater, Lance Armstrong and the music they listen to," explained Scott Greenstein,
president of Entertainment and Sports at Sirius Satellite Radio. 26

Various scholars have attempted definitions for contemporary sport. This is, of
course, still predicated on the idea that contemporary sport requires definition. But some
scholars generate criteria that either overtly or unintentionally exceptionalize
contemporary sport as outside or other from the mainstream sporting landscape. This is
exactly what happens when Wheaton forwards her nine-point criteria for labeling
contemporary sport as “lifestyle.” First and foremost, contemporary sports are lifestyle
sports because they are historically recent and focus on grass roots participation. Wheaton
argues that lifestyle sports emphasize participation over spectating, either live or in some
mediated setting like watching the X-Games. In this model, all sports are lifestyle sports
because all sports began as amateur endeavors predicated on participation for the sake of
participation. Admittedly, the majority of these sports focused on winning and losing, as
they involved score-keeping as the method for defining the activity’s end-point. But even
with baseball or soccer, there was sub-amateur participation among kids and adults with
no consideration for anything beyond the parameters of the game under play.

Wheaton also contends that “lifestyle” sports are set apart because they do not depend
on nor do they seek spectator recognition. To suggest that lifestyle sports are lifestyle


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sports because they are not predicated on being seen is absurd. When Tony Alva opined in *Dogtown and Z-Boys* that “style was everything” in 1970s skateboarding, he was not talking about the way he looked in a mirror—he was talking about the way he looked to people watching him skate. Moreover, the practice of many “lifestyle” sports involves tricks, and those tricks are practiced and perfected and performed in ever more complicated combinations and routines with an even more complex and expressive vocabulary to describe those tricks. If skateboarding or surfing or BMX bicycle riding were pursued by participants for nothing more than the joy of participation, strenuous practice of various tricks would not be part of the sport. Inverted 540 degree spins off the top of a fifteen foot ramp or any other comparable maneuver cannot possibly be figured as beneficial to just the participant—it must involve the way the trick is seen by anyone who is watching.²⁷

Among the various criteria for labeling contemporary sport as “lifestyle” is lifestyle sports are a recent phenomena. In other words, because they center around new technologies or objects such as bikes and boards they are somehow apart from traditional sport. In Wheaton’s study, there is no consideration for why this provides foundation for the term “lifestyle.” The historical record serves as an important counterpoint to Wheaton’s understandings of newness. John Betts observed that the transformation of sport has always happened in cycles, nearly ironic in their repetition. He noted initially that “the transformation of the United States from a rural-agrarian to an urban-industrial

society, of course, affected the development of sport in other ways.” Betts contended that urbanization ushered in the need for commercialized sport, while industrialization generated the kind of economic baseline critical to fostering more varied forms of recreation.

Industrialization also allowed the kind of standardization and price reduction that benefitted much of urban society in the late nineteenth century; sports enthusiasts were no exception. As a sporting goods monopoly, A.G. Spalding & Brothers were able to produce baseballs to fuel the national craze that ranged in price $0.05 to $1.50. This was likely the first major phase in the transformative relationship between commercialization and sport.28

Merchandising became Albert Spalding’s passion by 1876. He was an avid sponsor of, and booster for, the newest sporting fad at the time: baseball. Much of the popular press from the period characterized the sport of baseball as just that: a fad. Much like skateboarding and surfing struggled for legitimacy in their nascent phase, baseball depended on shrewd marketing and financial support to transcend its childish image and mature into a “sport.” In the process, Spalding branched into other sports during the 1880s, absorbing numerous athletic equipment companies. As outdoor pursuits became more popular, expanding market niches into which more sporting goods flowed, everyone seemed to want in on the new sports equipment bonanza. Mail-order catalogue companies

like Wards and Sears & Roebuck included various items for camping, canoeing, swimming, and ice skating.

By 1872 catalogues even offered bicycling’s ruminant ancestor: the velocipede. Not to be outdone, urban department stores such as Macy’s of New York started advertising an array of “sporting goods.” In fact, it was in urban department stores that a great American sporting tradition began, one that would be repeated in many periods of sports’ evolution. Although a separate department was created in 1902 for sports equipment, most stores (including Macy’s) stocked the bathing suits and ice skates and velocipedes in the toy department.

This was the new crucible of legitimacy for any new sport or activity: when the equipment necessary to a sport made it out of the toy department and into the sporting goods section, that sport had arrived. This became even more true during the early years of sporting goods stores. As retail establishments sprang up dedicated to the sale of sporting goods, the definition of what constituted sport became part of the national economy.\(^2^9\)

It is important to note that Wheaton and others acknowledge one of the more inescapable differences between traditional sports and contemporary sports. The degree of innovation and technological experimentation is unrivaled in contemporary sports. One of the key differences between sports like surfing, skateboarding, or mountain biking and team-oriented core sports is the transformative role of technology. Surfing and skateboarding were propelled forward by radical changes in the technologies they

\(^2^9\) Betts, 244-245.
employed; mountain biking more so by a rearranged application and interpretation of existing technologies.

In simplest terms, traditional sports have tried to maintain tradition. Baseball still uses wooden bats and leather wrapped, string-core balls. Even minor advances in team-sport technology have not significantly expanded the structural limits of what is possible during play. Basketball has endured some rule changes that have given games higher scores and a quicker pace. But enormous advances in shoe designs have not changed the way the game is played. Football, save for increasing the quantity of protective padding that players wear and the evolution of the pass-offense, remains little changed from its nineteenth century beginnings. Even such progressions as field size, artificial turf, or enclosed stadiums have only affected the venues, not the sport.

The greater shifts are present in sports that are techno-competitive rather than human-competitive. In the twentieth century American West, surfing has gone through several phases, each marked in advance by some major advance in technology and each resulting in some greater level of popular access to the sport. Skateboarding moved into entirely different spatial arrangements in the 1970s, so much so that the original motivation that most skateboarders claimed as a reason to skate—to imitate surfing—lost all meaning with the evolution of vertical and street style skating.

Most of the remaining levels of categorization advanced by Wheaton and her contributors fall short of telling readers why “lifestyle” is an appropriate or effective description of contemporary sport. She contends that the predominantly white-middle-class participant demographic, the individualistic structure of the sports in question, and
the fact that they are non-aggressive because they lack participant-to-participant physical contact all adds up to qualifying contemporary sports as something other than traditional. As for predominantly white participation, it seems that her own understanding of contemporary sport’s youthful nature should dismiss that category of analysis. Wheaton needs only to recall how long it took for traditional sport to engender trans-racial participation in all sectors of public life. The nascency of contemporary sport implicitly debunks the critique that it works from a racially monochromatic participant pool. Given time, all sports expand their participant base.

This has always been the great truth for any American sport: it always begins among one demographic; but if a sport possesses more important qualities, such as endurance over time or offers of better access, eventually it involves every applicable demographic. The idea that contemporary sport is unique because it is individualistic is intriguing, but the notion that contemporary sport is not aggressive is patently absurd. Surfers, skateboarders, mountain bikers, and other “lifestyle” athletes may not contact each other, but they aggressively contact their environments, racking up injury rates comparable to traditional sports. It would be silly to call what Laird Hamilton does—surfing into fifty-foot waves that roll millions of cubic yards of sea water at forty miles per hour—non-aggressive. It is overly restrictive to define aggression only in terms of human-to-human contact. Making use of the proprietary language of sport that Wheaton herself claims as a lifestyle marker, skaters “carve” or “shred” a ramp or pool; mountain bikers “bomb” a trail; mountain climbers “lay siege;” and, surfers “charge” their waves.\(^\text{30}\)

\(^{30}\)Wheaton, “Mapping the Lifestyle Sport-scape,” 11.
Many factors make contemporary sport different from traditional sport. Contemporary sports use new or appropriated spaces for their pursuit. Sometimes these zones are liminal, lacking any defined or manufactured borders. Variously, “lifestyle” sports also use non-urban environments or cultural spaces that also defy boundaries and hover just inside the sporting landscape. Regardless, the linkage is obvious: contemporary sport has evolved in the spaces or gaps produced by modern life. It was traditional sport that became much too “other” for kids in the 1960s and beyond.

The traditional spaces occupied by team/core sports no longer resembled the shared experience of American youth. Baby boomers fashioned new sports—contemporary sports—that took various landscapes once afforded only to establishment figures, such as parents, executives, or financial elites, and democratized those spaces for burgeoning numbers of other kids. Beaches, mountains, financial districts, all became part of the new sporting landscape, primarily because they were already part of the cultural landscape of those early participants—they were familiar. Those spaces were redefined as playing fields, as opportunities to do something else, such as skateboard or surf or mountain bike. In simpler terms, young adults with experimental personalities throughout the twentieth century took the landscapes that were already part of their lives and added sport to list of available uses.

The greatest level of merit in Wheaton’s treatment is in her contention that a style of life seems to evolve around some sports (mostly contemporary) that does not have a

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comparable evolution in traditional sports. This idea has been part of more idiosyncratic examinations of every sport listed as “lifestyle.” Without question, the identity that evolves among skateboarders or surfers or mountain bikers is helped along by certain idiosyncracies within those sports. The fact that in their early phases, they lacked a “season” meant that play could continue indefinitely.32

Unlike conventional organized sporting endeavors, contemporary sports were highly experimental, requiring enormous investments of time and practice, trial and error. Contemporary sport also made heavy use of certain everyday items and then recast those items in terms of the sports where they were utilized. The skateboard shoe evolved out of the Keds brand canvas deck shoe because the Keds shoe had a gum-rubber sole that was perfect for adhering to a skateboard deck. The Ford Woody station wagon did not become a prototypical surf car because it was cool or aesthetically special: it was a practical choice because it was one of the least expensive cars available that was long enough to haul surfboards and sleep in. In short, many of the elements of normal, non-sporting life became part of the practical landscape of contemporary sport, acquiring cachet along the way.

Despite the nominal value in the “lifestyle” description of contemporary sport, most descriptions of modern sport that perpetuate some mythic otherness do not have meaning any longer. If one works from the basic factual premise that more people skateboard on a daily basis than play baseball or football, contemporary sport is not an alternative to anything—it is integral to the mainstream, perhaps even at the center. The most pointed

one-line understanding of contemporary sport was Stacy Peralta’s choice for the subtitle to his documentary, *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, the 2001 film that traced the history of modern skateboarding. Peralta subtitled his work “A Film About the Birth of the Now.” In that summation, Peralta tried to convey how drastically the dual landscapes of culture and sport had changed since the baby boom began.

Only in the early phases of skateboarding, surfing, or mountain biking was there room for superlatives like “extreme” or “alternative” or “adventure.” Now these sports are the standard for comparison. One need only look at advertising trends in the last twenty years to see the way individual sports have shifted toward and co-opted the center. Companies looking to pitch their products are just as likely to pick a skateboarder, surfer, or bike racer, as they are a baseball or basketball star. This trend developed slowly and over time. During skateboarding’s second popularity spike, between 1975 and 1985, car companies like MG made use of skaters to pitch their products. The difference was in the way earlier ads used these sports as promotional currency. The athletes stood as background color or window dressing. In a 1978 print ad in *Sports Illustrated*, skateboarders surrounded a convertible MG Midget while one jumped over it. The ad copy compared the car’s handling to a skateboard’s maneuverability. The skateboarders featured in the ad did not pitch the product—their voice was never used to endorse the car—they just made it cool.33

The last fifteen years of advertising has demonstrated the full measure of change in American demographics, as ever more “extreme” athletes became spokespersons for a myriad of products and services. The coup de grace for this argument came in fall 2004.

during the baseball World Series. American Express, long considered a symbol of elitism and proprietary wealth, has always set the standard in the advertising world for using iconic athletes as spokespersons. In fall 2004, the company continued that tradition when it launched a five-part ad series that featured the new icons of sport. In addition to entertainment stars such as Ellen DeGeneres and Robert DeNiro, American Express chose two athletes for the “My Life, My Card” campaign: golfer Tiger Woods and big-wave surfer Laird Hamilton. In fact, Hamilton was the only spokesperson to do subsequent ads, three in all. The visual currency of modern sport has been difficult to compete with, even within American Express’s microcosm of cool.34

Understanding sport in the twentieth is more than understanding the linear narrative of what happened and when. Undoubtedly the details are important, even critical, as contemporary sports evolved in ways that traditional team sports never imagined. The phenomenon of sport and its transformation is as much about facts as it is about form and function. The single most important thing to realize in the history of sport in the twentieth century is that sport has become more than just a collection of games where people wear uniforms and someone keeps score. Sport as it is now pursued is less about winning and losing and more about performing, feeling, expressing, living. The uniforms of modern athletes never come off. The game never really ends. In the post-World War II era,

contemporary sport offers Americans the chance to play as they live—in splendid isolation or micro-community. In the culture of “me, me, me” and “now, now, now,” contemporary sport offers a new medium of consumption, where results are instantaneous, as is the action. There are no time-outs, only a seemingly endless series of linked maneuvers. Contemporary sport both inspires and is inspired by the cultural landscape where it lives.

The landscape that this study tries to model and explain begs even the most basic questions, such as what is sport? Put more simply, what constitutes sport and what does not? Are certain activities excluded from categorization as sport? In effect, if sport can be defined, what does it look like? Is there a meaning to sport at all or is it delimited by nature? Given that this study was pursued in the early twenty-first century, the internet was the first stop in trying to unravel the meaning of sport. A Google search of the phrase “what is the meaning of sport?” produced 1,873 hits in October 2004. Those links revealed that sport’s meaning was the topic of hundreds of books, articles, university courses, elementary school physical education curricula, forums, conferences, and pop surveys. It was evident that technology might push sport forward but was of marginal value to understanding its meaning.

The literature from the early twentieth century does not generate a more clear understanding of sport. In 1917, Frederic L. Paxson published the first academic attempt to understand the importance of sport in American culture up to that point. Not surprisingly, Paxson was informed heavily by Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. “No people has passed through greater changes in a single lifetime than did Americans in the generation which saw the closing of the old frontier,” begins Paxson’s essay on the
rise of sport.\(^{35}\) With this sentiment as the opening salvo of his thesis, he theorizes that sport rose as the natural safety valve to replace the release once afforded by the American frontier. Paxson was a man of his times and as such he perceived the world around him in frontier terms. He emphasized the popularity of sports as diverse as canoeing and curling, bicycling and baseball, roller skating and rowing. Paxson provided one of the first inclusive definitions of sport, one that made technology part and parcel of sport at large. In fact, Paxson’s list included more technologically dependent sports than purely human versus human sports. Without realizing it, Paxson tapped into the fact that sport had already become something more than *mano a mano* by the late nineteenth century. Sport did not have to exclude technology. On the contrary, technology only expanded the possibilities for sport and sports participation.

It may seem open-ended to suggest that sport is whatever people consider sport to be at any given moment in history, but perhaps it is not too far afield. After all, every participant considers their particular activity to be a sport, and some body of literary or analytical support can usually be located to support any endeavor’s sporting claim. If sport is as sport does, it is both absolute and limitless. Numerous pundits have manufactured determinist criteria for what sport is not, especially when counter-culture anti-heroes started making money and getting press for silly things like riding a surfboard or a skateboard. Critics always contend that measurement is the sole determinant of whether something is a sport or just a recreational activity. Even Paxson rejected this kind

of restrictive thinking. He studied the rise of many non-traditional sports and never once stopped to ask whether or not any of these activities constituted legitimate sport. Paxson seemed to be saying that if people competed at some physical endeavor, it was sport. The variables only appeared to be of nominal importance, such as the existence of a governing organization or the need for mechanized or non-mechanized technology. What counted was the central role of humans in those sports. For Paxson, even the meaning of sport was greater than the sport itself. He ended his analysis of the rise of sport in the late nineteenth century with the affirmation that sport was about freedom, about transcending whatever ails the human condition: “And who shall say that when our women took up tennis and the bicycle they did not as well make the great stride towards real emancipation.” Real or contrived, Paxson framed sport as it should be framed, as something that was, at its core, more than just keeping score.\(^{36}\)

Sport, as a category of analysis, has changed in and because of the West. Americans have long gravitated toward physical recreation, evidenced by the post-Civil War proliferation of professional and amateur sporting associations. It is tempting to be swayed by the eclipsing light of professional team sports, such as baseball or basketball, when considering what Americans do for fun and sport. Retail revenues in traditional “core” sport categories seem astronomical, especially when sales figures for soft goods, such as shoes, are tabulated on an annual basis. It seems that based on their economic importance, core sports are still the favored medium for analysis and understanding of Americans and American cultural history. But economic determinism skirts consideration


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of whether or not core sports are even relevant any longer, except for detailing the excessive spending habits of fans and pseudo-fans.

For understanding Americans, westerners, and the geographies they inhabit, it is more accurate to consider what sports most Americans participate in on a regular basis, as well as which sports dominate the perceptual landscape of sports lifestyles. That is, based on participation rates alone, it is more common for Americans between the ages of 18 and 30 to visualize themselves as something other than a New York Yankee in American Express commercial. This study offers a link between changes in sports participation rates after 1945 and the increasing dominance of western bred sports on the sporting landscape and in American culture.

Some will suggest that the West has nothing to do with contemporary sport, that there are no purely western sports. Quite obviously, there is never ending debate about the historical origin of any given. In the case of the American West and the concept of western sport, things are complicated, not only by intra-regional rivalries but interregional rivalries. While this study is focused more on the history of how and why contemporary sport evolved, it also suggests that there are decidedly western sports. Some have been around for a very long time, as with surfing. Some are more recent, such as mountain biking and skateboarding. Certain western sports owe their existence to extant technologies, such as mountain biking does to road cycling. But they all exhibit characteristics that separate them from similar pursuits. In the early twentieth century, urban kids cut roller skate wheel plates in half, nailed them to planks of wood, attached milk crates to the top, and invented the scooter. This was, in fact, the earliest form of the
skateboard, but it bears little resemblance to skateboarding technologies after 1959. One fact is certain: the sports born in the West after World War II soon dominated participation on the American sporting landscape. Most importantly, western sports possessed the kind of democratizing elements that made geography idiosyncratic to play. One of the more common criticisms of labeling skateboarding as sport is that you only need a board and some asphalt to participate. This assigns far too much veracity to the overwhelming number of images that depict skateboarders in solitary pursuit of their sport. More often they are in the midst of a group, certainly at a minimum they are in the presence of the photographer, who is there for the sole purpose of capturing an image that shows the world this person is skateboarding.

While it is an individualistic endeavor, skateboarding’s most common venue is in a group setting, with numerous skateboarders competing against each other in sessions dedicated to practicing and perfecting specific tricks or sequences of tricks. The board and asphalt criticism is unfounded: to play baseball people need the same things: equipment and other people. While people can skateboard alone, they rarely do. It is in the real, rather than perceived, pursuit of sports such as skateboarding that their developmental character is revealed. They are not anomalous: at the same time that individual participation sports evolved in opposition to traditional team sports their play was inevitably modeled on the sports they opposed. While people can skateboard, mountain bike, or surf alone, they usually do not because it is not as much fun or is inherently more dangerous.
From a participatory perspective, sports that evolved in the West after 1945 have displaced traditional or core sports. The principal objection to the traditionality of team sports like baseball or basketball is that for decades nothing else existed to compete with them. Those traditional sports represented the technological zeniths of their respective eras. Competition for the participatory energies of Americans began when alternatives popped up on the tide of post-war technological innovation. Perhaps the negative parental and municipal reaction to skateboarding in 1965 was attached to this very fear: that children would stop playing baseball and football in favor of these dangerous, new fangled fads. Phobic or not, that is exactly what took place after World War II. It was not until 1987, when American Sports Data (ASD), a small market research company in New York, did studies that produced reasonably accurate measurements of American sports participation. The data generated at ASD exposed that an enormous shift had taken place in the participatory landscape. Their studies revealed that “new” sports had started to grow, while overall participation in certain core sports was in decline.\\(^{37}\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>1990</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>13 Year Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseball</td>
<td>15,098</td>
<td>15,454</td>
<td>15,586</td>
<td>10,881</td>
<td>-27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basketball</td>
<td>35,737</td>
<td>39,808</td>
<td>42,138</td>
<td>37,552</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>20,292</td>
<td>20,894</td>
<td>21,241</td>
<td>15,456</td>
<td>-23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mtn. Biking</td>
<td>1,512</td>
<td>4,146</td>
<td>7,408</td>
<td>7,854</td>
<td>419.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboarding</td>
<td>10,888</td>
<td>9,267</td>
<td>8,388</td>
<td>11,649</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing</td>
<td>1,459</td>
<td>1,224</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>2,180</td>
<td>49.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What these numbers say about the character of sport in America and in the West is that things not only have changed but are continuing to change. As the years creep by, each of these contemporary sports becomes older and more ingrained in western and American culture. Participation is not the byproduct of some “love affair” with the exotic or new; love affairs with “new fangled” sports do not last twenty to forty years. Some will argue that the individual sport has been around for a long time, as with golf or even tennis. While those sports possess similarities to contemporary sport, they do not possess the same assets: golf and tennis require highly specialized playing fields that were traditionally anything but democratic in their accessibility. Once again, the appeal of contemporary sports is located not in their perceived mirroring of contemporary culture but in their ability to overcome the failed promise of traditional sport.

The other statistic that is important to consider is this: in its study, American Sports Data controlled for participant location, assigning geographic designations such as Northeast, South, or West to respondents. Among contemporary sport participants, westerners represent over half in each category, more than all other geographic designations combined. This is not that significant when looking at surfing, but mountain biking as a category includes on-road and off-road participants. Off-road mountain bike users only represent 50 percent of the total. So, the geographic availability of mountainous terrain does not influence the fact that overall participation, on-road and off-
road, is dominated by westerners. Skateboarding also skirts this problem given its need for paved surfaces. \(^{38}\)

Sports born in the West are dominated by westerners. Another characteristic of the study was the opportunity for all participants declare a favorite sport. People who mountain bike do not generally do so to the exclusion of all other sports activities. Kids who skateboard may also play football or basketball. But the inverse relationship between traditional and contemporary sports suggests that more and more people are selectively taking on sports and not participating in others. Of respondents to the ASD study who participated in multiple sports, an average of forty-five percent of mountain bikers, skateboarders, and surfers picked those sports as their favorite; in 1987, it was less than ten percent. By contrast, core-sports participants have declined in their favoritism towards football, baseball, and basketball, with self-selection dropping from over thirty-five percent on average to less than twenty percent.

Two things seem clear: first, there is a body of western sport that has nothing to do with rodeo or lumber jacking; second, those sports, while relatively new, have gained adherents over time. The hardest question remains unasked: is the popularity of these non-core sports in the West simply a by-product of geography, a reprise of the “in the West therefore because of the West” argument, or has there been a concerted effort to popularize these sports by westernizing them? To some degree, the contemporary sports that more and more westerners participate in evoke images classically associated with the

West. Harvey Lauer, president of American Sports Data, commented on the changing face of sport, saying, "Traditional team sports reflect traditional values: cooperation, teamwork and character. The new extreme sports have a diametrically opposite set of values including fierce individualism, alienation, [and] defiance."39

The inverse relationship between traditional and contemporary sports in terms of participation suggests a movement by westerners and non-westerners away from team-centered sports and toward those sports requiring only individual skill and participation. Michael May, an analyst and public relations coordinator with the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, thought the appeal of contemporary sports was self-evident when one considered the nature of those sports. "I think our quest for individuality, our quest for something different, our interest in uncharted waters...that same curiosity and drive has helped give birth to new activities and get us going in directions that you never would have anticipated."40 What this says about space and sport in the West is that based on the sports they engage in, westerners define their landscapes along numerous vectors and in non-traditional ways. The dynamics of participation and the increasing urbanization of the West combine to make urban landscapes venues for large scale sports participation among youth, as with skateboarding; at the same time, urbanites under thirty-five years of age, who comprise seventy-five percent of the on and off-road mountain bikers, clearly look to both urban and non-urban landscapes. For some

39Harvey Lauer, telephone interview by author, September 27, 2001; e-mail message to author, November 28, 2001.
40Mike May, telephone interview by author, September 27, 2001.
westerners, landscapes still do not possess innate value but value associated with some activity. The obvious trend associated with changes in sports participation suggests that space is something to be utilized, sometimes manipulated, but definitely valued for more than any purported aesthetic quality or manufactured purpose.

Even though the evidence of a transformation of the sporting landscape is circumambient, the West did not always dominate sports participation, either in raw number or in the types of sports played. Because the sporting landscape has proven more fluid than many observers realized, sport is a lens for viewing other elements of culture and history. The metamorphosis of American sports participation reveals that the current center of the sports universe is not occupied by the sports my parents grew up with but with the sports I grew up with. It is not enough to simply know that the shift took place.

In addition to the obligation to understand the path to the present, this study tries to fill other scholarly gaps. For both skateboarding and mountain biking, very little cogent historical analysis exists. The stand-alone histories of the two sports that have had the greatest effect on the overall landscape of sport participation lack anything approaching a well-documented or accurate historical treatment. Frank Berto's *Birth of Dirt* is so caught up in questions of invention and credit that it fails to ask the some of the most basic and critical questions. Skateboarding, for example, is something that in itself is nothing more than a creative way to imitate surfing on dry land. But urethane wheels took skateboarding into a vertical realm that made skateboarding more than surfing—they made it unique. The contemporary sports landscape is much more complicated than it used to be. Surfing and skateboarding invite debates about race, class, and gender much as
traditional sports did before civil rights legislation or Title IX. Just like their predecessors, contemporary sports are consumed, both by participants and would-be participants. What this study does is provide a working history of the current center of the American sports landscape. Skateboarding, surfing, and mountain biking are important components of American culture. They are the “now” that film maker Stacy Peralta tried to explain in his documentary on southern California skateboarding. This study traces not only what the “now” looks like but why and how it came to be.
WEST GOES EAST: SURFING AS THE PROTO WESTERN SPORT

Even though surfing has been part of the social and discursive landscape of America for some time, its claim to being a sport has boundaries. True, it is sport-like: it is physical; it requires prowess to do well and avoid drowning; it has developed its own quiver of moves; and it can be competitive. One could even make the argument that it is has simply been transformed into a sport by boosters to effect legitimacy and avoid permanent marginalization. Surfing historian Matt Warshaw notes that surfers resist labeling surfing as sport. Surfing is romanced more than it is played. Despite its obvious compatibility with being a sport, Warshaw observes that surfing lacks many of the discernible characteristics which Americans see in their traditional understanding of sport: it has no regulation playing field, no written rules, few statistics or records, and it is quantified only with the greatest subjectivity. In short, it fits all the criteria for contemporary sport.¹

Although surfing is positioned as the proto-western sport, its inclusion is not without problems. What makes surfing a likely candidate for analysis in any study of either sport

¹Matt Warshaw, Maverick’s: The Story of Big-Wave Surfing (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), x-xi.
or the West is the influence it has had on the socioeconomic and cultural landscape of the West, America, and the rest of the world. It also begins the model for how sport transforms during the twentieth century. Far from it being the “sport of kings,” as it has been incorrectly described by too many, surfing was always the people’s sport. It was always democratic in its accessibility and form.

As a western sport, surfing possesses various internal contradictions and is shrouded in too many myths. One of the more prominent euphemistic mythologies is the description of surfing as the “sport of kings.” This was a classic promotional nuance aimed at legitimizing surfing in an age when American surfing culture was under attack for its links to counter-culture. In 1966, America was not yet a bastion of tolerance or a shrine to national unity. President Johnson was moving the nation deeper into Vietnam, poverty was rampant, and the “Summer of Love” was decaying into a winter of discontent. It was not an era that abided alternatives to the norm, which was what surfing was relative to the extant sports landscape. In that same year, Ben Finney published *Surfing: The Sport of Hawaiian Kings*, the first attempt at the history of the sport. Finney, like others after him, tried to “royalize” the sport, to make it seem noble. The contradiction was with surfing’s populist roots. Its real appeal was its combination of inherent fun nature and democratic character: access was available to anyone who dared try. This was especially true in pre-twentieth century Hawaiian culture, where surfing existed for pleasure and recreation, as a test of character, or as an expression of royal

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power. These various elements were part of the cultural landscape for well over a
millennium.

It is the curious habit of historians, periodically, to make something mainstream into
something exotic or fringe, alternative or extreme, instead of considering the sport for
what it is. In simple terms, surfing never had to be royal to merit inclusion in the panacea
of sport or to justify tracing its history. Surfing, as it was pursued by everyday Hawaiians
and then Californians, changed people’s lives, tastes, language, and cultural iconography.
Surfing added the final coat of luster to the West Coast’s expanding currency in the
American cultural economy.

Surfing is one of the few western sports whose popularity is inversely proportional to
its participation rates. While very few people surf, countless are familiar with its
associated styles, images, and lingo. Knee length board shorts and surf logos are a staple
in the clothing industry, and euphemisms like “catch a wave” or “hang loose” are rarely
misunderstood, even though the source of their cachet is not always comprehended by
those who employ them as currency.

In Las Vegas, Nevada, far removed from any surf break other than wake-surfing at
Lake Mead, one of the most popular shopping spots for young Las Vegans is a retail
establishment named Hollister, located in the Fashion Show Mall. The shop is named for
the famous Hollister Ranch surf break located just north of Santa Barbara, California. The
store sells surf inspired clothing for men and women, bandying about surfing aphorisms
and beach lifestyle grist. An informal poll taken over many Saturday afternoons indicated
that ninety-nine percent of Hollister’s patrons had no idea of the origin of the store’s
name. About twenty-five percent knew it was named for someplace in California but could not specify where or why. None of the store’s sales floor personnel could identify the store’s namesake. Youth knowledge of the origin of the store’s namesake did nothing to dampen the enormous allure attached to beach clothing in one of the most arid metropolitan centers on the planet.

This example is nothing more than further testament to the colossal significance of surfing in the western and greater American cultural lexicon. The progression of sport in the West was both typified and inspired by surfing’s transformative nature. It was more than just a sport that southern California kids embraced after its introduction in the early twentieth century. Surfing represented the entire package: physical activity; human physicality; styles of dress, speech, and music. In the sum of its parts, surfing crossed the line and merged sport with lifestyle.

Surfing owes its evolution to ancient peoples who traversed enormous bodies of water to settle the islands of Polynesia. One Hawaiian origin story has it that in the beginning of all things, when the god Wakea and the goddess Haumea fashioned the land and sea, they made the Pacific Ocean too large. So they dotted it with tropical islands to provide refreshment and shade for exhausted travelers. Those early voyagers left a record of their travels all over the Pacific islands. Stone implements, rock carvings, and other archeological data links Polynesian peoples to Asia, placing their arrival in the Pacific at sometime before 200 B.C.\(^3\)

The sport’s origins lay outside the continental United States. In sharp contrast to surfing’s symbolic importance for contemporary youth culture is its history, which extends back much further than popularized images from the 1960s and the music of the Beach Boys or movies like *Gidget*. It traces its origins back more than 1,000 years to ancient Polynesia, where it likely served a more practical purpose to oceanic cultures. In its earliest form, surfing was probably not a recreational pursuit. Similarly, there is no way to ascertain who first determined that riding waves on planks of wood might be “fun.” The Pacific Ocean has pounded the coastlines of its islands for thousands of years, certainly much longer than humans have inhabited those islands.

There is little that pins down surfing’s evolutionary genesis. As the people of Pacific cultures entered the oceanic regions they would have adapted to their environment. This means that in addition to adaptive strategies which used the sea for travel and food, it is likely they also figured the sea as a source of recreation. The recreational pursuit of riding waves on planks of wood fosters various skills critical to survival in an oceanic environment, including balance and breath-hold. These skills undoubtedly crossed-over into and benefitted daily living for Polynesians and Pacific Islanders.¹

In the Pacific model of surfing’s evolution, the origins of simple wave-riding date to nearly 2,000 B.C., when ancestors of the Polynesians and other islanders started moving east from Southeast Asia, exploring and colonizing their vast oceanic environs. Archeological data indicates that the first canoes reached Hawai’i by at least 400 A.D.

Those first settlers were likely already skilled at wave riding. The various elements unique to Hawaiian surfing, such as long boards for standing on the wave and riding horizontally across the wave’s face, developed over hundreds of years of contact with Hawai’i’s big waves. In this formulation, Hawaiian surfing dates to at least 1,000 years ago.⁵

Whatever lack of hard archeological data there might be for ancient surfing, there is no dearth of material evidence for surfing in the modern age, beginning with European contacts with Hawaiians in the 18th century. In late 1776, as Americans were still trying to digest the full measure of their decision to leave England’s fold in favor of independence, Captain James Cook was in his third voyage of exploration in the Pacific. He and his crew were already well acquainted with many of the activities and cultural idiosyncracies of the island peoples they had encountered during the previous eight years. Only the third voyage brought published accounts of surfing to the rest of the world.

In January 1778, while Benjamin Franklin was in Paris finalizing details of a Franco-American alliance against the England, Cook landed at Waimea Bay on the island of O‘ahu. Staying only for a week, Cook returned late 1778 to winter in the Hawaiian islands. Part of the journals of Captain Cook include the accounts of Lt. James King. First published in 1784 in London, King described surfing among the Hawaiians as something to be envied and awed:

“The Men sometimes 20 or 30 go without the Swell of the Surf, & lay themselves flat upon an oval piece of plank about their Size & breadth, they keep their legs close on top of it, & their arms are us’d to guide the plank, they wait the time of the greatest

⁵Finney and Houston, Surfing, rev. ed., 23.
Swell that sets on Shore, & altogether push forward with their Arms to keep on its top, it sends them in with a most astonishing Velocity, & the great art is to guide the plank so as always to keep it in a proper direction on top of the Swell...they seem to feel a great pleasure in the motion which this Exercise gives.®

The sport was bound up with religion, sexual practices, and the social class system of Hawai‘i. Songs developed that recounted surfing feats, sung and chanted at various ceremonies and feasts. Even board builders had ritual chants that were required before labor could begin on a new board. In Hawai‘i, surfing was not restricted to royalty: most Hawaiians surfed, achieving proficiency in the water at an early age. There are folk tales that figure surfing part of the earliest Hawaiian culture. These tales describe battles between kings and chiefs, chiefs and gods, and various morality plays of love and loss. One surf story details the legendary romance between Laieikawai, a maiden of humble origins, and one of her suitors, Hauailiki, a champion surfer from Kauai. In this telling, Hauailiki performed numerous daring feats on his board, riding one giant wave all the way to shore. For his efforts, Laieikawai presented him with a lehua lei, a customary token of recognition for surfers. In a classic tale of unrequited love, surfing prowess did not win the girl, as Hauailiki returned to Kauai with nothing more than his lei.⁷ Cook stumbled upon a part of Hawaiian society and culture that developed over a millennium.

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Surfing was already a part of the socio-economic landscape and informed the differences between Hawaiian classes.

The hereditary chief class, or ali‘i, claimed the most proficiency with board sports on the waves. Expertise was a byproduct of privilege, as the ali‘i had more free time to pursue surfing as a skill. Often taller and stronger than average Hawaiians, the ali‘i’s status depended, in part, on their strength and stamina. Strenuous sports like surfing provided the kind physical training necessary to their position at the top of Hawai‘i’s class system. King Kamehameha I trained as a young man with both surfboard and canoe. The ali‘i class often had their own personal surf chants, prayers dedicated to proclaiming the glory and skill of a chief or king. The privileges of the ali‘i went beyond leisure time and personal surf chants: they often extended to owning rights to a particular break or wave. In one tale, a handsome young surfer is almost executed for riding on the same wave at Waikiki as a high ranking female chieftess. The same surfer, Pikoi, tried to borrow a board from the chieftess, a violation of kapu that also nearly cost him his life. It was in these stories, and many others, that surfing was married to understandings of both Hawaiian culture and its various levels of stratification.³

Even the material culture of surfing was stratified by rank in Hawaiian society. Commoners rode waves on body boards, known as paipo, or on stand up boards up to twelve feet long, known as alaia. Royalty, male and female, rode longboards known as olo. These boards were sometimes as long as twenty-four feet. These boards clearly tested the physical abilities of any chief or chieftess who rode one. At five inches thick, they

³Finney and Houston, Surfing, rev. ed., 41-42.
weighed more than 150 pounds. Given the weight of the olo, a surfer would have found it very difficult to paddle out from the shore, through the breaking waves, to what is called the “outside” of the break. In the old days, a surfer had two choices: paddle all the way around the surf line to get outside or hitch a ride on a canoe with the olo in tow, paddling to the outside with technology instead of shoulders. This allowed the alai‘i to reserve their energy for the better part of the sport: riding waves back to shore.9

The proprietary attitude of the alai‘i about specific breaks and technology was one of the many ways that chiefs and chieftesses used surfing and other Hawaiian sports to maintain their physical and spiritual rule over the people. Despite this stratification, the sport remained open to anyone with the desire to surf. Along with the daily operation of surf culture in Hawai‘i, each year Hawaiian surfers paid homage to the god Lono at the Makahiki festival and surf chants punctuated the spirituality embedded in the practice of the sport. For the ancient Hawaiians, surfing was a religious sport that developed the unity of one's mind, body and spirit.10

Meanwhile, back at the islands, the reality of contact between Europeans and Hawaiians became a story similar to the one being played out around the globe at about the same time. Europeans brought Hawaiians a combination of what Jared Diamond has termed “guns, germs, and steel.”11 Estimates of Hawai‘i’s population at the time of

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10 Finney and Houston, Surfing, rev. ed., 41-42, 44.

Cook’s arrival range from 250,000 to as many 1,000,000 people. Over the 100 years following Cook’s arrival at Waimea, Hawaiian population dropped to approximately 70,000. Disease, not surprisingly, was the principal agent of decline. By the year 2000, barely 9,000 “pure” Hawaiians remained, less than one percent of the state’s 1.2 million people. In the wake of European invasion, Hawai’i was introduced to measles, smallpox, and various venereal diseases that sterilized a large number of the surviving population. As the biological onslaught proceeded, Hawaiian culture and economy changed. By “discovering” Hawai’i and making its location known on maps, Cook and the British opened the islands to the haole: Europeans, Americans, and other foreign peoples of non-Hawaiian extraction. Sandalwood traders, whaling crews, and the requisite merchant class that underpinned nineteenth century trade made Hawai’i their home. They introduced Hawaiians to the bevy of consumer goods manufactured in the expanding industrial revolution and to the money economy that manufacturing depended on. The nineteenth century was not exactly a high point for surfing either.

The real key to understanding surfing’s contemporary importance in Hawaiian culture as something more than a marketing ploy or tourist draw is to understand how devastating its decline was in nineteenth century Hawaiian culture. Continental Americans might draw a comparison by imagining if baseball were demonized by some extra-regional force, swept under the carpet for a few decades, then rediscovered by later generations of

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youth. In the same way that American fans perceive baseball as an indigenous sport, surfing was and is part and parcel of almost a thousand years of Hawaiian culture and history.

By 1800, less than fifty years after Cook, as ships from various European countries were bringing weapons, alcohol, and disease into Hawai‘i, traditional Hawaiian culture started to unravel. The young Hawaiian king Liholiho typified the effects of Western hegemony with his fall from grace and power. One of the key elements to how Hawaiian culture operated was the kapu, or taboo, system. The kapu were the moral matrix through which decisions and plans flowed. Like any culture, Hawaiians had definite parameters for public relations between men and women. There were kapu for celebrations, funerals, and feasts. In 1819, reportedly after a three day drinking binge, King Liholiho came to dinner with his mother and a small number of other women. In doing so he abolished the ancient kapu on men dining with women. This was interpreted as a sign that Hawaiians were not expected to fear the old gods any more.14

The kapu system, long a part of indigenous culture, was only the first of many cultural building blocks to feel the weight of European pressure. A year later, in 1820, God came to Hawai‘i, carried across the Pacific by New England missionaries. With those Calvinist missionaries came a wholly opposite set of white Christian kapu, including prohibitions against nudity or near nudity and thunderous railing against any activity that took people away from worship or pious living. These early missionaries spent most of the 1820s converting as many Hawaiians as possible, including various important chiefs. The

14Finney and Houston, Surfing, rev. ed., 53; Horowitz, Blue Latitudes, 399-400.
importance of surfing to Hawaiian culture was not lost on some of God’s army. William Ellis, a touring British missionary, spent a good part of the 1820s saving souls and teaching English. He also watched locals surf:

“They have a great variety of games, and gambol as fearlessly in the water as the children of a school do in their playground....but the most general and frequent game is swimming in the surf. The higher the sea and the larger the waves, in their opinion the better the sport. On these occasions they use a board, which they call papa hé náru [papa he’e nalu], generally five or six feet long....those who are expert frequently change their position on the board, sometimes sitting, sometimes standing erect in the midst of the foam.”

Ellis was astonished by the sheer numbers of locals who surfed, with boards and without, and who would in great numbers abandon the tasks of daily living to play in good waves. But Ellis could not avoid his primary calling as a messenger of the Word. Despite his clear admiration for Hawaiians and their customs, he was also part of the larger American effort to Christianize Polynesian peoples and bring them back from the wayward nature of their ancestral life.

With conversion came the desire to modify culture, to outlaw those customs that were implicitly Hawaiian, such as hula and surfing. In the case of surfing, missionaries complained about both the lack of clothing and the way the sport negatively affected so many other aspects of daily life. William S. Ruchenberger noted in 1838:

“A change has taken place in certain customs....I allude to the variety of athletic exercises, such as swimming, with or without a surfboard..., being in opposition to the strict tenets of Calvinism, have been suppressed. Can the missionaries be fairly charged with suppressing these games? I believe they deny having done so.

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But they write and publicly express their opinions, and state these sports to be expressly against the laws of God."\textsuperscript{16}

In 1847, Hiram Bingham, a missionary from New England, insisted that he and his fellows were innocent of spiritual responsibility for any decline in surfing. He observed that, “the decline and discontinuance of the use of the surfboard, as civilization advances, may be accounted for by the increase in modesty, industry, and religion, without supposing, as some have affected to believe, that missionaries caused oppressive enactments against it.”\textsuperscript{17} More often than not, missionaries made no secret of their distaste for native Hawaiian ways, including surfing. At the same time they were protesting any culpability for repressing surfing based on biblical objections, those objections were constantly at the ready for Hawaiians.\textsuperscript{18}

The overthrow of the kapu system had a residual effect on surfing. After Liholiho, Hawaiians drifted further and further from the power and influence of their gods and cultural stability that ritual provided. After 1819, family structures became more disjointed, rippling out and impacting productivity levels in farming and fishing. These


\textsuperscript{17}Hiram Bingham, \textit{A Residence of Twenty-One Years in the Sandwich Islands} (Hartford: Huntington, 1847), 17; Jonathan Kay Kamakawïwoʻole Osorio, \textit{Dismembering Lāhui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2002), 18-19; Wyndette, Islands, 81-82, 89, 96.

\textsuperscript{18}Sheldon Dibble, \textit{A History of the Sandwich Islands} (Honolulu: T.G. Thrum, 1909), 102.
material endeavors were also dramatically affected by the steep decline in native Hawaiian population.

Surfing and Hawaiian sport in general were affected most immediately by the cessation of the Makahiki festival, the event that tied all things Hawaiian (especially surfing) to the god Lono-i-ka-makahiki. The greatest of the Hawaiian luaus, the Makahiki was a celebration that lasted four months. Surfing was integral to the annual Makahiki. This ancient festival coincided with the rise of winter waves around mid-to-late October. It began when the Huihui (or Makaliʻi) star group made its first evening appearance in the eastern sky. Greek astronomers called this group of stars Pleiades. The Makahiki was a prime element in the linkage between sport, games, and the maintenance of popular custom among the islands’s broad populations.

The Makahiki’s integral role in Hawaiian culture made it a highly visible target for missionaries bent on religious imperialism. Intense Christianization efforts eroded an important level of indigenous resistance during the middle 1800s. In addition, the growing political clout of the expanding Anglo sugarcane planter class made it possible for missionaries to suppress the festival by the late 1850s. With the end of the festival, the great sport and surf tournaments were never organized again, at least not in the traditional manner of pre-Cook Hawai‘i. For surfing, the abolition of traditional religion in favor of imported monotheism meant the temporary halt to its sacred elements. Surfing was divested of its religious roots. Missionaries removed wherever and whenever possible all of the surfing chants, board construction rituals, and gods and stories dedicated to surfing. The effect was to relegate the sport of surfing to Hawai‘i’s cultural backwaters. So
effective was the combination of disease, ambivalence, and cultural imperialism, that surfing all but disappeared from the Hawaiian landscape between 1819 and 1860. Where thousands once pursued the sport, only a handful continued to learn the art of riding waves.19

Despite missionary efforts, surfing survived in the nineteenth century because of the efforts of native Hawaiians who did not embrace the teachings of Christianity. In addition to native Hawaiians, a number of haoles and mixed-blood Hawaiians also took up the ancient sport and rebuilt the decimated surf culture. Surfers, by and large, found themselves few and far between in late nineteenth century Hawai’i. “In one place we came upon a large company of naked natives, of both sexes and all ages, amusing themselves with the national pastime of surf-bathing,” Mark Twain observed. “Each heathen would paddle three or four hundred yards out to sea,...none but the natives master the art of surf bathing thoroughly.”20 Despite his references to cultural inferiority, Twain’s mention of surfing in the context of it being a national pastime suggests that Hawaiians never really let go of their favorite sport. The pessimism of historians and anthropologists about surfing’s cultural white-out may have been overstated or at least under-verified. Reports from other post-Civil War travelers suggest the reports of surfing’s death may have been greatly exaggerated.

Much of the credit for surfing’s popularity in the early twentieth century American West is assigned to the efforts of Duke Kahanamoku, a native Hawaiian surfer and 1912


Olympic gold medalist in the 100 meter swimming freestyle. Kahanamoku was known universally as Duke, his given name. While Duke helped spread surfing and surf culture to many countries, he did not bring surfing to the American West. That legacy belongs to George Freeth, Jr.

In 1883, on the island of Oahu, George Douglas Freeth, Jr. was born into a well-connected local family in the multi-cultural landscape of fin du siècle Hawai‘i. His maternal grandfather, William L. Green, was a British-born former gold prospector. He made his fortune in shipping and iron works after coming to Hawai‘i. By 1880, Green was Hawaii’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. He married locally and his daughter, Elizabeth, married another Englishman, George Freeth, Sr. The third of six children, George Freeth, Jr. was surprisingly Anglo in appearance. Some of Freeth’s friends observed that Leif Ericson looked more Hawaiian than the newly arrived Freeth. While Freeth may not have inherited the outward appearance of his mother, he developed a love for the sea that made him fit in with the locals. He spent a good deal of his youth at Waikiki Beach, swimming, diving, and eventually, surfing. His prowess in the water also attracted the attention of travel and adventure writer Alexander Hume Ford.21

The popularization of Hawaiian culture in the United States followed fifty years of heavy-handed imperialism. In last quarter of the nineteenth century, exploitation defined the relationship between the American mainland and Hawai‘i. By 1875, powerful American sugar plantation owners had secured the Reciprocity Treaty between the United

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States and Hawai‘i. That treaty allowed sugar from Hawai‘i to enter America duty free in exchange for a promise not to give any territory to other foreign powers. Its renewal in 1887 secured American rights to a naval base at Pearl Harbor. The exploitive nature of the treaty did not sit well with the growing number of Hawaiians who were ever more powerless to stop the sugar growers who benefitted from the treaty’s protection. Monopolies were breeding discontent at home and abroad. The tension that surrounded the disproportionate power wielded by whites led to a successful white minority revolt, deposing and removing the native monarch, Queen Lili‘uokalani.22

John L. Stivers, U.S. Minister to Hawaii, extended diplomatic recognition to a new provisional government that quickly petitioned Congress for annexation. Although debate was sharp, the interests of American industry and Anglo sugar growers won out over the sentiments of Americans who believed the United States was too naked in its imperialist aggression. The Republic of Hawai‘i was established in 1894. Annexation was delayed primarily because of opposition from President Cleveland, whose research found that a majority of native Hawaiians opposed annexation. Again, despite the protestations of many, Congress felt that it could wait for another election cycle and Cleveland’s departure from office to finish the work of acquiring Hawai‘i. In 1898, by joint resolution, Congress annexed Hawai‘i and made the protection and care of Hawaiians part of its legislative purview. Following this series of events, Alexander Hume Ford became a booster for Hawaiian tourism.

22Osorio, Dismembering, 247, 258; Wyndette, Islands, 202-223

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Things had changed in the decades before Hume’s arrival and Freeth’s rise to prominence. Large olo boards disappeared from the surf scene, which had also been pushed underground. Alaia type boards then in use were no match for their earlier versions. Most boards were about six feet long and little more than roughly shaped planks. The sport might be said to have returned to its infancy: boards were short, riding techniques were simple, the whole pastime was unelaborated and practiced only by a few. But the revival was soon to come.23

During the nineteenth century, few Anglos learned to surf. As Mark Twain described it, “none but the natives ever master the art of surf-bathing thoroughly.” It was a popular myth, in fact, that only a Hawaiian could balance successfully while standing and riding a wave.

Despite this belief, in the early 1900s, a number of Honolulu residents ventured into the waves at Waikiki on boards styled after their grandparents’ and gradually renewed interest in the sport. George Freeth was among them. In 1900, at the age of 16, he taught himself to ride standing up on the board instead of lying down. The board he used was a solid, heavy, sixteen foot long olo design. It had been given to him by his uncle, a Hawaiian prince, the story goes, and the board is now a treasured item in the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

Freeth was an innovator who experimented by cutting the old olo longboards in half. By his own admission, his modifications were aimed at easing the paddle out rather than


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catching larger waves. The weight of traditional surfboards was always a big problem for would-be surfers. Just getting the board from the top of the beach to the water was exhausting for some. Then there was the task of paddling out. Needless to say, many haole surfers never made it beyond the inside, or shore-break, sets. But Freeth’s innovation signaled the willingness to keep the sport alive and help it prosper, even if that meant tinkering with certain traditions.²⁴

At the same time, tourists from the United States and Europe were also discovering Waikiki. In 1901, the first major resort opened in Waikiki. The Moana Hotel was as luxurious as any hotel in America at the time. It was constructed the Beaux-arts style of architecture and was noted for the single grand Banyan tree in the courtyard that fronted the beach. A wooden pier extended more than 100 yards from shore to draw guests toward Hawai‘i’s greatest asset, the Pacific Ocean. Hotel advertisements promoting the Moana began appearing around 1906, proclaiming surfing and canoeing as exciting tourist sports.²⁵

In an imperialistic world, which is what the fin de siècle world was, the exotic both repelled and fascinated Americans. They were as in love with Pacific peoples as they were afraid of diluting the gene pool. They were content to read about exotic places like Hawai‘i, much as they were content to read about the beauty of Jack London’s Alaska or John Muir’s Yosemite. This kind of interest in things sacred and profane drove an industry niche that was filled by men like Alexander Hume Ford. After traveling

²⁴Verge, “King of the Surfers,” 83.
²⁵Desmond, Staging Tourism, 124.
extensively in Asia and Siberia, Ford settled in Oahu in 1907. Hawaiian culture fascinated Ford, especially the sport of surfing. Like Captain Cook before him, Ford had never seen anything like surfing. Unlike the nineteenth century Christian missionaries who tried to ban surfing for its sinful immodesty, Ford tried to comprehend the Hawaiian penchant for surfing by learning the sport himself. In the process of flailing about in the surf, Ford met George Freeth, Jr.  

During his time in Hawai‘i, Ford also employed the help of adventure novelist and journalist Jack London. While visiting the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, London became acquainted with Ford. Over dinner one evening, London and Ford turned their attention to surfing. They made arrangements to meet the following day and surf some of Waikiki’s inside breaks. London’s first efforts were feeble. His board was too small and his balance feeble. Ford gave London his own longer board and a push to get him started riding the slow rollers toward shore. London recalled, “Ah, delicious moment when I felt that breaker grip and fling me! On I dashed, a hundred and fifty feet, and subsided with the breaker on the sand. From that moment I was lost.” After surfing for a while longer, Ford reportedly told London, “Tomorrow, I am going to take you out into the blue water.”

London had never faced a challenge as physical as paddling a seventy-five pound surfboard beyond the shore break through surf that was likely no more than four feet high. For London, it was sufficient to register surfing as a sport: “The mere struggle with them,  

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facing them, and paddling seaward over them and through them, was sport enough in itself.” While paddling around outside the break, London and Ford noticed George Freeth on the larger waves beyond the inside position. They paddled out to meet Freeth and learn what they could of surfing bigger waves. London described this meeting in 1907:

“Out there in the midst of a succession of big smoky ones, a third man was added to our part, one [George] Freeth. Shaking the water from my eyes as I emerged from one wave and peered ahead to see what the next one looked like, I saw him tearing in on the back of it, standing upright on his board, carelessly poised, a young god bronzed with sunburn.”

While London and Ford may have intrigued readers with their tales of surfing, it was George Freeth who decided to take surfing beyond Hawaii’s Pacific insulation. He made a plan to travel to California with the support of the Hawai‘i Promotion Committee, carrying letters of introduction from London and Ford. The purpose was to improve tourism between mainland America and Hawai‘i. Freeth’s popularity as a surfer and waterman in Hawai‘i made his departure from the islands front page news. Accounts figured Freeth as one of the key personalities in the revitalization of the once banned Hawaiian sport, noting his ability to replicate tricks once performed only by pure Hawaiian elders. Three weeks after leaving Honolulu, Freeth was surfing at Venice Beach, California. So peculiar was the phenomenon of surfing that a Santa Monica, California newspaper offered a small story about Freeth in July 1907.

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28 Ibid.

29 Santa Monica Daily Observer, July 27, 1907. 

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At the beginning of the twentieth century, southern California was a place where anything seemed possible. In the idyllic locales along the southern coast men like Abbot Kinney, a wealthy cigarette manufacturer, had dreams of European style resorts where the rich and famous would mingle with middle-class Californians in settings of opulence. His creation, Venice Beach, a replica of the famed Italian city of canals, was instrumental in the life of George Freeth and the larger story of California beach culture. Kinney, railroad tycoon Henry Huntington, and others subdivided vast tracts of coastal land to build housing for the many newcomers to the Golden State. Beach living and recreation, styled after Coney Island, was slowly taking hold for westerners. Of the many communities and projects that these men promoted and pursued, it was Kinney’s Venice of America that captured the most public attention.\footnote{Jeffrey Stanton, \textit{Venice of America: ‘Coney Island of the Pacific’} (Los Angeles: Donahue Publishing, 1988), 4-11; Verge, “King of the Surfers,” 86-87.}

Freeth arrived at the perfect time in California’s beach history. In 1907, Los Angeles was growing both vertically and horizontally. Areas like Venice and Redondo Beach were being developed as magnets for the rich and famous. Only three years prior, Abbot Kinney had announced his plans to develop a coastal resort just south of Santa Monica modeled on Venice, Italy. Henry Huntington owned most of the properties in Redondo Beach and was anxious to sell them to visiting Angelenos who wanted to escape the intense heat of the greater Los Angeles basin. Visitors flocked to Redondo Beach on Huntington’s Pacific Electric Railway for a weekend or a day trip. The glamorous Hotel
Redondo, right on the Pacific Ocean front, lured upscale visitors from throughout the State.\textsuperscript{31}

Huntington had seen Freeth surfing in Redondo Beach, and ever the savvy marketer, hired George Freeth to demonstrate the ancient art of surfing for the entertainment of Redondo Beach visitors. Huntington thought that the crowds would flock down to the coast to see the “man who could walk on water.” He also hoped the Redondo lot parcels would fly out of his hands. When Freeth decided he would try to revive the art of surfing, he had little success with the monstrous, 16-foot hardwood boards. Would-be surfers in California had just as much trouble with the olo-style boards as haoles in Hawai’i. But when he cut them in half, he unwittingly created the California version of the “long board.” Contemporary longboards range from nine to eleven feet and owe their birth to Freeth’s decision to modify the olo. It worked exceedingly well and made him the talk of the beach community. George exhibited his surfing prowess twice a day in front of the Hotel Redondo to the delight of visitors. His boundless energies soon led him to swimming, diving and water polo competitions. He was made the official Redondo Beach lifeguard—the first in Southern California.\textsuperscript{32}

From 1907 to 1915, George Freeth promulgated a surfing revolution that became a stable phenomenon on the California coast. Freeth remained in California as its first


lifeguard and organized and trained its first professional lifeguard corps, bringing the art of surfboard riding to the United States. He became a national hero and earned both the Carnegie Medal for bravery and the Congressional Medal of Honor during a particularly violent storm in December 1908, when he made three trips through mountainous surf to rescue seven Japanese fishermen. At least seventy-eight people owed their lives to his work as a lifeguard. In 1919, at the age of thirty-five, he died during the national influenza epidemic. Locals reported that Freeth had exhausted himself rescuing several swimmers at Oceanside and became an easy victim of the flu.33

In the wake of Freeth's death, surfing was part of the landscape in California, though its accessibility to the general public was dubious. The equipment was heavy, the machismo even weightier. Freeth opened the way for the introduction of the sport. The physical environment and nascent California culture opened a niche for a new kind of water sport. What surfing needed was a hero who would last longer than Freeth did and technological advances that allowed access to more than just the strapping few.

While London was writing surf articles and Freeth was gaining celebrity as a surfer and lifeguard, Alexander Hume Ford engaged in a crusade to promote surfing. In 1908, he lobbied the trustees of the Queen Emma Estate to set aside a plot of land next to Waikiki's Moana Hotel for a club that would preserve the traditional Hawaiian pursuits of surfing and outrigger canoeing. Ford was also concerned about beachfront access, which was an issue early in the twentieth century. Even though Ford understood the

profound linkage between surfing and Hawaiian culture, he presented a proposal to the trustees that protected surfing because of its potential for tourist revenues. He reasoned that the best way to promote and protect surfing was to capitalize on its acquired kitsch. Ford’s idea invested surfing with sufficient tourist appeal to make it an integral part of the Hawaiian economy. As a result, it was less likely that it would be suppressed, as it had been in the mid-nineteenth century.

The trustees accepted his proposal, and on May 1, 1908, they founded the Hawaiian Outrigger Canoe Club, the first modern club dedicated to the perpetuation of wave-riding. Ford secured a twenty year lease on an acre of beachfront property, built a symbolic grass hut, and charged annual dues for surfboard storage in lockers. Ford envisioned a club that would “give an added and permanent attraction to Hawai’i and make Waikiki always the Home of the Surfer, with perhaps an annual Surfboard and Outrigger Canoe Carnival which will do much to spread abroad the attractions of Hawai’i, the only islands in the world where men and boys ride upright upon the crests of waves.”

By 1911, there were as many as 100 surfboards on the beach at Waikiki. When Jack London returned to Hawai’i in 1915, he was amazed to find the Outrigger Club had 1,200 members, “with hundreds more on the waiting list, and with what seemed like half a mile of surf-board lockers.” But the Outrigger Club was a double-edged sword. At the same


time that it tried to preserve surfing, it also represented the first sign of institutional change in the sport from its Hawaiian origins.

Surfing in Western culture was immediately linked to the marketing of place and the promotion of tourism. Furthermore, women were no longer included, a major shift from the Hawaiian evolution of surfing. The Outrigger Canoe Club, though it did eventually include a number of women, was an avowedly male realm. Perhaps most important, the club was an almost strictly haole organization. Surfing’s association with wealthy white men had begun. In fact, three years after its formation a number of renegade members broke off and started a rival club called Hui Nalu, “The Club of Waves.” This new club was overwhelmingly composed of native Hawaiians. It seemed apparent that a divide between the haoles and the more traditional surfers had emerged.36

Out of the implicit cultural friction between competing surf clubs came Duke Kahanamoku, Hui Nalu’s first captain and founder. Kahanamoku was the catalyst for early surfing’s move to the mainstream. By 1905, a few whites and natives were riding the surf on any old plank or board they happened to have. The boards averaged six feet in length. Kahanamoku was fifteen years of age and already “one of the solid believers in this surfing bit,” as he later recalled. “A group of us, mostly Hawaiian boys, used to gather at a hau tree on Waikiki Beach and discuss boards, waves, the delights of surfing,

and the latest thing in experiments. It was a poor man’s club, but it was made up of dedicated surfers.”

The old hau tree stood at the edge of the shore, where the Royal Hawaiian Hotel stands today. Duke’s role as, first, one of the revivalist surfers and then, later, as surfing’s ambassador to the world was key to surfing’s return from near obscurity.

Kahanamoku became the most influential surfer of the era. Five years after Freeth, Kahanamoku came to southern California on his way to the 1912 Olympics, where he won a gold in the 100 meter freestyle. With his redwood board he dazzled the assembled crowds. This trip to California helped Freeth’s surfriding club and inspired many to take up the board.

By 1916, Duke Kahanamoku was the three-time world record holder in the 100 meter freestyle, a two-time Olympic gold medalist, and credited with developing the flutter kick to replace the scissor kick in freestyle swimming. He was one of Hawai’i’s best ocean watermen. At a swimming exhibition for the New South Wales Swimming Association in Sydney, Australia, Kahanamoku constructed an 8’ 6” board out of Australian sugar pine and rode it in front of an amazed audience, introducing the sport to Australians. Considered the fastest swimmer alive, Kahanamoku toured the world, giving swimming exhibitions and surfing demonstrations that caused a sensation much greater than Freeth’s. He also became a favorite of Hollywood casting directors, playing Aztec chiefs,


38“Programme for Venice Friday,” Los Angeles Times, August 29, 1912, III2.
Hindu thieves and Arab princes. On weekends he took his Hollywood friends surfing, and everywhere he could, he used his fame to introduce the world to the sport of surfing. In summer 1917, Kahanamoku caught a wave that took him well over a thousand yards. This feat was unrivaled in the sport to that point, and remained so for decades. It was also another boost for his enduring legend.39

Unlike most other sports on the American sporting landscape, surfing advanced and expanded principally because various surfers were unsatisfied with the state of technology available to them. The weight of boards and their rudderless design made them difficult to get beyond the break and unwieldy in any direction of travel that was not perpendicular to the wave. The typical late 1920s board was a solid redwood plank that ranged from six to nine feet long. It was flat-bottomed and its edges just barely turned up to the bottom side. Surfers bought a redwood plank at the local lumber yard, took it home, chopped it into a rough shape with an axe, and then whittled it down with a plane and draw knife. The finished board was invariably flat, heavy, and about 3 1/2 inches thick.40

The technology that started to democratize surfing arrived in the wake of global war. World War I stimulated the development of waterproof glues that could effectively bond wood together. This new adhesive allowed surfers to bind all the pieces of timber together instead of using bolts running from rail to rail. Another technological advance was plywood, thin sheets of pine laminated together to produce half inch thick sheets of wood.


40Young, The History of Surfing, 48-52.
in 4' x 8' pieces. The layers were glued together cross-grained, which increased their strength but kept the dimensions of the sheets small.

While plywood was developed for the first fighting aircraft, it led to the box-frame plywood-covered surf/paddle board, developed by surfer and board designer Tom Blake. Blake had worked as a lifeguard and swimming instructor in Santa Monica but in the early 1920s he saw Duke Kahanamoku surf in southern California. After this encounter, Blake tried surfing and fell in love with the sport and the lifestyle. He moved to Waikiki in 1924. While in Hawai‘i, Blake also developed a profound interest in the ancient olo boards and their restoration. A year later, Blake returned to Santa Monica and started building his own surfboards. In a personally annotated copy of his book Hawaiian Surfboard, Blake admitted that he stumbled onto the idea for the hollow board in the process of shaping an olo board for himself. Blake was trying reduce the weight of the surfboard. On a whim, he took his sixteen foot olo replica drilled it full of holes to lighten and dry it out. He then plugged the holes, creating numerous air chambers the length of the board. The result was the accidental invention of the first hollow surf-board.41

By the early 1930s, Blake had refined his hollow board construction, going from drilled holes to chambered construction with hollow compartments. It was all sealed together with a thick coat of lacquer. Blake recognized earlier than most that advances in surfing technique and terrain depended primarily on advances in technology. Tradition was fine for some surfers but Blake believed in the total surfing experience. That meant

riding any wave that came the surfer's way. Versatility in the water, according to Blake, was only limited by the level of available technology. Blake once referred to the art of surfing as "the art of the surfboard." These words were more true than even he knew at the time. Boards built on Blake's prototype hollow-box were used until the 1950s. They were the first boards designed specifically to make catching waves easier.

Alongside technology, the cultural ennui of surfing evolved in the 1920s and 1930s. During this period surfing came into its own as a sport and a way of life. Ultimately, it was the cachet of that lifestyle, manifested in dress, speech, language, and music that allowed surfing its trans-sport currency and made proximity to an ocean idiosyncratic to the importance of the sport. In between the wars, various spots in southern California became associated with the surfers who rode there. Without surfers, San Onofre or Malibu would have completely different meanings. The remoteness of various surf breaks allowed true subcultures to develop, where surfers literally lived on the beach and often attained their sustenance from ocean foods and scavenging. Traveling even became a source for rogue mystique, as legendary tales of stowing away in life-boats to get to Hawai'i emanated from the expanding culture.

As more and more surfers gathered at the coastal breaks in Hawai'i and California, the image of a surfer started to take shape. Romantic stories started to spread about adventure seeking young surfers who lived on the beach. These surfers shunned money

42Blake, *Hawaiian Surfboard*, 17.

and responsibility. The tales painted a picture of surfers as people who lived on the
margins of society. Life was trying to manifest lifestyle in surf culture. Without fail, as
with every other sport that began on the periphery, the more “rogue” surfing sought to be,
the more popular it became. Increasing participation was the double-edged sword every
surfer loathed. The more people participated, the more accepted surfing became.
Acceptance had its rewards. It was the key to mobility and access to riches that
marginalized figures, such as jazz musicians or socialists, could not secure. The downside
for surfers came at many levels. Life was crowded life was at the center of the sporting
landscape; moreover, being mainstream corrupted the essence of the sport. It cheapened
the intrinsic beauty and Zen-like precision of George Freeth or Duke Kahanamoku. In
success was compromise, the end of the ethos. Technology precipitated that conundrum.44

As the 1930s and 1940s progressed, the technological revolution continued. Balsa
wood became the preferred material for making surfboards. It was lighter than redwood
and provided greater versatility. The problem was price and availability. Balsa blanks
were expensive, ranging between $25 and $50. Most of the blanks had to be imported
from Central and South America. While balsa was a definite improvement, it still was
different in degree rather than kind. Phil Edwards remembered, “We had been getting our
surfboard blanks from Ecuador....Two thirds of the board--about 35 pounds of it--were
ending up in shavings on the floor. Time was involved; precious time when the surf was
up and there were horrible moments when we would hover uncertainly over a board,
knives poised in the air, looking first at the board and then at the open door where

44Kampion, Stoked, 49; Langford, 23-24.
someone stood impatiently, saying, 'Jeez, you guys. Come on! The surf is good.' An alternative to natural material was not possible at that time.

Replacing natural materials with chemical substitutes was part and parcel of the larger economic climate of the war years, so the transformation of surfing shared much with other industrial and commercial endeavors. In the now famous, if not melodramatic, words of Phil Edwards, "Enter Hobie Alter." Hobie Alter was born Hobart Alter in 1933. Raised until his teens in the Inland Empire orange groves of Ontario, California, he spent every summer he remembers in Laguna Beach. His father and grandfather grew oranges in San Bernardino County, but owned a coastal home in Laguna. It was axiomatic that nine months of inland living translated into a passion for the ocean and play in the waves. Alter recalled in 2005 that he had seen a postcard of Hawaiian surfers at Waikiki, sometime in the early 1940s. His parents had also been to Hawai‘i, returning with 8mm film of surfing. Alter had already spent several summers wave-diving, trying to body surf, and paddle-boarding. After seeing his first surfing images, he had to try the sport. But nobody surfed Laguna, at least not when he was staying there. His father had tried to buy a surfboard in Los Angeles, but unable to acquire a true surfboard he returned with only a paddleboard.

Alter remembers summer 1950 with unusual clarity. A group of surfers had made their way to Laguna. Among them was Walter Hoffman, one of the first Californians to

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46Ibid.
surf the North Shore on O'ahu. Hoffman had made a name for himself as part of the first wave of Californians who decided to live surfing on Hawai'i's beaches, residing in World War II quonset huts and surviving primarily off the foodstuffs the sea provided. When Alter watched Hoffman and his crew surf, he was hooked. Hoffman surfed on a copy of a Simmons foam board. The Hoffman version was basically a plywood box. The top and bottom were two-dimensional surfboard shapes separated by a balsa side wall, known as a “rail.” The hollow board had a foam core glued in for buoyancy and shape. It was effectively Tom Blake's hollow box design but the styrene foam core made less wood necessary and gave the board more flotation and lighter weight. Hoffman made the whole package waterproof with a coating of blown fiberglass.

The inherent flaw was that the seams where each material component was glued together leaked. Over time the board got heavier as it became waterlogged. Nonetheless, it was good design, and without a comparative model Alter used this as the template for his first board. He asked Hoffman where to acquire materials to make a board. The balsa came from General Veneer in Southgate, California, and the fiberglass came from Valco Fiberglass in Los Angeles. Hoffman gave him all the information he needed and even offered his own board as a template. When Alter finally got around to shaping, he watched Hoffman glass the first board, listening and learning the entire time.47

Alter made twenty boards over the next year, modifying each one. Within a few years, he built 100 more. By his own admission, he still did not think there was a business in all of this—it was his father who convinced him that he was a good shaper and that he should

47Hobie Alter, telephone interview by author, January 21, 2004; May 4, 2005.
open a shop somewhere he could get exposure. He moved his operation to a small building on the coast highway in Dana Point, California. Alter was in business. He also brought something new to the retail market: the foam core board. The way Alter describes it, the transition to foam was as natural and subtle as brushing his teeth. But there was genius in Alter's method. "He had seen polyurethane foam before, and one day he stood looking deeply into a cup of the stuff. He saw that (1) its ratio of strength to weight was enormous and (2) that it wouldn't soak up water like balsa wood." Alter just stood there and mumbled, "Surfboard."

The modern surfboard was the byproduct of petroleum and military research and development. The three main components in a post-war surfboard were foam, fiberglass and resin. All three owed their origins to technological advances made before, during, and following World War II. Polyurethane foam, used for the surfboard's core, was an extraordinary chemical cocktail. It was simple but extremely volatile. It was developed in the 1940s for use as aircraft and refrigeration insulation. Inert liquid materials were mixed with several additives, including the primary active ingredient toluene di-isocyanate, and poured into a secure mold, where carbon dioxide gas formed small bubbles within the liquid. The small bubbles expanded, creating foam, as the polyurethane was formed within the mold. The gas byproduct "blew" the foam into its hardened cellular matrix. Once the mix was in the mold, surfboard makers baked the whole thing for approximately thirty minutes. The heat cured the foam, which could then be removed from the molds.
What popped out of the mold was a “blank,” a foam plank shaped slightly like a surfboard. The blanks were the starting point for the finished foam surfboard.\(^4^8\)

Alter’s friends told him that it was a great idea but there was no way to control the expansion process. So Alter started building molds that might contain the volatile polyurethane. Unaware of the tremendous expansion properties of the material he was working with, Alter made countless errors. His first mold was insufficient to withstand the pressure from the amount of liquid polyurethane he used. The mold creaked, shook, and exploded. According to Alter, it blew the side of his father’s garage wide open. Alter was undaunted. He continued to work with foam, hoping he could produce a blank that required absolutely no shaping—pop out surfboards, like a popsicle mold. Though this never happened, he eventually created the first successful reusable mold. Not having to rebuild the mold every time he poured in liquid polyurethane allowed him to ramp up production. In 1959, he found himself in the business of making surfboards.\(^4^9\)

The advantage of polyurethane foam was the way it mated with fiberglass. Spraying fiberglass over the entire blank, the threads in the fiberglass bond the to the striations in the polyurethane, creating a smooth coating with little effort. The whole package was coated in resin and hardened very quickly. Fiberglass was an excellent tension member

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\(^4^9\) Alter interview, January 21, 2004; Edwards, *You Should Have Been Here*, 95.
and the foam provided excellent compression for its weight.\footnote{Steven M. Shaw, \textit{Surfboard: How to Build Surfboards and Related Watersport Equipment} (La Brea: Stephen M. Shaw, 1994), 36. Fiberglass is similar to window glass: it is heated to a molten state and strained through very small platinum discs into the air and collected as very fine threads. These threads are immersed in an oil to keep the filaments from breaking as they are woven. The threads are woven on textile machinery, and the oil is melted out under high temperature. A finish, such as Union Carbide's 'Silane' or DuPont's 'Volan' are put on the cloth to promote flexibility and adhesion to the polyester resin. Cloth used in the surfboard industry is woven especially for surfboards.} The result was a board that was inexpensive, stable, and most important, lightweight. Most of the boards that came out shops like Alter's weighed less than thirty-five pounds. Like other sectors of commerce and industry, surfing benefitted from the profusion of military technology spin-offs after 1945. “Wars have always sped up the pace of technology,” wrote Nat Young.\footnote{Young, \textit{The History of Surfing.}, 37.} The other thing that speeds up the pace of growth and innovation is the cross-pollination of ideas.

Hobie Alter may have perfected the foam surfboard, but by his own admission he did not invent it. Just as numerous bicycle mechanics worked on developing the automobile or engineers worked toward long-distance telecommunications, many other surfers were working on fiberglass and/or polyurethane foam boards. Pete Peterson, another of the original contingent of southern Californians on the North Shore, built a fiberglass surfboard in June of 1946, aided by Brant Goldsworthy and Joe Quigg. Goldsworthy had a plastics company in Los Angeles that supplied component parts for World War II aircraft. That first-ever fiberglass board was constructed of two hollow molded halves, joined together with a redwood stringer down the middle. The seam was sealed with
fiberglass tape. Bob Simmons started blowing polystyrene foam cores for sandwich style boards in the mid-1940s. He had a production model that was so good, Walter Hoffman copied it, and in turn, so did Alter.

Simmons’s boards were so good that he sold more than 100 in summer 1949—a record for the time period. Lorrin “Whitey” Harrison, a waterman in every sense of the word, was the first one to build a surfboard out of polyurethane foam, in 1955, a year after Bob Simmons’ untimely death. At a certain point in the technological history of surfing, the stories of individual surfers and shapers start to collide. For example, Sant Monica surfers Dave and Roger Sweet assert they were blowing polyurethane foam into molds as early as 1951. The only corroborated sighting of Sweet testing his red foam board was in 1956, a year after Alter first saw Harrison’s board. The problem that all of these shapers had was the inability to consistently replicate their work, if they replicated it at all. Very few contest that Hobie Alter developed the foam board on his own and also gave the industry of surfboard manufacturing its first successful and replicable model.

One of the constants about surfing in the twentieth century was the commitment of most surfers to advancing technologies. Once the sport came to mainland America, budding young California surfers started creating, modifying, experimenting. From Tom Blake to Hobie Alter, surfers changed surfing. While it is true that the technologies or materials were already in place in other forms, it was still the athletes themselves who

http://www.davesweetsurfboards.com/SweetHistory.htm

Young, The History of Surfing, 61; Gault-Williams, Legendary Surfers, volume 4; Alter interview, January 21, 2004; Edwards, You Should Have Been Here, 96-97.
precipitated change. Mainland surfers were unencumbered by any deep cultural
attachment to the sport’s traditional form. Because they felt little or no obligation to the
status quo, they were never satisfied with the limits imposed by technology. Modern
surfers lightened boards, changed their shape, added fins, and developed methods of mass
production.

Better technology was integral to the process that promoted surfing to many more
people than could have surfed with 100-pound boards. Lighter boards worked better in
marginal surf, such as shore break, and were more transportable. After foam, moving the
board around was easier: to your car, to your home forty miles from the beach, to an
apartment near a surf shop in North Hollywood, California. Foam gave surfing more
democratic potential and expanded access. The democratization of surfing was nearly
complete with the shift from balsa boards to foam boards. Lightweight polyurethane
foam, poured into a mold, produced a blank that could be shaped like balsa, but with one-
quarter the effort. Coated with fiberglass, the foam surfboard revolutionized the sport and
granted access to millions of formerly excluded potential surfers. The foam board was the
biggest and most important breakthrough in the history of surfing. Their light weight
opened the door to anybody that wanted to take up surfing, including women, children,
and inland would-be surfers, famously referred to as “kooks.” Previously it had taken a
beach version of Hercules to carry a surfboard from the car to the water and back.54

54Corky Carroll, “Modern Surfboard Evolution Part 1” Weekly Newsletter,

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Hobie Alter was many things. He was an innovator to be sure. But he was also important to the business of surfing, to applying cognitive business techniques to an industry that seemed to pride itself on not being an industry. Keeping surfboard construction a cottage industry only translated into fewer people surfing. Shaping surfboards was always a labor intensive process. The fact that few people owned surfboards immediately following World War II was directly related to the limited production of good equipment, not to the lack of exposure to the sport. California manufacturers were garage-based, advertising by word of mouth and limiting sales to those they deemed worthy. It is difficult to pin down who did what first in the surfing world: who rode the first big wave, built the first balsa-wood board, who decided to employ fiberglass in the board’s exterior. Hobie Alter is responsible for making surfboards more accessible to more people.

The commitment to technological fluidity epitomized surfing’s evolving sense of itself. Surfing was no longer the ancient sport of kings. Surfing was simply a sport. The advantages of foam and fiberglass may have democratized the sport for millions of would-be surfers, but it also helped experienced surfers ride bigger, faster waves. The compulsion to do more than just hang-out and surf the same waves over and over again, to ride waves that could never have been ridden without advanced technology, belied the mythic “mellow” side of surfing. Instead of remaining contented with what surfing was, a cadre of surfers committed themselves to making the sport more exciting, more competitive, and more challenging. There was a long tradition in surfing of “going big,” but the technology of the era made mid-twentieth century understandings of “big”...
anachronistic. A new world dawned during the 1950s and 1960s—the waves were bigger and the surfers bolder.
CHAPTER 3

GUNSLINGERS AND GODS: BIG-WAVE SURFING, FROM PAKI TO PE’AHI

Surfing experienced discernible phases in its development after reaching mainland America. Most sports start on the fringes of society and move gradually toward the center. Surfing, like skateboarding and mountain biking, began as a sport deeply associated with a lifestyle, real or manufactured. Over time surfing was co-opted by media, merchandise, and non-surfers. It went into a rogue phase, followed by a phase of professionalism. One of surfing’s more enigmatic moments, the one that has remained at the margins and has only recently been drawn into the center, is big-wave surfing. This was the technological fusion of everything surfing had become since George Freeth. As Anglocentric as it might sound, the course of events that led to surfing’s big-wave evolution involved a significant number of non-Hawaiians and a goodly amount of military technology. Technology and cultural mores restricted surfing among Hawaiians to pure recreation: there is no verifiable evidence beyond oral tradition that Hawaiians were pushed the edge of the proverbial envelope in their wave selection. They were not experimenting with lighter or more durable materials to build better, faster surfboards. They were, by all accounts, content to keep surfing what it had always been: a manifestation of their oceanic culture and an integral component of their social and
religious organization. When technological innovations did take place, such as the selection of lighter weight wood or board design modification, they were focused on making the paddle out easier, not to make catching enormous waves part of the surfing experience.

During the middle portion of the twentieth century, surfing manifested in every beachfront country in the world. It was carried to areas where it did not previously exist by men like Duke Kahanamoku and discovered in other places where it had existed for some time. Surfing went beyond Hawai’i, California, and even America between 1920 and 1970. By the end of the 1960s surfing was popular in Indonesia, Tahiti, Africa, Australia, France, Vietnam, Costa Rica, and dozens of other countries that boasted surfable breaks.

The larger narrative of surfing lends itself to a “then-on-Thursday” model for history. Much of the fictional and historical literature of surfing focuses on who did what and when. This study is concerned with the relevant details that explain various progressions, but at its core, this study is seeking answers different questions, such as why surfers felt compelled to compete in an activity that, as Warshaw observes, did not really lend itself to any objective competitive framework. Early on, certain surfers saw the opportunity to ride enormous waves on boards that were not well suited to the task. They also chose to permute their sport into something that implicitly carried the risk of dying. There is something about the comparative nature of non-traditional sports that seems to marry them to some real or contrived rogue element. Despite the mainstream position that surfing, skateboarding, and mountain biking currently occupy in the American sporting
landscape, they were anything but mainstream in their evolution. What is important to this study is just that: the manner in which surfing (or skateboarding or mountain biking) changed. It is the journey from the fringe to the middle that models the greatest understanding of sport.

While the overwhelming majority of participatory surfers do not ride big waves, a handful do surf the giants. What is most telling about that small number of big-wave surfers is that they appear to receive more press and possess more currency with mainstream America than competitive or recreational surfers. The paradox is that their very aberrance belies their true place in the surfing spectrum. Professional and/or competitive surfers are, in fact, closer to the sporting mainstream of what most Americans would recognize as athletes. Competitive surfers “go to work,” they invite exposure and media coverage, they have corporate sponsors, they receive paychecks, they allow themselves to be judged and evaluated. There is more than one professional surfing tour, with lesser events on a weekly basis all over the world. Competitive tours solicit both preteen and senior citizen surfers. The business of surfing is a multi-billion dollar industry that ripples through American culture at levels ranging from the obvious to the imperceptible. Clothing, hairstyles, language, and the visual discourse of both sport and recreation are imbued with, and affected by, surfing.

The paradox of big-wave surfing plays out in the twenty first century as big-wave surfers and big-wave surfing now typify the surfing experience for non-surfers. The most atypical manifestation of surfing has come to symbolize surfing for mainstream America. The prominent role of big-wave surfing in the two most recent commercial surf
documentaries, Dana Brown’s *Step Into Liquid* and Stacy Peralta’s *Riding Giants*, illustrates the conundrum. The currency of big-wave surfing, despite how out of proportion it is to the rest of the sport, could not be demonstrated better than by the fact that *Riding Giants* ran for thirty days at a major Las Vegas movie multiplex.

The reason that American Express chose Laird Hamilton, who was only a professional surfer by virtue of a few corporate sponsorships before AMEX, was because his image transcended the matter-of-fact professional status of the dozens of professional competitive surfers that actually make more money and have made surfing a legitimate part of the American sporting landscape. The mainstream character of the rest of the surfing world was the very reason it was dismissed in the AMEX ad campaign. American Express was drawn to the western imagery of conquest and especially the image of individuality that Hamilton epitomized. While we know that big-wave surfing is almost never done in solitude, the first ad that American Express produced and televised, unlike the extended version that is archived at their website, featured Hamilton all alone on one of the world’s biggest waves.55

The evolution of big-wave surfing was driven by a combination of personalities and technology, much as was skateboarding a decade later. It also created a specific lexicon that capitalized on mythic pioneerism and perceptions of conquest and idealized individualism. These same images were married to the pioneer experience in nineteenth century America. But historians of American westward expansion have exposed how overland travelers were anything but independent and individualistic. Similarly, this study


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suggests that everything about why AMEX chose big-wave surfing as part of its new moniker was predicated on idealized understandings of a sport that at its core could not exist on an individualized scale.

From its beginnings, big-wave surfing was a cooperative endeavor that required much more than individual prowess or courage. Those elements were critical, no doubt, but the necessity of technology and other surfers, who eventually used jet skis to tow each other into monstrous waves, spoke to the realistic character of this particular form of surfing. For one brief moment, the surfer faces a wave that stacks up at twenty-five to fifty feet. As any film footage of big-wave surfing reveals, on the margins of the camera’s field of view are the jet ski drivers that tow surfers onto fast moving swells; rescue personnel who are poised just off the break, ready to race in on still more jet skis and save some fearless gunslinger; and camera crews on boats and in helicopters. In all, there are dozens of people with an abundance of technology that float about in support of the tiny cadre of actual surfers during any given big-wave session.

This is not meant to demean to the tremulous nature of surfing big waves. The immensity of the waves themselves and the life-or-death stakes attached to riding them demands the kind of support described here. Attacking big waves is, on a smaller scale, similar to attacking Everest or K2. But in the realistic picture of what happens during a session at Mavericks or Pe’ahi lies the discursive paradox that is Laird Hamilton in an American Express ad: he always appears alone. Subsequent ads do not perpetuate this falsehood, but the original ad was structured on the individuality myth. Stacy Peralta’s narrative voice in Riding Giants reveals the truth of big-wave surfing’s successful
evolution and practice: “Performing as a team is the key to survival in fifty-foot plus waves where every wipeout becomes life threatening.”

Big-wave surfing was always something outside the norm of surfing. That dichotomy demonstrates an important nuance about surfing. Within the surfing community, the sport has always been perceived as normal, as the sport of the people. Big-wave surfing existed beyond that norm where everyone feared to tread. There are many stories and legends that try to dramatize the early days of big-wave surfing. Some stories tell of catching waves so big and far off the shore at Waikiki that when two surfers break, one left and the other right, they travel the length of O’ahu, meeting at Kahuku Point at the island’s northern tip. In 1868, according to the legend, a man named Holoua was washed out to sea with his house and all his earthly possessions. A tsunami caused the kind of earth-shattering waves capable of evicting Holoua from terra firma. As millions of Indonesians learned with devastating effect in 2005, tsunami waves travel in sets, with each successive wave getting slightly bigger than the initial waves. Holoua, after being swept into the sea, looked out to see a fifty-foot building of a wave headed right at him. As it swelled up behind him, Holoua tore a long plank of wood from the remains of his home, mounted it, and rode the tsunami wave back to shore.

Such stories also convey the epic focus of big-wave surfing, not just in the way they are handed down through generations but also in the way they are memorialized in visual


57Sam George, “Riding Giant Waves.”
media. An American artist, C.P. Cathcart, dramatized the story of Holoua in a 1948 oil painting. In Cathcart's rendering, Holoua not only survives but dominates the wave, demonstrating excellent form as he crosses the wave's face just ahead of the breaking ledge. Although these stories hover on the edge of myth, they reveal another important aspect of surfing history. Big-wave riding, the fact of "riding giants," operated alongside traditional surfing from the beginning.® Just as vertical skateboarding was a fraction of pre-urethane skateboarding, big-wave surfing was hindered principally by technological limitations. Even though most surfers do not engage in the challenge of big-wave surfing, most would acknowledge that its excitement pushes them to occasionally test their limits.

This same iconic draw that sporting goods companies have long capitalized on—the perception among average athletes that everyone possesses the potential for extreme. In the late 1980s, K2 Ski Corporation introduced the first recreational retail ski designed around "extreme" use. The K2 "Extreme" boasted various design features that made it useful on terrain ranging from novice slopes to the sixty degree inclines of places like Valdez, Alaska. In short, the ski sold like nothing before it, marketed as extreme equipment for the recreational skier. The trick was convincing people that the ski was exactly what they wanted even though ninety-nine percent of skiers would never use the ski on the kind of terrain it was capable of engaging. This has been the same story with big-wave surfing: cachet came from its dual personality, as it was part of surfing but beyond the scope of most surfers.

®Warshaw, Maverick's, 39.
Historians have discerned the evolution of big-wave surfing in frontier terms, to magnify and romanticize the beginnings of something that is already, without any help, enormous in both scope and substance. The simple truth is that in the contemporary surfing world, competition within the sport has manifested in the form of riding big waves. Surfers are measured and judged based on what the ride as often as they are evaluated for how they ride. It has become possible to measure waves more accurately than ever before. And, unlike the myths that grew up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is also possible to accurately trace the origins of big-wave surfing, where participants use “guns” and are referred to as “gunslingers.”

Riding big surf is probably as old as surfing itself. After some very heavy surf pounded the Lāhainā coast, missionary C.S. Stewart noted in 1823 that for the surfing Hawaiians, “...the more terrific the surf, the more delightful pastime to those skillful in the management of the boards.”® Big-wave ability and power seemed to go hand in hand, as Chief Abner Paki became one of big-wave surfing’s earliest boosters. Big-wave pioneer Tom Blake wrote that Paki “would not go surfriding unless it was too stormy for anyone else to go.”® It seems unlikely that everyone shied away from big surf: the euphoric, adrenaline driven rush attached to going fast and being on the edge of control certainly was not lost on pre-20th century cultures. Contrary to contemporary claims of originality in developing the “extreme,” the marriage of sport and the extreme is older than most

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people imagine. Surfing is just another place that lacks exception in the current era as writers and pundits continue to misapply the “extreme” label as though surfing has reached that plateau in their lifetime.

Big-wave surfing evolved as a result of a combination of desire and design. It was the practical limitations of surfboard technology, rather than a lack of human initiative, that restricted the ability to surf bigger waves. The classic wave-riding pattern until the 1930s was to paddle ahead of the swell and ride the wave in a straight line toward the beach. It was not common to carve across the face of a wave and even less common to find the inside of the curl or barrel. The typical problem with trying to surf anything over six feet and across the face was something known as “sliding ass,” where the board’s tail section lost purchase and slid around like the skidding rear end of a car. This happened because surfboards did not have tail fins at this time—they were flat, wide, and generally squared at the tail end. Often they were shaped much like an ironing board.

In 1937, a group of haoles surfing at the Browns break on O’ahu grew tired of wiping out every time they tried to cross a wave’s face. John Kelly, Wally Froiseth, and Fran Heath exited the water and walked to Kelly’s house at Black Point. Kelly took a small ax and started to cleave a new shape into Heath’s board. By pinning down the tail and tapering the rails, Kelly happened upon a board shape that bit into the face of the wave better than before. He also shaped the last foot of the boar’s tail so that it appeared V-shaped in the cross section. The effect was that the V tail behaved like a keel, preventing some left to right slippage. The improved board was dubbed the “hot curl” board for its improved carving and ability let surfers make the wave’s curl more often. The new shape
also allowed the kind of consistent cross-wave movement that was imperative to riding bigger waves. And riding bigger waves was becoming a part of what surfing was all about.\(^1\)

Big-wave riding was born at Makaha, a quiet beach community located quite literally at the end of the road on the west side of O‘ahu. In fall 1937, the hot curl surfers sought out new breaks to conquer. Kelly, Froiseth, and a few other surfers piled into Kelly’s Ford Model-T to head to the west side of O‘ahu for some fishing and some reconnaissance—they did not take any boards on this initial trek. They slept on the beach between the Pacific and the Makaha Valley that night. As they went to sleep, the ocean was calm and glassy. Kelly recalled waking in the middle of the night to a roar unlike anything he had experienced at Waikiki. Less than 100 yards north of their campsite, twenty-foot waves were crashing. It was Makaha waves that inspired surfers to develop a dedicated approach to big-wave surfing.

Waves under ten feet are the same at Makaha as at any other break. But the waves that broke at Point Surf Makaha, the spot just north of the general Makaha break, were entirely different. Those waves were big and strong, pitching up at a much faster pace than anything off Waikiki. The force generated at Makaha could kill, and Kelly and the others recognized its power. They also regarded it as a challenge. Even though the surf only rose big four or five times a year, Kelly’s crew knew they had stumbled onto

something special. The best description of Makaha for people who have not seen it is in Matt Warshaw’s history of big-wave surfing. Warshaw writes:

“Maybe three times a decade the Makaha surf hits a glorious and terrible twenty-foot plus, each wave moving down from Kaena Point, folding over in vast sections like buildings collapsing one after another... The curl arcs down at the top of the point and spirals evenly for two hundred yards, finishing in a deepwater channel. No flat sports. No direction changes. Easy to catch, but once in, it’s a blood oath; the wave goes from fast to faster, steep to steeper, inescapable, then pours into the concluding Bowl section, where it flares up and out like a cobra hood before folding in on itself.”

Big wave legend Greg Noll, a member of the second wave of southern Californians to take up residence on Hawai’i’s beaches to pursue surfing, remembered that the wave at Point Surf Makaha left him gawking and humbled. “It doesn’t get that big that often,” Noll recalled, “but man, when it does it’s really something. I remember being out there on a huge day and just going into a mental freeze-up. A haze settled over my brain, like I was in a dream. No place put the fear of God in me like big Makaha.”

One of the major obstacles to handling the Makaha surf was still technological. Despite the improvement represented in the hot curl board, cross-wave stability continued to be a problem in surf over ten-feet. Surfing’s technological progress was interrupted by World War II and the manpower demands that it generated. Not until 1948 did major technological advances take place. That year, two newcomers to the early 1940s big-wave scene—George Downing and Russ Takaki—joined Wally Froiseth on a visit to Malibu, California. Malibu had become California’s surf hot-spot.

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63 Ibid.
Synergy resulted in this 1948 visit. California surfers were using a different board than their island cousins. Downing was amazed by the comparison between the redwood hot curl board and the California model. Malibu surfers were riding a board shaped from a balsa wood blank featuring many innovations. They shaped their boards with a scooped nose, which kept the board from diving into every up-swell in the waves. They also gave the board a rocker shape, which gave the board bottom curvature, consequently more bite on the wave face. Finally, they had added a stabilizing fin, mounted at the tail of the board and known as a “skeg.” This gave the board a degree of maneuverability unlike anything offered by the hot curl boards: it actually allowed a rider to turn left and right while crossing the wave’s face. This was without question a tremendous advance for riding big waves. The rolling nature of large surf and its tendency to change shape and pitch required a surfer to negotiate the wave. What the tail fin did was change the sport from simply riding a surfboard wherever the wave carried you to surfing the waves with purpose. The tail fin maximized the directional agency of the surfer by increasing their options while positioned on the wave’s face.64

Because the balsa blank was too permeable over time, the California board builders did not use varnish to finish their boards. Instead, they had started layering the balsa blank with resin impregnated fiberglass, a byproduct of aerospace advances made during the war. Surfing had become about more than just the lifestyle, if it was ever about that.

Surfers wanted to surf, and they wanted to surf more than just the hospitable conditions of Waikiki or Malibu.

The key to big-wave surfing lay in pushing both design and technology. Surfers were implicitly not “laid back.” If being laid back was the goal of surfing, board designs would never have advanced. Surfers, despite their public persona as slackers and miscreants, pushed designs and technologies for the sole purpose of riding bigger, more ferocious waves. By extension, they impacted the sport at large because of the democratizing effect these new designs and technologies had on access to the sport.

Big-wave surfing became the unintended catalyst to opening up the sport to millions of would-be surfers. Media also played its part. Each winter giant northwest swells sweep down the coast, creating the fabled Makaha Point Surf. Downing was riding his modified board on November 27, 1953, when Honolulu photographer Skip Tsuzuki took a picture of Downing, Brown, and California surfer Buzzy Trent racing down the face of large Makaha wave. The Associated Press bought the photo and put it on the wire. Newspapers across the nation picked it up over the next few days. Almost overnight, big-wave surfing was on the radar and surfing in general shot forward as a result.

This was the watershed moment. Even if surfing remained obscure in its details to most Americans by 1953, it had become identifiable. By comparison, Oklahoma City residents knew about skateboarding at almost the same time as New Yorkers and Californians, and sooner than other places. Geographic proximity had a more direct

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impact on participation than awareness. Before Tsuzuki’s AP photo, *Life, National Geographic, Colliers,* and even *Popular Science Monthly* had disseminated information about surfing. Often these articles contained references to big waves, describing them as “powerful swells,” “the thunder of breakers,” “rolling mountains of water;” however, none of the accompanying photographs ever showed someone surfing a wave more than six feet high. Tsuzuki’s image of Makaha depicted big-wave surfing accurately for the first time.66

Tsuzuki’s widely published photo was like a bombshell on the American mainland’s surfing population. Surfers quit their jobs to go to Hawai’i. Dozens arrived and camped out on the beach, staring helplessly at the fact that every California surfer must face in Hawai’i: the waves are not there all the time.67 The local press noticed the conspicuous presence of all the California boys. The *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* learned about the Makaha surfer encampment and its growing roster of college age suburbanites. To the local paper it seemed interesting and eccentric, if not a touch subversive. The paper reported:

“A small band of Californians have found Makaha. They are content to go without the usual luxuries of modern day living, just so they can surf there. Three Californians arrived about ten days ago to join the hardy band of some fifteen ascetics living in a shack about two blocks from the surf. The new arrivals have taken a cottage across the street—for about ten dollars a

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67Sam George, “When We Were Kings,” *Surfer,* August 17, 1999, 144.
month each—and have scattered swim fins, spears, and surfboards around their new house—the kitchen being a Coleman stove."\(^{68}\)

Unlike California, where waves break somewhere almost every day of the year, Hawai‘i is located in a place that is subject to the whims of tidal geography and annual season. Inconsistent surf was the rule in Hawai‘i. Still, the California surfers, men like Buzzy Trent, George Downing, Walter and Flippy Hoffman, all stayed and played, casting long shadows for future big-wave riders. Makaha became training ground for all future big wave riders: first Makaha, then the rest. It inspired Phil Edwards to pen his Fourth Law of Surfing: “You must one day, at one time in your life, stand on top of a monster wave.”\(^{69}\)

The second major phase in the technology of the surfboard came from the Makaha period. While encamped at Makaha, George Downing started working on a board that was specifically designed for big waves. When big-wave riding was still in its infancy, day trips to Makaha and the North Shore were forays into uncharted territory. Downing not only rode monster surf, he became its consummate student, intent on understanding and refining tactics and equipment. His scientific design research helped him create one of the earliest collections of boards that could handle various surf conditions, known as a “quiver.” Each board came with subtle variations in length, the degree of curve in the board or “rocker,” as well as size and weight. Different boards for different waves—this


\(^{69}\)Edwards, *You Should Have Been Here*, 65.

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was the technical approach to surfing that most untrained observers did not notice when they stared at California surfers. Downing also created the first system of changeable fins, which made it possible to adjust even more specifically to the various surf conditions.

In 1951, he constructed the first board for truly big surf, and it soon became the template for all serious surfers. At a stable ten feet in length, it was cut with a moderate rocker and a fairly steep upward shovel at the nose to avoid submarining, or diving into upswells. The tail was pinned and the board was trimmed to a svelte twenty-nine pounds. With the modular fin system, which was unexplainably ignored for another fifteen years, the “Makaha Gun” could outrun the infamous Makaha Bowl and still provided the ability to carve on waves that were previously ridden out in survival fashion. Downing also studied the weather. He dove on the reefs that shaped the waves. Downing pushed the act of riding big waves beyond simple fearlessness: he added a dimension of predictability and purpose to the entire process. Downing’s research and theories made him peerless in the water. Before him, survival was the only mission. His speed-driven bottom turns and arcs at huge Makaha redefined what was possible. The images of Downing and Froiseth, among others, inspired the first wave of Californians to make their assault on Hawai‘i.70

The Makaha crowd did not yet know that an even bigger challenge waited just a few miles across the Waianae Range, on Oahu’s North Shore, where the greatest concentration of rideable big waves lay waiting for surfers to find them. It was only

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thirteen miles from Makaha. The North Shore had been surfed by hot curl surfers in the 1940s and early 1950s, but never at its greatest size. Its location made it vulnerable to enormous swells traveling southwest out of the North Pacific. Because those swells were unimpeded by any other land mass, they gathered great speed before reaching O’ahu. Many times waves at the North Shore were too big and too powerful to ride. Like Point Surf Makaha when it was big, the North Shore waves could kill.

The intimidation of the break was amplified by the story of two North Shore pioneers—Woody Brown and Dick Cross. In December 1942, Brown and Cross paddled out during a fast-rising swell at Sunset Beach and were trapped outside the break by the giant swells. Conditions forced them to paddle three miles down the coast to Waimea Bay where they tried to reach shore. At Waimea they were caught by a monster set of waves. Brown barely made it to the beach. Cross disappeared under an avalanche of foam and was never seen again.71

This modern kapu (taboo) surrounded the North Shore by the time the next wave of Californians hit the Islands in the mid 1950s. That group included a brash, gregarious character from Hermosa Beach named Greg Noll. The younger surfers turned their attention to the largely unsurfed North Shore, which they found was a veritable cornucopia of big-wave venues, with exotic names that become legendary: Haleiwa, Laniakea, Pupukea, Sunset Beach, and the ever foreboding Waimea Bay. Waimea Bay’s massive winter peaks had not been ridden as far as the surfers knew. The first recorded, modern foray fell to Noll, whose relentless drive into the unknown earned him the

71George, “Riding Giant Waves.”
reputation as the North Shore’s Pied Piper. He cajoled an intrepid group of followers, including 17-year-old Mickey Munoz from Santa Monica, to paddle out to Waimea Bay one November morning in 1957.\textsuperscript{72}

Nobody can recall who rode the first wave, but from that day forward Waimea Bay became big-wave riding’s crucible, and Greg Noll was the standard by which all other big wave riders were measured. He spent almost every winter on the North Shore, sitting outside of the pack at Waimea Bay, stuffing himself into impossible positions on the biggest waves then imaginable. He rode so aggressively that Phil Edwards gave him a new nickname: “The Bull.” His flamboyant approach, including his trademark “Jailhouse stripe” surf trunks, breathed flair into an ordinarily more stoic scene. Noll almost single-handedly brought glamour to the big-wave-riding arena, and subsequently to the fast-growing surf culture in general.

Despite its enduring qualities of great drama, adventure, and romance, this last epoch of big-wave surfing’s Golden Era would hardly last the decade. But it continued the process of technological progress that assisted later surfers in their quest for waves. Like Downing before them, the Waimea surfers started arriving in Hawai‘i with specially built boards designed for nothing but riding big surf. They were long and narrow, like the olo of pre-20\textsuperscript{th} century Hawaiian surfers. Noll rode an 11’6” “gun” for Waimea that he described as “first and foremost a wave-catching machine, because if you can’t catch a wave nothing else matters.” Unlike the olo boards of past days, the new guns were made

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{72}Greg Noll, Da’ Bull: Life Over the Edge (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1989), 16; George, “When We Were Kings,” 143-144; Warshaw, Maverick’s, 59-61; Alter interview, January 21, 2004.\end{flushright}
from balsa wood, thinned and epoxied; or after 1959, they were likely foam-core boards built in California and shipped to Hawai‘i. Either way, they worked for the purpose they were designed for. They also helped Noll and his pals effectuate the image of being “gunslingers” who lived for the hunt.\(^7\)

Surfing’s next transformation had little to do with surf technology—it was driven by cinema. Surf culture exploded onto America’s cultural shore following the release of the surf-and-sex farce *Gidget* in 1959. The world’s surfing population exploded. Estimates suggest that before *Gidget* there were between 5,000 and 10,000 surfers who surfed with some sort of frequency. Five years after *Gidget*, *Surfer* magazine decried the overpopulation of surfing’s most sacred hot-spots. The magazine suggested that as many as 2,000,000 surfers were combing the beaches of the world. This was the market setting for such famous decisions as Bill and Mark Richards starting a surf and skateboard shop in North Hollywood, California in 1962—thirty miles from the nearest beach.

Setting the stage for big-wave surfing’s next era was an almost Shakespearean final act: Greg Noll’s apocryphal last ride at Makaha Point Surf. In December 1969, the biggest swell ever seen hit the Hawaiian Islands, closing out the entire North Shore, including Waimea Bay. It was known as the 100-year swell. The largest waves ever recorded, forty to sixty feet, pounded the North Shore. How appropriate that it was Greg Noll, by then considered an aging veteran, who led the charge. He believed that Makaha might still hold potential, that waves with some surfable shape were forming in the

\(^{73}\) *Riding Giants*, 2004; George, “How Surfboards Got From There to Here,” 144.

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protected space of the O'ahu's west side. As he drove back across the island to Makaha, he also drove into history.

When Noll arrived at Makaha, a handful of his friends stood with him, looking at what they thought was the biggest swell they had ever faced. Noll was confronted with a wave so massive and overwhelming that it forced him to reevaluate his very mortality—to paraphrase Nietzsche, the abyss stared back into him. Noll turned and rode into history, but it would turn out to be the last big wave he would ever attempt. There were no photographers there that day, no film teams. But a group of surfers watched Noll paddle for the biggest wave they had ever seen anyone attempt. The best estimates from various witnesses is that the wave stacked up at approximately fifty feet. Noll made the drop from the wave's lip to its trough like he was on an elevator that had just snapped its cable. By the time he started to turn at the bottom, the wave was already closing on him. He stepped backward off the board, went under, and resurfaced a minute later after the wave had moved past him. Noll began what he called the hardest swim of life back to shore. Noll's last wave at Makaha broke and vanished, so seemingly did the popularity of traditional big-wave riding and its traditional arenas. Even venues for surfing were starting to delimit the meaning of the sport. That same year, 1969, Big Surf—a wave-machine driven water fun park—opened in Tempe, Arizona.74

Greg Noll never recovered from what he still considers the apex of his surfing life. He was so shaken by the wave at Makaha that believed he would never be able to replicate or exceed the experience. Noll walked away from Hawai'i and professional surfing. He

74Noll, Da' Bull, 78; George, "When We Were Kings," 150.

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became a fisherman in Alaska and eventually settled in Crescent City, California. Big-wave surfing also suffered in the 1960s. The sport was broad-sided by the “shortboard revolution” of the late 1960s. In this period of rapid surfboard design upheaval, the longer, heavier “elephant gun” was phased out in favor of shorter, lighter, more maneuverable models. The millions who flocked to beaches every summer found they could not turn the big boards, and the industry favored their participation and pocket books. Big-wave surfing took a backseat to the development of the more high performance-based approach these new “mini-guns” afforded. As the boards changed, so did the stage.

Located just a few miles north of Waimea, by 1970 the smaller breaking but fantastically hollow Banzai Pipeline had usurped ‘The Bay’ as the ultimate proving ground. Young surfers like Gerry Lopez epitomized surfing’s new pursuit of riding in the tube. With a quiet, almost Zen-like calm, Lopez, known throughout the surf world as Mr. Pipeline, transcended the goal-oriented approach of riding the biggest wave to simply stand inside the hollowest portion of the wave, a statement that suited the counter-culture sensibilities of the time. Lopez represented the pursuit of form, a stark contrast to surfers such as Greg Noll who symbolized size over everything else. The new ethos suggested bigger was not better. The subsequent growth of modern professional competitive surfing further eclipsed the big-wave scene, until by the mid-1970s, most dedicated Waimea Bay riders found themselves with very little company on those big days that so many had once relished.
Not long after Noll left surfing behind, a lone surfer paddled out alone on a different coast and into a very different sort of big-wave lineup. Northern California’s Half Moon Bay redrew surfing’s maps and changed the face of the sport forever. Half Moon Bay was a sleepy coastal farming town some twenty-five miles south of San Francisco. The surfer was a local named Jeff Clark. He had been intrigued in his youth by stories of a giant wave that broke off the Half Moon Bay Harbor at Pillar Point and he was determined to paddle out to see for himself. The wave was a ferocious peak called Maverick’s, named for a white German shepherd that surfed on the nose of a surfboard with surfer Alex Matienzo. On a winter day in 1962, Matienzo was driving down the coast checking the reef breaks near Half Moon Bay. It was a big day out in the water: the waves were breaking a half-mile from shore. The place Matienzo was looking at didn’t have a name, so he named it after the dog that rode with him.

In 1975, Clark was only 17 years old. He was unable to get anyone else to accompany him out at Maverick’s. He jumped off the rocks and stroked out toward the distant waves crashing over the rocks. For Clark it began four years after Matienzo named Maverick’s, in 1966, when Clark’s father, a San Mateo County deputy sheriff, built a house for his six-member family on an oceanfront lot in Miramar, just south of Pillar Point. The house had a view of the waves off the headland two miles away. Jeff Clark was nine years old. That summer he began surfing, and by junior high school, after having attached himself to an older, car-driving group of surfers, he had developed a near-encyclopedic knowledge of the breaks from Santa Cruz to San Francisco. Clark learned early that the freakish
big-wave reef north of his house was called Maverick's, and that it was too intense to ride.\textsuperscript{75}

Clark was a devoted young surfer but not a great natural talent, even by the provincial standards of Half Moon Bay. He did have guts. As a high school freshman, he was known as the kid who would paddle calmly into big waves and take his knocks like a prizefighter. Stoicism was an odd trait in a teenager. Clark set himself apart, too, as a seventies teenager with no interest in drugs. "I wanted to surf. And that's pretty much all I wanted to do." At age sixteen, he began watching Maverick's. During the winter, he often surfed Ross's Cove, a break just north of Pillar Point, and when Ross's hit ten feet, he would sit on his board and cast a speculative eye toward the big, empty, shadowy peaks at Maverick's. Clark knew that kids his age in Hawai'i were riding Waimea Bay and Sunset Beach. He thought he could do something like that at Maverick's. Clark often wondered why nobody rode Maverick's. When the \textit{Surfing California} guidebook was published in 1973, the entry for Pillar Point said: "Huge winter walls outside Half Moon Bay harbor. Shallow reefs. Too dangerous for surfing." Clark epitomized that cavalier attitude intrinsic to most big-wave surfers: as soon as someone told him it was too dangerous to surf, he had to try. On a warm February afternoon in 1975, Clark paddled out, catching a series of ten to twenty-foot waves. Still, no one would surf there with him. Clark rode Maverick's alone from 1975 to 1989.\textsuperscript{76}


\textsuperscript{76}Marcus, "Cold Sweat," 58; Warshaw, \textit{Maverick's}, 89; \textit{Riding Giants}, 2004.
Clark literally paddled out into the unknown. The wave he intended to ride was not a surf spot—it was a navigational hazard. Nothing like this had ever been attempted on the California coast. In a sport that thrives on word-of-mouth, Clark rode the giant Maverick’s surf alone, in waves that not only rivaled the size of those at Waimea Bay, but broke even bigger and even more often. After fifteen years of solo sessions, in 1990, he finally convinced Tom Powers and Dave Schmidt, two big-wave riders from nearby Santa Cruz, to join him. Powers and Schmidt were dumbfounded when they saw the size and shape of the waves at Pillar Point. News of Maverick’s erupted in the surfing community and redrew its traditional maps.

As the story of Maverick’s unfolded, the surf community was introduced to eloquent devotees like Dr. Mark Renneker, Grant Washburn, Evan Slater and Peter Mel, who defined this new archetype of West Coast big-wave riders. Like their North Shore antecedents, the Maverick’s crew pushed the limits of both performance and survival in bigger and bigger swells. Boards started to change again, returning to longer models with bigger fins and shallower rails. But unlike surfers at other big water breaks, including Waimea Bay, the hyperbole was valid: Maverick’s men were actually cheating death.

By the winter of 1994 surfing’s big-wave fraternity had acknowledged Maverick’s as a serious wave. Nothing could have prepared them for the last two weeks of that December. The combination of epic swells and perfect conditions announced to the world that Maverick’s was the “real deal.” Being a big-wave rider meant taking a trip to Half Moon Bay. On December 23, 1994, Maverick’s hosted an new type of big-wave session. Media converged on Pillar Point as conditions for huge surf reached perfection. Word
spread that north Pacific swells were traveling south to pound at Maverick's. In addition to the already heightened tension over big surf, two of Hawai'i’s best Waimea riders since Greg Noll–Ken Bradshaw and Mark Foo–arrived to join the event. It was a unique reverse migration. The presence of the Waimea surfers created the impression that something momentous was going to happen, but no one could have predicted what that something would be. Mark Foo, a big-wave expert weaned on North Shore giants, took off on a medium-sized set, tumbled off his board and disappeared.

Foo’s drowning death cast big-wave riding in a dramatic new light. But that is as it should be. Big-wave surfing has always been outside of the common understanding of the sport. Foo’s death, which was covered in dozens of newspapers and at least six major magazines, illuminated for millions of observers what was at stake every time men like Greg Noll or Jeff Clark paddled into a wave. Fair or not, surfing was recognized by millions of people but rarely understood, often cast as a juvenile summer hobby. Big wave surfing was even less well comprehended by the general public. Less than 100 surfers in the world, out of the millions who surf every week, possess the physical ability

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to carve down the face of waves that exceed forty feet. Big-wave surfing is not like any other kind of surfing.\textsuperscript{79}

As a wave increases in height, its mass increases exponentially, as does the energy released when it breaks. The result is often compared to a bomb going off. As the wave breaks, its energy is transferred forward and up, and it moves at speeds approaching forty miles and hour. The best comparison to normal six-foot surf is the difference between controlling a car at thirty-five miles per hour and 200 miles per hour. The bigger the wave, the less room for error and the greater the consequences to wiping out.\textsuperscript{80}

Foo’s Death also highlighted the subtle transformation of big-wave surfing. The day Foo and Bradshaw arrived, there was media coverage all over Pillar Point. Photographers, journalists, and helicopters were stacked up trying to get the photo that would sell more magazines and make some surfer’s career. The scene in the water, according to Jeff Clark, was a circus. The result was a dangerous profusion of “Kodak courage.” Before the world knew about places like Waimea, Makaha, or Maverick’s, big-wave surfers approached their task with courage and caution. The presence of media and the hope for sponsorship compelled some to take unnecessary risks. But by his own admission, this was the environment Foo enjoyed the most. Foo was a fearless self-promoter who


reputedly would stop surfing on any given day if photographers were not focused on him. As talented a big-wave rider as Foo was, he still considered it a job more than a calling. The question raised by his death was whether or not those two competing ideas could co-exist with acceptable results. Ultimately, very few big-wave aficionados have managed a profitable balance.*

Unlike the stoic gunslingers of the 1950s, Foo had sponsors. His career was built on a combination of contests and big-wave bravado. The atmosphere at Maverick’s the day Foo died indicated that even big-wave surfing was in flux. Clark was not surfing alone anymore, and a small contingent had joined him permanently at Pillar Point. The issue raised by Foo’s death vectored into the heart of big-wave surfing, revealing that even the most macho of the sport’s subcultures was vulnerable. Foo was the first big-wave surfer to die since the 1940s. Perhaps commercialization played a part in that death. Regardless, big-wave surfing was once again on the radar of millions, just as it had been after Skip Tsuzuki’s 1953 photo of Makaha.82

Big-wave surfing’s rise to prominence along the spectrum of the non-surfing public completed in the 1990s but not in northern California. It is true that the existence of Maverick’s reshaped the surfing conception of the globe. It displaced myths about how and where big surf broke, compelling surfers to look at undersea maps for reefs in

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obscure locations and not necessarily along commonly known land masses. Big-wave surfing revolutionized the sport’s perceptual cachet through another Hawaiian wave that hid in plain sight.

A series of deep-water breaks are located sporadically along O’ahu’s North Shore. The waves produced by those offshore reefs only begin to show during the biggest swells. Because of the size of the inshore surf and the low, water-level perspective of observers, off-shore waves are not visible to surfers standing on shore or sitting in the lineup at inshore breaks such as Waimea Bay or Sunset Beach. Over the decades a handful of surfers paddled out to tackle those distant giants, including Greg Noll in the 1960s. But the combination of powerful currents and the sheer mass of the behemoth waves forced most surfers to remain at the more accessible inshore breaks.

Enter Laird Hamilton, acknowledged currently as the sport’s greatest big-wave rider. Hamilton was raised in Hawai’i from the age of two years old, he learned to surf with his stepfather, legendary surf stylist Billy Hamilton. The younger Hamilton honed his skills at Pipeline, a ruthless and hollow wave that breaks with only a few feet of water covering its reef. Growing up blond in Hawai’i also hardened Hamilton to external pressures and fears. Like Noll before him, he seemed more inner-directed than the competitive surfers who dominated the limelight of North Shore surfing.  

Hamilton exudes all the cliches of surfing: he is 6’ 3” tall, blond, blue-eyed, and chiseled to the point of less than five percent body fat. He has little difficulty holding his

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breath for two minutes under the sea’s surface and seems to be capable of any physical challenge. His peers describe him as the ultimate waterman: swimmer, surfer, paddler. He has also never surfed competitively. He tried his hand at competitive wind-surfing, but not in a traditional way. Rather than compete in front of judges and suffer subjective assessments of his skill, Hamilton chose to compete against a clock, winning the 1990 Windsurfing Speed World Championships. He remained content to make a living in various ways but never on his surfing efforts. His only surf related sponsorship came in the mid-1980s with a French surf clothing manufacturer.84

The turning point for Hamilton in 1992. He joined other local watermen Buzzy Kerbox and legendary Waimea Bay surfer Darrick Doerner for a revolutionary session at one of the North Shore’s most picturesque outer reefs called Backyard Sunset. Abandoning the traditional paddle-in method of catching waves, they opted to use technology to ride waves moving too fast to catch. At the offshore break, the trio towed themselves into a series of giant waves from behind Kerbox’s inflatable Zodiac speedboat. Using standard surfboards without any kind of foot straps, the Zodiac afforded them easy entry and sufficient speed to traverse any section. Free from the constraints of having to paddle into the waves, they focused on performance and, in classic Noll fashion, catching as many waves as possible.85

Towing into waves was a revelation. The tow-in crew traded the clumsy Zodiac for the quicker and more maneuverable personal water crafts, such as the Ski-Doo. Technology ruled this evolution in surfing. Soon after the Backyard Sunset sessions, Hamilton hooked up with Dave Kalama, Brett Lickle, and Mark Angulo, all of whom were experimenting with windsurfing into large off-shore breaks, with wind the more nascent form of locomotion. Windsurfing boards brought an important innovation to big-wave surfing: foot straps. As the name implies, neoprene straps are fixed to the surfboard’s deck to keep the rider in contact with the board at all times. At high speeds and over choppy waves surfaces, this proved as important as the advent of motorized assistance with catching big waves. With the addition of straps, Hamilton, Kalama, Doerner, and the others became known in the surf community as the Strapped Crew. In this techno-driven pursuit, they stood apart from the rest of the surfing world. But there aberrance only gained them more notoriety. Magazines and television shows started pursuing the Strapped Crew whenever they could find out ahead of time that they would be surfing.86

Because paddling was not an option for swells that traveled more than thirty miles an hour, Hamilton and his peers focused on redesigning boards for the express purpose of tow-in surfing. Their surfboards dropped three feet in length, making them more maneuverable. Sail-boarding straps were a permanent fixture, and increased the leverage a surfer needed on the face of millions of cubic feet of water. Hamilton went back to

boards made from balsa wood blanks because they provided more impact absorption, dampening the effects of the extreme surface textures on Hawaiian big waves. But all this technology still needed a wave commensurate to the Strapped Crew’s collective abilities. Like Greg Noll decades earlier, Hamilton’s energy needed the proper stage. On that inaugural session in 1957 Noll found his at Waimea Bay. And with the development of tow-in surfing, Hamilton discovered his at a remote, off-the-scale Hawaiian surf spot called Pe’ahi.

Located on the north shore of Maui, Pe’ahi is named for the Hawaiian word for “beckon.” The reason is obvious only to those who visit. When it breaks big, Pe’ahi can be heard from miles away, calling surfers to its maw. Local surfers also dubbed the board crunching wave something else: “Jaws.” Pe’ahi generates a breaking wave only when ocean swells reach a certain size. From the north shore of Maui a massive underwater ridge, the remnant of an ancient lava flow, juts straight out to sea. Half a mile from shore the reef drops abruptly away into the sea. An average swell of ten to twelve feet simply passes over the nub of the reef without producing more than a ripple. But larger swells, generated thousands of miles away in the Gulf of Alaska, pitch skyward when they strike the reef. This process is known as “shoaling,” and is the heart of wave formation. The shape of the wave, its surface contours, nearly all of its features are created or affected by the underwater reef a swell contacts.87

Pe’ahi has a second wave-rearing trick. The swell on either side of the reef, moving in deeper water, bends inward, focusing much of their energy on the center of the wave crest. This refraction of wave energy is like a magnifying glass gathering light into a hot, focused beam. In essence, the reef squeezes the wave inward and upward. Surfers call it a peaking wave. Fortunately, the deepwater channel next to the underwater ridge also ensures that there is a safe zone where the wave will not break. Surfers head to this natural safety zone as the carve down the face of the mountainous Jaws.88

Pe’ahi offered the perfect venue for Hamilton and his new brand of performance big-wave riding. It was here, at this fearsome break, exploding forty to sixty feet high and crashing into rugged lava cliffs, previously considered unrideable by conventional means, that tow-in surfing came into its own. The exploits of the Strapped Crew represented the greatest quantum leap forward in surfing performance since boards were made from solid wood. The performance paradigm shifted, as Hamilton rode bigger and bigger waves with a radical flair that, compared to conventional big-wave surfing, appeared surreal.

Part of the transformation big-wave surfing was the recognition that solitary endeavors, while romantic, did not fit the paradigm of achievement. These were surfers who wanted to ride the biggest waves in the world—that was not something even the best watermen did alone. The teamwork inherent in the tow-in approach introduced the element into an arena where gunslingers had classically fought and died alone. This ethic, in turn, fostered a new sense of surfing heroics, as suddenly safety, as well as concern for others, were paramount. It seemed that the biggest complaints of the Pipeline surfers from

88George, “Riding Giant Waves.”

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the early 1970s had found compatibility with big-wave hunting in the “form and function” approach of the Strapped Crew. Throughout this period of innovation, Hamilton has been a prime mover. Hawaiian waterman extraordinaire Dave Kalama said of Hamilton’s dominance: “A line has definitely been drawn in the sand, and there are only one set of footprints on the other side. Laird’s.”

Big-wave surfing with Ski-Doos and surfboards boasting foot straps, surprisingly, is not yet the apex of surfing. After the evolution of tow-in surfing, Hamilton popularized the practice of wearing emergency flotation vests to minimize the risk of drowning. Even the board is beginning to become surreal. In 2002, Hamilton developed a board attached to a hydrofoil—a two-foot strut that protruded from the bottom of the board with a winged keel attached at the end. Using snowboard bindings and boots to stay attached to the board and a tow-in for initial speed, Hamilton surfs thirty foot waves sixteen inches above the surface of the water, the hydrofoil gliding smoothly and silently just below the wave’s surface. What this represents is the continued commitment of athletes to expanding the boundaries of their sport, perhaps the only remaining, yet consistent, difference between contemporary sport and traditional sports.

The fallout from big-wave surfing’s current visibility is far reaching. It generates a sense among the spectating public that sport is something different. Sport is not always about winning, though that still seems to be the most common point of departure between traditionalists and modernists. The evolution of surfing over the twentieth century reveals the clear fact that once alternatives existed to traditional means of sport or recreation,

89George, ibid; Riding Giants, 2004; Warshaw, Maverick’s, 178-180.

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Americans were eager to try them. It was not just professional or competitive sport that
demanded people embrace courage or some degree of the cavalier. Big-wave surfers have
become iconic within the sport of surfing, operating on the edge of the sport for the entire
twentieth century. Only in the twenty first century have big-wave surfers become
identifiable and idiomatic within the larger sport lexicon. They have become ubiquitous
within American culture, sufficiently so to stand as markers for a larger population of
athletes. As Michael Jordan stands for basketball or Tony Hawk for skateboarding, Laird
Hamilton epitomizes the surfer that most Americans readily understand. Americans have
delimited the stodgy definition of sport that was born with nineteenth century inter-
collegiate football and Babe Ruth era baseball. Sport is as sport does, to paraphrase and
update Tom Hanks' character in *Forest Gump.*
American youth, especially urban kids, have always loved to go fast. They took their cues from the rapid transportation systems that evolved all around them in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century. Trolleys, cabs, elevated trains, metros, transcontinental railroads, and airplanes all proved that people could travel faster than human bipedal motion naturally allowed. In this same period of time, sport also encompassed the evolution of speed and mechanized motion: speedboat racing on the Hudson River, automobile racing, and even prop-fighter races evidenced America’s love affair with going fast. Urban kids embraced this phenomenon at their own level.

In its nascent form, the skateboard was a scooter. These were crude devices, designed around human energy, and encompassing a wide variety of available materials to produce a new form transportation. The scooter’s base was formed from a piece of lumber, usually a discarded length of 2" by 4" stud. Innovative young people gave the base mobility by sawing a single roller skate base in half, attaching the plate and its metal wheels to the scooter. A milk-crate was nailed upright to the top of the base. A handle was attached to
the milk-crate for control. Almost as soon as this crude device was fashioned, kids started to go fast, and eventually started to race.¹

In New York City, the Children's Aid Society hosted the Anything On Wheels Derby, an event designed to raise money and spirits among underprivileged youth. Beginning in 1939, the Anything On Wheels Derby was an early public display of the inclusive nature of urban sport and its decedents. A photo of the starting line of the 1952 derby depicts a sporting landscape to which few other traditional sports could lay claim. Competing side by side were boys and girls, whites and blacks. This photo suggests that early on, skateboarders (like surfers and mountain bikers) understood that traditional sport came with inherent limits to access. That is not to say that traditional sport was inherently exclusionary; on the contrary, sport by its very nature should have provided more common ground than race or gender discrimination. Traditional sport operated in the extant cultural matrix, reflecting the deep divisions that preceded the evolution of organized sport. Contemporary sport became a venue for young Americans to cast off those divisions in pursuit of more esoteric goals like form and style.

In the early 1960s, the modern skateboard was born in a California surf shop, but it took a Pennsylvania-born record producer to make that happen. Bill Richards grew up in southern Pennsylvania in the early 1920s and 1930s. After attending Dartmouth College, Bill got into the record business and became a producer, believing that this was an industry that could truly expand. In 1941, before America entered World War II, his production dreams brought him to the west coast where he paid the bills as a vice-

¹Michael Brooke, The Concrete Wave (Toronto: Warwick Publishing, 1999), 16.
president at Columbia Records before starting his own record label, KEM Records, named for his three sons, Kurt, Eric, and Mark. While running KEM, Richards realized he could not become eminently successful in the record business. He came face to face with the earliest form of industry abuse in payola. By 1950, the recording industry was exploding and the economic stakes were very high. Radio remained the number one medium for music and if an urban radio station was favorable to a particular artist or label, the treatment guaranteed profit. In such a classically aggressive industry, market share was everything. The kind of money and favors and graft required of a producer who wanted to get a record on the air played was more than Bill Richards could handle. His son Mark remembered how distraught his father was over the kind of amoral business in which he found himself. Mark Richards believed his father was forced out of the industry by his own conscience. From 1957, when he left recording, Bill Richards remained unemployed or underemployed for the next five years.²

By 1962, southern California experienced the grass-roots growth of something new. All over the Southland, as southern California was known, kids were cutting roller skate base plates in half and nailing them to planks of wood, just like their urban predecessors had done. In this current phase, southern California kids deviated by stopping with the plank and the wheels. No milk crate, no handle bars. “Skateboards” were the tool of the late 1950s. Newspapers quickly dubbed the craze “sidewalk surfing,” but the profusion of

this imitative sport, which claimed affinity with ocean surfing, was not limited to coastal areas.

While surfers were likely the first individuals to attempt dryland surf maneuvers on crude skateboards, there is no agreement among the participants who remain as to who built or rode the first skateboard. There is little disagreement that skateboarding benefitted from its time-proximity to the rising popularity of surfing and all things Californian or beach related. This was an era in American history marked by travel, by recreation, by the desire to simultaneously suburbanize and escape the suburbs. Just as national parks provided many Americans with a physical and psychological respite from urban blight, sidewalk surfing afforded inland kids a refuge from suburban malaise.

Landscapes started to change meaning with skateboarding. Even the slightest grade to a street or driveway presented something new: freedom of motion. As Oklahoma City native Malcolm Haney would later describe it, the first goal in early skateboarding was to go fast, really fast.

This was the way many sea changes occurred: participation began small, spreading only if sufficient people were able to repeat the experience and the results. As more participants replicated the experience they had seen, the level of enthusiasm increased and the popularity of the sport spread. In addition, fringe sports by their very nature attracted those who were already looking for an alternative to the status quo. Traditional sports had always maintained their popularity at least in part because they had no competition.

Skateboarding may have begun as something for California surfers to do while the surf was low, but as skateboarding moved inland, it found a much more receptive
audience. With little or no chance of seeing the beach except on holidays, the appeal of board sports grew among land-locked would-be surfers. The suburban concrete available to inland youngsters created a man-made incubator for skateboarding that did not require surfing as a continual inspiration.

Into this flowering trend toward alternative sport stepped a fifteen-year-old resident of southern California’s San Fernando Valley named Mark Richards. In his youth, Richards evolved from traditional sports, playing little league baseball and youth football. Around the age of ten years old, he developed a friendship with Johnny Christ, a fellow student at Campbell Elementary School in North Hollywood. Christ was instrumental in Richards’s development as a skateboarder and surfer. After becoming friends, Johnny Christ moved to Hawai‘i with his family. While in Hawai‘i, he learned to surf. Christ eventually returned to California, and brought his love of board sports with him. He and his family settled in Pacific Palisades, west of Los Angeles.³

Like many surfers in the period, Christ turned his non-ocean attention to dryland surfing, or skateboarding. Richards and Christ spent time hanging out at classic southern California surf spots like Malibu and further south, at Zuma and Santa Monica. In those early days, Richards skated at various middle schools and high schools where asphalt banks were part of the schoolyard perimeter. The topography of Pacific Palisades is critical to this element of skateboarding’s history. The Palisades are nestled in the low mountains the separate West Los Angeles from the Pacific Ocean. Driving to Malibu

³Richards, e-mail message to author, April 14, 2005.

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from Santa Monica meant winding up into Pacific Palisades and then back down to sea
level on the other side.

That topography resulted in school playgrounds that were literally terraced, with
fifteen to forty-five degree banks separating the levels. Asphalt assured those banks
would not erode. It also provided nascent skateboarders with their first artificial, dryland
wave. These were the zones later appropriated with more publicity by teenage skaters in
the 1970s, such as Stacy Peralta and Tony Alva. Contrary to the course of events depicted
in Stacy Peralta’s documentary, *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, by the 1970s riding elementary
school asphalt was a well worn practice when urethane-wheeled skaters came along. At
these schools, Richards encountered future skate legends like Danny Bearer, Woody
Woodworth, and the Hilton brothers.4

Eventually Christ helped Richards learn to surf. But like other surf/skate legends from
the 1970s, Mark Richards did not learn to skateboard so he could have something to do
when the surf was bad. Richards learned to skateboard years before he first surfed.5 The
mythic “surfer first, skater second” image that so many 1960s and 1970s skaters tried to
propagate was just that: a myth. Skateboarding, by all accounts, was not respected outside
the community of practitioners. It was a hobby, a fad, or something youngsters did
because they were no good at football or baseball. The idea that skateboarding constituted
sport was beyond comprehension for most Americans. It took decades for surfing to

4Corky Carroll, telephone interview by author, November 13, 2004; Richards

acquire a marginal degree of acceptance in American culture, and that only took place after *Gidget* and its watered-down representation of surfing. So, when skateboards hit the streets, surfing already had currency. That skateboarders might want to be known as surfers first made a certain kind of street sense. Surfing had more street credibility, more cachet, and was less likely to be banned by municipal governments.

In addition to the banked playgrounds of Pacific Palisades schools, Mark Richards skateboarded with his friends for a few years in the streets of North Hollywood and Reseda. Before 1962, Richards and Christ bought used roller skates with composite clay wheels from a Santa Monica roller rink. They removed the boot, cut the base plate in half, drilled mounting holes in the plates, and wood-screwed the plates to poorly formed pieces of oak or maple plank fashioned in his highschool wood shop or his father’s garage.

As much as Richards loved skating, surfing really grabbed his life. “Even though I started skating first and was really kind of more into skating,” Richards recalled, “once I got bit by the surf bug I was just totally enthralled with the sport. That’s what pushed me into suggesting that [my] dad open a shop, was the fact that he had been taking me down to Hermosa Beach to order my board, to buy a pair of trunks, to buy a bar of wax.”

Richards understood that as more and more inland southern Californians were attracted to the sport, hundreds and then thousands of kids would not be able to find a surf shop closer than Hermosa or Santa Monica, some thirty to forty miles from most of the suburban development outside the Los Angeles basin. Richards correctly perceived that
inland demand would accelerate and he wanted to be the one to meet it with product. To Richards, who was only fifteen years old at the time, "it was a no-brainer."

As his love for skateboarding grew, Mark decided it was time to turn commercial. He convinced his father, who had been underemployed for almost five years by 1962, that they could make money selling skateboards and surfboards to San Fernando Valley youngsters. After doing some research, checking for an acceptable storefront location, and polling dozens of local skaters, they decided to give it a try. The next weekend, they headed for the coast and traveled south from Santa Barbara to Dana Point. This was their market research trip. They stopped at every shop they found, talking to dozens of proprietors and gathering information on price points, manufacturers, and designs.

The trip produced valuable information. The Richards decided one thing for certain: they would not open a surf shop in North Hollywood, thirty miles from the nearest beach, without a major manufacturer as a signature brand. They had to get a recognized name into the shop as a draw. They decided on Hobie Surfboards, which were being sold exclusively out of Alter's shop in Dana Point.

The divide between business and culture presented a philosophical problem. Bill Richards encountered some resistance from Alter, principally because he was not wholesaling his boards to anyone at the time. Alter also balked because wholesaling meant increased demand, which meant ramping up production. That might take the productive process out of the innovator's hands. "When I started off, it was a Hobie surfboard, and I had to shape it myself, I felt. Every balsa board, I shaped. That made it

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mean something. We were kind of particular, it was a real custom deal, they talked to you, you figured it out and told them what they should ride.” Alter’s concerns had been part of the American economic landscape for centuries. Even though Alter was already producing more surfboards than most of his contemporaries, he still perceived himself as an artisan or craftsmen. The reticence he felt was born of the same kind apprehension most early nineteenth century master craftsmen felt as they watched their cottage production facilities give way to industrialization and mechanized mass production.7

An intermediary broke the stalemate. Bill Richards had contacted John Severson, editor of Surfer magazine, intending to carry the publication as part of the store’s line-up of merchandise. For whatever reason, Mark Richards recalled that Severson took a liking to the elder Richards. He volunteered to convince Alter that Hobie boards would do well in the San Fernando Valley, that the brand’s value would not depreciate by being sold inland. Alter relented, and the result was an even greater number of wholesale avenues opened to Hobie Surfboards.

Mark Richards made numerous decisions for Val Surf, many of which contributed to the shop success and longevity. He modeled Val Surf on the classic coastal shops he had visited with his dad and before the store opened, he made skateboards part of the retail program. Located at the corner of Whitsett and Riverside Drive in North Hollywood, Val Surf became the inland nexus of a revolution in sport.8


At this point, Richards did something no one in the industry had considered. In addition to deciding on a retail skateboard section, Richards wanted his boards to look anything but homespun. Designing and shaping boards to look finished was the lesser task. What really mattered was putting wheels on the boards that did not look like they had been ripped from a roller skate boot and cut in half. New meant new, from the deck to the wheels. Richards had his father contact Chicago Roller Skate Company to purchase sets of skate wheels unattached to the roller skate boot. Even the letter Bill Richards wrote had to explain why this request was not kooky:

“\When the kids are not surfing in the ocean they have adopted the closest thing to it on dry land, ‘SKATE BOARD RIDING’ ...These boards have roller skate wheels in the front and back. Rubber on wheels have proved the best for this. It is impossible to purchase these wheels with the attachment [truck] for securing on the boards. I would like to have at least 12 sets of the rubber wheels with the metal attachments for securing to board. As I said before sets are considered one in front and one in back, in other words they get wheels for 2 boards out of one pair of shoe skates.\”

It was not surprising that Richards had to explain everything about what he was doing. The retail skateboard market was entirely undeveloped. M.C. Hansen at Chicago Roller Skate Company replied that the assembly could be produced but not with all the specifications Richards wanted. Given the limited quantities involved, Hansen felt it was not cost beneficial to rework the production line to accommodate Val Surf’s needs. Richards would still have to drill both the base plates and the boards to achieve a viable mount. Hansen also indicated he did not think this was a lasting trend and hoped Richards knew what he was in for. In this, he was not alone. Even Hobie Alter, at this point, was

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9Bill Richards to M.C. Hansen, September 20, 1962, personal files of Mark Richards, Val Surf, store 1, Valley Village, California.

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not sure about skateboarding’s permanence. When Alter arrived to deliver the first shipment of surfboards to Val Surf he walked into the store, took one look at the skateboard display at the back of the store, and nearly turned around and walked out. Mark Richards remembered that Hobie asked out loud if the Richards were going to run a toy shop or a surf shop. His attitude, as did those at Chicago Roller Skate and many others, changed rather quickly over the next year.10

Richards received the first shipment of Chicago wheels assemblies just before opening the store. He and his older brother, Kurt, mounted them to rectangular, laminated wooden boards. Those boards carried the Val Surf logo and were sold mainly to southern Californians. In October 1962, the Richards family opened Val Surf. Not only was it the first inland surf shop in California, it was the first retail skateboard shop in America. Skateboards proliferated in the San Fernando Valley region, so much so that the local press and vocal concerned citizens started referring to skateboarding as a fad.

Bill and Mark Richards realized that the skateboard might change the shape of southern California sport. Even Hobie Alter had to take a second look. Once skateboarding was picked up in national press, especially in magazines like Surfer which featured prominent surfers such as Mickey Muñoz and Joey Cabell riding skateboards and hanging out at slalom competitions, Alter came back to Val Surf looking for a retail outlet for the soon-to-be-famous Hobie Skateboards that were modeled on his own surfboard

10M.C. Hansen to Bill Richards, September 27, 1962, personal files of Mark Richards, Val Surf, store 1, Valley Village, California. Richards, interview, January 16, 2004. When asked about this fact, Hobie Alter said in his interview that he really did not remember delivering that first shipment but he was sure the Richards were not selling skateboards.
shapes and cosmetics. Selling their own designs as well as the first corporate production boards, the Roller Derby skateboard, Val Surf’s business grew steadily.

Alter continued his involvement skateboarding. He helped develop the industry of skateboarding much as he had promoted surfing through surfboard production. Alter remembers the days in Dana Point, California when skateboarding was just a scooter, the two-by-four mounted on metal roller skate wheels with a milk crate nailed to the top for steering. Sometime in the late 1950s, nascent skateboarders mounted clay wheels taken from roller skates on 1"x 6" planks of wood. Although Alter was a key player in the evolution of the industry, he credits the birth of the modern, retail skateboard to Larry Stevenson, founder of the Surf Guide creator of the Makaha skateboard.

Larry Stevenson grew up in a state run boy’s home. Lacking any formal parenting, he always had mind to experiment and try new things. He credits a 1939 visit from Leo Carillo, the actor who played Pancho on television’s “Cisco Kid,” for introducing him to skateboarding. During the Christmas season that year, Carillo delivered store bought scooters with attached handles as gifts to the boys. Stevenson took that scooter as his inspiration.

Stevenson embraced the sports that were unlike those enjoyed by his peers. While stationed at Pearl Harbor in 1940s, he visited the famous Makaha break. He said he had never seen anything so powerful. Makaha made a lifelong impression on Stevenson. When he returned to California, he enrolled in college but found his real joy working as a summer lifeguard at Malibu. As a lifeguard he learned to surf, and fell head over heels for all things beach. Having majored in business, Stevenson also learned to recognize
economic potential in various aspects of the emerging culture of surfing. Selling the
lifestyle was just as important, he thought, as selling the sport itself. Stevenson boostered
surfing as a promoter, screening the films of Bud Browne in theaters up and down the
California coast, spreading the “gospel of surf.”

While on duty during the 1950s, Stevenson looked down from his lifeguard tower and
noticed surfers in the parking lots doing surf-style moves on primitive skateboards. He
started to consider the implicit relationship between the two sports. Having already
realized the currency of surfing and surf culture, Stevenson publicized California surfing
with his weekly newsletter, Surf Guide, which he founded in 1961. Riding the wave of
popularity started by Gidget and John Severson’s Surfer magazine, Stevenson also
actively promoted skateboarding. He wrote articles about local skaters, described places
to skate, and provided tips on constructing homemade boards.

Larry Stevenson soon found out how right he was to promote the new skateboarding
“fad.” Two years after starting Surf Guide, he converted the newsletter to a full-fledged
magazine. The same year, 1963, he founded Makaha Skateboards. Like Bill and Mark
Richards before him, Stevenson acquired the wheels for his new Makaha skateboard from
Chicago Skates. Unlike the Richards, Stevenson managed sufficient orders to have the
Makaha name emblazoned on the wheels, adding to the whole factory patina that he
wanted. Makaha boards were factory milled, professionally mounted with jigs to assure

11Larry Stevenson, telephone interview by author, July 5, 2005; Sean Bryant,
television interview by author; July 6, 2005.
the wheels went on in the same sport on every board, and sported a recognizable name that appealed to both surfers and skateboarders.\textsuperscript{12}

Like the cottage surf industry that preceded him, Larry Stevenson and his wife Helen started assembling Makaha boards in the garage of their Santa Monica apartment. The first orders for boards came from locals surf shops and toy stores that recognized the accelerating trend. In fall 1963, Makaha held the first corporate sponsored skateboard competition at Pier Avenue Junior High in Hermosa, California. Stevenson’s boards started to sell, with more orders coming from mail-order ads in \textit{Surf Guide} and \textit{Surfer}. Makaha started sponsoring riders, forming the first corporate skateboard team. Like other manufacturers after him, Stevenson’s efforts produced large financial returns. He moved his production facilities to a large, one-room factory at 2601 Colorado Boulevard in Santa Monica. By early 1964, Makaha was producing 2,000 boards a days. Between 1963 and 1965, Makaha skateboard sales exceeded $4,000,000. Stevenson may not have invented the skateboard, but his early awareness of its potential allowed him to be the father of the first factory produced, retail board. It was another key component to the sport revolution that was underway.\textsuperscript{13}

As Stevenson’s creation acquired popularity, other companies took an interest. Alter started to get involved in the business, sponsoring a few riders and designing a couple of retail models. Corporate America made its first inroad to skateboarding in this context.

\textsuperscript{12}http://www.makahaskateboards.com/history.html; Stevenson interview.

\textsuperscript{13}http://www.makahaskateboards.com/history.html; Stevenson interview; Brooke, \textit{The Concrete Wave}, 22-23.

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Two of the riders skating for Stevenson’s Makaha team were Davey and Stevie Hilton, sons of hotel magnate Baron Hilton. The Hilton family owned a toy company that was parented by Vita-Pakt Juice Company, another Hilton enterprise. At the urging of Stevie and Davey, Hilton decided to get in on the retail skateboarding boom. They contacted Hobie Alter with an offer to design boards for Hilton’s new line, the Super Skate.¹⁴

The creation of the Super Skate skateboard, with Alter’s name licensed to the product, also provided the first major shakeup in corporate team alliances. After World war II, when sporting goods manufacturers developed new products, part of their marketing strategy an endorsement from some major athlete. One of the earliest models for this kind of success came from competition between skateboard manufacturers. Larry Stevenson had already started generating buzz with his Makaha skateboard, making heavy use of the implicit relationship between skateboarding and surfing at the increasingly famous North Shore in Hawai‘i. The new Hobie surf and skateboard team made equally heavy use of Makaha riders for their pool of talent. “We virtually robbed Larry Stevenson’s skateboard team,” recalled Alter. “They were all from Santa Monica and that was really the key start of it up there. Davey and Stevie Hilton, George Grafton, Torger Johnson and Danny Bearer...that little group on the Makaha skateboard team ended up being on the Hobie Skateboard team.”¹⁵

Alter and the Hobie team, and skateboarding at large, benefitted from a strong dose of corporate funding: Baron Hilton owned the San Diego Chargers football team at the time.

¹⁵Ibid.

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To promote his new venture, he arranged for the Hobie team to perform a half-time skateboarding exhibition at the Chargers’ 1964 Thanksgiving Day game. Millions of people witnessed the new sport, as Hobie team members did nose-wheelies, hand-stands, and various surf-style moves for fans in the stadium and at home in front of their televisions. That year, 1964, proved to be a very important year for skateboarding.\textsuperscript{16}

Hobie Alter was an innovator in surfing and skateboarding. In addition to braving the inland retail waters with his surf label, Alter also worked constantly to improve the technology that guided and governed the sports he loved. This led to another critical innovation in skateboarding technology. By 1965, Hobie surfboards were predominantly made with foam cores. The raw materials for the foam came from a company called American Latex in El Segundo, California. One sunny day in 1965, a sales representative from American Latex brought Alter two pairs of urethane wheels, not much bigger than the average clay composite wheel that most skateboards rolled on. Those first generation urethane wheels were not injection molded like modern wheels but cast, with the surfaces milled down to size. The labor intensive production process resulted in urethane’s only drawback: cost. At a time when Hobie’s best complete skateboard was only $17.00, urethane wheels would have increased the average price of a Hobie board to more than $50.00. Regardless of the consequences, Hobie agreed to try the wheels.\textsuperscript{17}

The very next weekend, he invited the team to his house. The wheels were mounted to a demo board and the entire team took turns testing the urethane on the asphalt stretch

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid.
known as Hidden Halley Road in Laguna Hills. “They were phenomenal, they didn’t wear, they gripped, they were everything perfect,” Alter remembered. He took the idea to Vita-Pakt and pitched urethane to corporate executives, calling this the best thing that had ever happened to the sport. Based on the exorbitant cost, the enormous number of decks lying unsold in warehouses, and the perception that most skateboarders would always be little kids who depended on money from mom and dad, Vita-Pakt declined Alter’s idea. They were worried more than anything about degrading the value of their current top-of-the-line product, which was touted as the best of everything. Making urethane available would make any other Vita-Pakt product seem less than second best, and even more equipment would end up permanently encased in warehouse dust. The age old corporate strategy of creating demand by reducing supply drove Vita-Pakt’s decision, as it probably drove other companies that American Latex almost certainly contacted.

Despite the obvious technological advance for the sport that urethane represented, other companies viewed urethane through the same lens as Vita-Pakt. The urethane wheel did not appear in the retail market until eight years later, through the efforts of Frank Nasworthy and Cadillac Wheels. Hobie Alter, with the help of film maker Bruce Brown, had to settle for simply spreading the gospel of motion as it was defined in southern California skateboarding. Their first stop was Oklahoma City in June 1964.18

The link between surfing and skateboarding was critical in the evolution of the modern skateboard, but it was also the unforeseen conduit to skateboarding’s diffusion to Middle America. By 1963, Surfer magazine was promoting the lure of surfing to tens of

18Ibid.

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thousands of surfers and would-be surfers. Bruce Brown was a young surfer and film maker in 1963. He decided that he wanted to provide the world with an accurate and entertaining view of surfing’s global, ageographical appeal. The result was the greatest surfing movie of the era, *Endless Summer*. Brown decided that the bicoastal nature of surfing in the United States was an inadequately explored horizon: promoting *Endless Summer* on the East Coast was Brown’s answer to that problem.

The diffusion of skateboarding across the United States also depended on the intersection of surfing, skateboarding, and America’s new infatuation with surf films and surf music. By March 1965, Jan and Dean’s “Sidewalk Surfin’” single sold more than 700,000 copies. The song captured the world of 1964 perfectly, as Jan and Dean sang, “Grab your board and go sidewalk surfin’ with me/Don’t be afraid to try newest sport around/It’s catchin’ on in every city and town.”

At the same time that American youths were enjoying the lyrical images of skateboarding, surf culture, through the medium of film, was also making its way to every city and town. Most pop culture observers agree that America’s cinematic exposure to surfing began with the film *Gidget*. “There were a handful of film makers in the late 1950s through the 1960s. In 1953 Bud Browne made *Hawaiian Surfing Movie*, the first commercial surf film that was shown anywhere. John Severson along with Bruce Brown came up with the standard style of modern surf movie, silly comedy sketches with a search for surf plot. In those days, the film makers spent half of the year traveling around

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shooting surfing on 16mm film. When they had enough footage to fill ninety minutes, they would add some silly comedy routines, an intermission in the middle, and show it at high school auditoriums, beach town theaters, and community halls. They put on the entire show themselves, setting up, running the projector, narrating the film live and packing it all up for the next city. These authentic surf films catered to a growing group of excited, hooting young surfers.\textsuperscript{20}

Bruce Brown changed the nature of the surf film genre forever with his now classic \textit{Endless Summer}. Although Brown’s film did not go into general release until 1966, a few lucky individuals saw the film during a 1964 promotional tour. Beginning with a premier in southern California, Brown included the East Coast in the great odyssey of surfing. Brown teamed with Hobie Alter and the Hobie surf team. In June 1964, Brown and Alter rented a Ford Condor bus and headed east to bring Brown’s film to the Atlantic seaboard. The Hobie surf team members on that trip were Corky Carroll, Joey Cabell, Mike Hynson, and Phil Edwards. All of the surfers had skateboards with them, though many of them had never ridden with any seriousness. Surf champ Mike Hynson, for example, had only started skateboarding two months before the trip. But the natural talent they all possessed as surfers transferred readily to skateboarding.\textsuperscript{21}

At various gas stops along the route, the team would skate into small towns to explore while the bus was being gassed and serviced. Local populations could not believe their

\textsuperscript{20}http://www.isurfing.com/history.

\textsuperscript{21}“Mike Hynson Profile,” \textit{The Quarterly Skateboarder}, winter 1964, 9-11.
eyes. In a 1964 interview in *The Quarterly Skateboarder*, Mike Hynson described the average reaction:

“We would pull into a gas station in some small inland town and yell, “fill ‘er up.” Then the entire crew would burst out of the doors with their skateboards and go rolling around town exploring. It took twenty minutes or so to get the bus full of gasoline and serviced, so we had plenty of time. The local population usually just couldn’t believe the rolling invasion. In some places we looked like pied pipers with all the local kids in town following us along.”

One particularly memorable stop came near the end of the journey east. By afternoon on June 27, 1964, the team was lost somewhere on a detour along Interstate 70. A large sign advertising the annual Jaycee Chicken Barbeque drew the hungry crew to a stop in Hagerstown, Indiana. This was about as far as possible from any surfing or skateboarding landscape. After availing themselves of dinner, the team started to skate in the local park, performing the tricks they knew best, attracting a crowd filled with both curious and skeptical onlookers. Eventually the team skated to its vehicles and left town. “We took off we’re going out town, and I don’t know, seems like we were ten miles out of town, and here comes this guy by us in a car and he’s waving at me to pull over,” Alter recalled. “I thought, ‘oh crap, one of these guys didn’t pay for their dinner.’ It turns out he was the local newspaper reporter and he wanted to know all about and the skateboard thing.”

Rather than falling victim to the classic misunderstanding of California surfer kids and the fear that became a constant part of being different in America’s heartland, the local press was more interested in the reasons behind surfing and skateboarding, hoping

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to provide a story for the town’s weekly newspaper, the *Hagerstown Exponent*. The waylaid skateboarding surfers made the front page of the *Exponent*’s next issue, under the headline “Lost In Hagerstown! World Famous Hobie Surfing Team Eats Barbecued Chicken in Jaycee’s Tent.” Although it seemed trivial to locals at the time, the event signaled a transformative moment for young Americans everywhere who had yet to be exposed to the promotional tour.²⁴

Even the cities that the *Endless Summer* tour simply passed through were touched by the wave that was early 1960s skateboarding. In late June, 1964, Bruce Brown and Hobie Alter met in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to begin the cross country tour promoting *Endless Summer*. While no one interviewed remembered a bus full of California surfers skating through town that day, Hobie Alter recalled Oklahoma City in summer time quite clearly: “Oklahoma City was like a 105 degrees that day, and I remember we were squirting each other with water and skating through the gas station and having a ball. And Bruce had his music for the *Endless Summer* on tapes there, and he had it going on big speakers...we were just young and noisy.”²⁵

Oklahoma City was touched by the skateboard experience soon after the team rolled through the heart of America. Somewhere during those heady summer months in 1964, while the rest of the nation was gripped with racial tension, a national election, and the possibility that America’s involvement in Vietnam might escalate, a pair of Oklahoma

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²⁴“Lost In Hagerstown! World Famous Hobie Surfing Team Eats Barbecued Chicken in Jaycee’s Tent,” *Hagerstown Exponent*, July 2, 1964, 1; Carroll interview.

City youths discovered skateboarding. Malcolm Haney and Mike Meadows, friends since
about 1960, had just graduated from Northwest Classen High School, the home of the
Knights. Haney planned to attend the University of Oklahoma while Meadows was going
to Oklahoma State. They were spending their last summer before college doing what any
teenagers might do: Haney drove an ice cream truck to earn some extra money and Mike
Meadows worked clean-up for a construction crew.26

At some undefined point in mid-June or early July, Haney and Meadows heard about
California kids who rode skateboards to emulate surfing on dry land. Haney and
Meadows could not remember where they first heard about skateboarding. “I must have
read something about it in the newspaper or in a magazine, something about what was
going on out in California,” Haney recalled. The combined effect of media and music
brought skateboarding to Oklahoma City at almost the same time that Hobie Alter and the
Endless Summer crew came through town.

Once Haney and Meadows learned of skateboarding, they had to try the “newest sport
around.” Haney’s reasons for skateboarding were similar to the motivations expressed by
skateboarders across generations. “Being in land-locked Oklahoma, I probably had a little
bit of a California fantasy. Remember, the Beach Boys were huge,” he said. “Plus, Mike
and I liked to be different and were always looking for a way to be different because we
weren’t the jock type.”27 Although Mike Meadows was unable to recall exactly where he

26Malcolm Haney, e-mail message to author, April 18, 2005; Mike Meadows,
telephone interview by author, April 20, 2005.

27Haney e-mail message.
had first seen skateboarding, he remembered exactly why he wanted to do it: “Here we are in Oklahoma City and I’ve never been anywhere. I spent eighteen years of my life in Oklahoma City before going to Oklahoma State University, and the beach music had a great impact on me, you know, The Ventures, ‘Pipeline,’ The Beach Boys. I actually remember seeing the Beach Boys at Spring Lake Park, paid ten cents to see the show. I had a keen interest in the California music and the lifestyle, so laid back.”

By summer 1964, beach culture had come to Oklahoma City. Jan and Dean played three sold-out shows at the civic auditorium in early August 1964 and the film *Ride The Wild Surf* played on screens at four different movie houses that same summer. Inspired by what was happening around him, Haney took a twenty-inch long wood plank, sawed out the basic shape of what he thought a surfboard should look like, and attached the dismantled wheels and axles from a pair of shoe skates, the type of roller skates that strapped directly to a child’s shoes. Haney painted the board metallic gold and put a racing stripe down the middle. Meadows adopted the entire patina of California skateboard culture: “I was wearing a t-shirt with a horizontal stripe around the middle...I was working in the summer in shorts and got super tan, and put a product called Light and Bright on my hair to lighten it. I mean, I was an Oklahoma City skateboard surf bum.”

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28 Meadows interview.

29 *Oklahoman*, August 1, 1964, 64; August 21, 1964, 51.

30 Meadows interview.
Skating was difficult at first because of the technological limits of roller skate truck mounts, so Haney’s board really did not turn without serious difficulty. What it did do was speed along in a straight line down Oklahoma City’s steepest hills. When asked how he felt the first time he tried skateboarding, Haney replied simply “scared.” Meadows remembered his experience in a slightly different light: “[We] worked on form. You could turn by leaning, you could turn the skateboard. We worked really hard on skating, on form. We worked on crouching, on our arms, on leaning. We wanted to look like surfers. Even though I had never been on a surfboard in my life, the goal was to appear as surf-like as possible.”

Fear or form, exhilaration or exhibition, whatever the impulse may have been, the effect was the same: Haney, Meadows, and dozens of other nascent Oklahoma City skateboarders drew closer to the sport as the 1964 summer wore on. Haney and Meadows fell in love with skateboarding, with rolling through town, attracting the attention of onlookers and, of course, girls. Just like scootering in the 1950s, and the way skateboarding had evolved in California a few years prior, the skateboard experience in Oklahoma City quickly attracted young women to its ranks, a fact that upset most girls’ parents.

By mid-September, the Oklahoman newspaper chronicled the new fad that had hit Oklahoma City: sidewalk surfing. So conspicuous were these “skateboarders” that

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31Haney e-mail message.

32Meadows interview.

33Malcolm Haney, telephone interview by author, April 13, 2005.
columnist Kay Lavier censussed the population at about twenty kids, ranging in age from 12 to 20. Lavier also interviewed Haney and Meadows. Haney told the reporter was that he intended to take his board with him that fall to the University of Oklahoma, a few miles away in Norman. Lavier marveled at the ease and grace that skating possessed. Local skaters had even begun to cluster like their California cousins, getting large groups together on Saturday nights for impromptu race and free-skate sessions on local paved hills. Like Californians, they skated barefoot or in navy blue Keds, and without safety gear. Haney did take his board to college that fall. “I was at a fraternity rush party, in this house that had tile floors,” he recalled. “I started skating up and down the halls. Pretty soon, other kids wanted to try, and they started taking turns with my board, riding two at a time, falling. It was really fun.” Once again, the grass-roots pollination of skateboarding provided the new material for cultural transformation, as two kids from Oklahoma City took there love of skateboarding beyond the place where they found it.34

This skateboard revolution in Oklahoma City began before SkateBoarder magazine started up. At the time, there was little, if any, national press on skateboarding; very few surf shops were carrying boards or selling by mail. But there they were in Oklahoma City, a crowd of devotees conspicuous enough to attract the attention of the local press. The first Oklahoma City advertisement for a retail skateboard appeared September 7, 1964 in the Oklahoman. Featured in the center of general merchandise ad for the retail outlet Shoppers World, between a children’s eight-inch globe and a toddler’s ten-inch tricycle, Oklahoma City’s first skateboards were marketed as the visual and physical medium they

34Haney interview.
became famous for in the 1970s. Instead of a bland product picture of the skateboard, which sold for $2.66, the ad used artwork of a young boy skateboarding, depicting the board and rider in the act of turning. The ad copy said, “Let’s Go Surfing! All you need is a sidewalk or drive way and the thrills of surfing and skiing are yours on dry land.” This all seemed to bode well for the fledgling sport, especially in conservative Oklahoma.

Skateboarding was on a collision course with predictability, waiting to meet the same fate in Oklahoma that it would meet everywhere else. The fear of losing control of their children manifested in Oklahoma City’s rapid fixation on skateboarding’s “dangerous” side. The next article to feature local skaters ran a week later, this time on the front page of the Oklahoman and with a large photo. This time the story also made clear mention of two previously overlooked aspects of the new sport: skateboarding’s inherent dangers and the progression of the sport eastward, from California to Oklahoma. There is no mention of how skateboarding made its way into Oklahoma City, only that it definitely originated among surfers in southern California. The Oklahoman alerted the public to the dangerous nature of skateboarding, having avoided any word of caution in its first article.

Fear seems to have accompanied the craze everywhere it went but never among the participants. The conservative demeanor of post-World War II middle-class, middle-Americans was evident in their reaction to skateboarding. Was it a Communist plot? Had it been sent here by degenerates from San Diego? The very next Oklahoman article was


36Katherine Hatch, “Falling for Newest City Fad,” Oklahoman, September 21, 1964, 1.
only a picture and a caption. The picture was of ten-year-old Larry Castro, holding his skateboard with a heavily bandaged right arm. Castro had been the victim of his own ingenuity and recklessness, mounting roller skate wheels on a cut-down water ski. His repeated tumbles resulted in pavement burns so severe that infection resulted and massive doses of antibiotics were required as treatment. His parents treated the cause as well, throwing young Larry’s skateboard in the trash.37

Skateboarding’s fall from parental grace was as quick as its rise to prominence. In Oklahoma City and elsewhere, most of the articles that tried to capture skateboarding’s appeal during late 1964 and through 1965 dealt in equal measure with the sport’s California roots, its implicit risk to life and limb, and to a lesser degree, the absurdity of riding a piece of wood with roller skate wheels attached. Calls for a return to more traditional pastimes, such as baseball or basketball, echoed through human interest stories and nostalgia pieces, pieces that were equally committed to relegating skateboarding to the quickly growing trash heap of 1960s fads. Deborah Martin was twelve years old in November 1964; her best friend, Alecia Chalmers, was eleven. The girls also pursued the sport that Oklahoman columnist Henry Gelogamah described as “a zany balancing act on an absurdly narrow board.” It seemed the “thrills of surfing” description was not as accurate as promoters first thought. The girls were described in the kind of marginalizing language every historian dreams of encountering: Deborah and Alecia were referred to as “the high priestesses of the local skateboarding cult.” In Oklahoma City, skateboarding went from thrilling to a cult in less than ninety days. The girls’ parents hoped that their

37*Oklahoman*, September 25, 1964, 8.

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daughters would realize that skateboarding was too childish and even more dangerous. They protested to Gelogamah that they hoped all skateboarders would give the sport up in favor of something less provocative, like pogo-sticking.\footnote{Henry Gelogamah, “Boards Getting Tricky,” \textit{Oklahoman}, November 19, 1964, 44.}

While these examples might seem purposefully extreme or conveniently ridiculous, Oklahoma City was typical in its skateboard experience. After the craze swept the city in late 1964, articles in the \textit{Oklahoman} never failed to mention the dangers of the sport and progressively marginalized its participants. Even tertiary articles on subjects such as the city’s ever more limited hospital space located some of the blame for increasing pressure on medical resources in the elevated numbers of injuries caused by skateboarding. Other pressures affected skateboarding as well, such as those depicted in the average surf movie, where the hero trades in his board at the end of the film for responsibility, a job, and a pair of hard shoes. Skateboarding did not yet possess the allure it has since acquired.\footnote{Katherine Hatch, “Hospital Space Situation Gets Worse in City,” \textit{Oklahoman}, March 25, 1965, 43.}

Even Malcolm Haney and Mike Meadows, skateboarding’s vanguard in Oklahoma City, swapped their skateboards and their Keds for hard shoes and duty. After studying economics and marketing at the Oklahoma State University, Meadows spent the next nine years with IBM. He followed with a stint at Xerox and then Exxon. Eventually his roots as a restless, skateboarding surf bum called to him. In 1990, Meadows moved to the island of Maui to figure out what to do with the rest of his life. The very first thing on his

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new list was to complete his childhood California dream: between 1990 and 1991, at the age 44, Mike Meadows finally learned to surf. Malcolm Haney studied advertising and journalism at the University of Oklahoma. After college he served a tour with the Army, stationed outside of Washington, D.C. He returned to Oklahoma City and worked in the local advertising industry but eventually went to work for Xerox, Kodak, and finally, the Kansas City Star newspaper. He married his high school sweetheart, Martha, in 1967, and they have been married ever since. He also still owns his first metallic gold skateboard from 1964. He regards it as a thing of beauty.\footnote{Haney e-mail message.}

By August 1965, skateboarding faced serious trouble. In Oklahoma City, pressure from concerned, conservative parents and the nationwide overproduction of equipment drove the price of a skateboard to $1.00 at the Spartan Family Department Store. Most of retail outlets that carried skateboards at this time experienced difficulty selling them to the public. Skateboarding in Oklahoma City did not have much of a future. Like most areas where skateboarding was popular, the sudden and seemingly unexplained downward spiral in prices portended a production glut. If skateboards did not sell, attracting new participants was difficult.

While the real effect of skateboarding’s early entrance into the Midwest or the South did not fully occur for a few decades, the seed of something other than core sports was sown in those heady days of 1964 to 1965. Almost without exception, kids across America discovered this western phenomenon called skateboarding and made it their own. They began to embrace the lingo, the dress, the commitment to form, and above all,
they cherished the freedom that skateboarding clearly provided, the kind of freedom their parents feared. Skateboarding offered a new paradigm for sport, one that was predicated on participation above winning. Although skateboarders experienced peer competition, as they tried to go faster or look better than the next rider, nobody kept score. Skateboarding also came with risk as part of the territory. But even as kids, they understood that skateboarding was no more risky than riding their bikes or playing football. But skateboarding offered something beyond traditional means of play or sport. It offered to opportunity to redefine one's self, to become more than a land-locked Midwesterner. It offered something that football, baseball, and basketball never could: independence.

By late 1964 or early 1965, skateboarding was everywhere in America. This reality was exposed quickly in the sport's first dedicated periodical, SkateBoarder. Originally published as The Quarterly Skateboarder, the magazine reinvented itself as SkateBoarder after only two issues. As a fringe publication, it captured and defined one of the most transformative periods in sport history. SkateBoarder had advertised its startup in Surfer Magazine, another publication from John Severson. Because of the advance press, the first issue of SkateBoarder, published in late 1964, was filled with letters from skateboarders, many of them located outside of California. The letters-to-the-editor section represented a genuine cross-section of America: Dallas, Texas; Bainbridge, New York; Dayton, Ohio; Arlington, Virginia; and various inland and coastal locations in California. By the fourth issue, America was overrun with skateboarders. Letters to
SkateBoarder poured in from ever more disparate locations: Portland, Oregon; East Rockaway, New York; and Phoenix, Arizona.41

What SkateBoarder revealed was by 1964, skateboarding was a national phenomenon which made proximity to an ocean irrelevant to the pursuit of the sport. Skateboarders wrote in about the same issues regardless of where they lived: problems related to skateboarding’s perception as dangerous; the need for dedicated spaces for the sport; the universal love of speed and style; and the critical mass building behind the need for better equipment. The last issue, the need for better technology, revealed the truly groundbreaking nature of early 1960s skateboarders. In their early efforts at going fast and going vertical, the boundaries of the sport were tied to the limits of the equipment rather than the limits of the athletes.

Far from being held back by the available technology, skateboarders in the 1960s routinely pushed the limits of what was possible with their equipment. The first issue of SkateBoarder featured commentary and photos of some interesting first accomplishments. Numerous skateboarders spoke of their downhill experiences, of traveling forty miles per hour down steep two-lane roads on equipment that no one believed could handle those speeds. But going fast and going big were part of the sport, regardless of the technological drawbacks to clay wheels and short boards. Letter-writers and articles frequently mentioned how skaters would use cars to clock their downhill speeds, so that no one could accuse them of cheating or fudging. Even in the 1960s,

41"Skatepost," The Quarterly Skateboarder, winter 1964, 6-7.
nascent skaters feared being labeled as “posers” more than they feared injury or death from high-speed skating.

Contrary to the myth-making of Dogtown and Z-boys, pool skating did not originate with Santa Monica skateboarders in the 1970s. Not even close. Many of Dogtown’s remaining elite, especially film maker Stacy Peralta, have grudgingly acknowledged that they were not the first pool skaters, but they quibble over “important” differences between what they did and what early 1960s skaters did. They claimed no skateboarders had ever made it as high on the wall as they did, that no previous skaters had hit the tile or the coping. These assertions are patently false. Stacy Peralta admitted in a 1976 interview in SkateBoarder magazine that he knew other skaters had skated the same pools he did a decade prior, as early as 1964:

“A year and a half ago, we were riding this pool and were carving over the light. Skip Engblom checks it out and tells us, ‘George Trafton was blue-tiling in the very same pool ten years ago on clay wheels.”

This is an appropriate assessment of pool riding’s origins given skateboarding’s massive and rapid popularity. Based on the various accounts of so many skateboarders from the period about pushing limits and riding in pools, it seems likely that the critical mass that exploded between 1964 and 1965 produced America’s first skateboarders. Skip Engblom, then the co-founder of the Zephyr skateboard team, was a long time observer and participant in the nascent southern California surf and skate scene. As such, he seems

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42 John Smythe, “Interview: Stacy Peralta,” SkateBoarder, October 1976, 57; Bryant interview. “Blue-tiling” derives its meaning from pool construction practices in the 1960s. The upper four inches of the pool’s vertical surface, just below the coping, was commonly tiled with light blue tiles.
uniquely qualified to have relayed information to Peralta about pool skating's true beginnings. In his 2001 documentary, *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, Peralta contended that pool riding began with the Dogtown crew. Based on his 1976 interview with *SkateBoarder*, Peralta seems to have confused the facts.43

The first issue of *SkateBoarder* contained what were likely the first published photos of pool riding, a practice erroneously believed to have been developed by Santa Monica skateboarders in the 1970s. “The latest in obtaining thrills when the surf is flat and the sidewalks are crowded is pool skateboarding, a new fad [that] originated in Roy Diederichsen, Sr.’s empty swimming pool in Menlo Park.” The blurb and accompanying photos described how one of the skaters on property accidentally “fell” into the pool and “was struck with the idea of riding his board to the deep end.” The story turned out to be based less on accident than *SkateBoarder* originally reported.44

Innovations take place just as often because of agency as they do because of accident. In 2005, Roy Diederichsen, Sr. recalled that he had made arrangements for his pool to be resurfaced. His son, Roy, Jr., came to him and asked if he and his friends could go skateboarding in the empty pool. Roy, Sr. happily agreed, believing they would never make a go of it anyway, and whatever damage that might occur would be patched up by the impending resurfacing. Roy Diederichsen, Jr., interviewed in 2005 as well, recalled the event with gusto. Born in 1949, the younger Diederichsen moved to Menlo Park in 1956. He visited grandparents in the Bay Area, bringing a Roller Derby skateboard with


him to ride the hills around their home. He recalled that he and his friends actually considered riding in a pool as early as 1961. In 1963, after Diederichsen turned fourteen years old, that opportunity occurred.45

Soon everybody in the neighborhood was in the pool, all trying to get higher and higher up the wall in the deep end. Presaging the decade to come, SkateBoarder opined that “not many people participate because there isn’t an excess of empty pools lying around.” That problem was solved by drought ten years later. Without skipping a beat, the article revealed skateboarding’s trans-horizontal future by suggesting that pool manufacturers explore building pools designed for skateboard use rather than swimming. What the first issue of SkateBoarder also demonstrated was that by 1964, ten years before the Dogtown revolution and the spread of concrete skateparks, skateboarding was already in love with testing its own limits, both horizontal and vertical. Innovation and change were the twin markers of this emerging pastime.46

The first issue of SkateBoarder revealed that skateboarders understood the full measure of the sport’s possibilities. In an editorial entitled “Sidewalk Surfing?” John Severson tried to define skateboarding’s complexity and potential. He wrote:

“Whenever a new sport comes into existence or an existing sport suddenly gains popularity, its thrills are often compared to other sports. It’s similar in many ways to surfing and to skiing, not only in maneuvers and techniques, but in many cases, in terms as well. Several months ago LIFE Magazine ran an article entitled “Sidewalk Surfing.” Sure, that’s what it is, but we predict a lot more for skateboarding. We predict a real future for the sport—a future that could go as far

45 Roy Diederichsen, Sr., telephone interview by author, May 28, 2005; Roy Diederichsen, Jr., telephone interview by author, May 29, 2005.

46 “Getting Around,” ibid.
as the Olympics. It's a much more “measurable” sport than surfing and therefore lends itself more to competition.”

Severson guided skateboarding into the middle of that combination of ideals and perceptions that Americans understood to be sport. If skateboarding could find a home in the middle, it would thrive. Severson understood how marginalization had affected surfing. He hoped that skateboarding could avoid that period in its evolution. At the same time he waxed hopeful about skateboarding’s potential for competitive verve, he warned against a dystopic horizon, juxtaposing the classic western image of the pioneer against the scandalous picture that might be created by too much individualism or expression:

“Today’s skateboarders are founders in this sport—they’re pioneers—they are first. There is no history in skateboarding—it’s being made now—by you. The sport is being molded and we feel that doing the right thing now will lead to a bright future for the sport. Already there are storm clouds on the horizon with opponents to the sport talking ban and restriction. Skateboarding is not a sport of speed; it’s a sport of skill. It’s not a sport of destruction—of others or yourself. It’s a sport of control. It’s up to you to see that skateboarding does not become a sport of rebels and radicals...and we ask you, the pioneers, to make it great.”

Given the present image of skateboarding, surfing, and other contemporary sports, it seems almost unfathomable that one of the sport’s media and marketing pioneers wanted the sport dominated by the mainstream, by anti-rebels. But Severson knew the fate of athletes that ventured too far from the center. Just as Alexander Hume Ford wanted to protect surfing by effecting a vested interest in the sport among wealthy, white men, Severson located skateboarding’s safest location in the plain view of mainstream


48Ibid.

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America. He was also keenly aware of what was starting to nationally. There was a gulf between America's two faces: between the patina of suburban socio-economic harmony and the deep dysfunction of racism and poverty. While impromptu photos of the Anything On Wheels Derby in 1952 captured a fleeting moment of diversity within the emergent urban skateboard scene, SkateBoader tried to craft an image of skateboarding that would allow the sport to survive not just the fleeting consumer tastes of youth but the propensity America had for quashing the aberrant. Without a molded, kid-next-door image, skateboarding was doomed.

One of the curious aspects of skateboarders in the 1970s was their absolute certainty that everything that was revolutionary about skateboarding was done by them first: the first pool sessions, the first skateparks, the first extreme athletes. Well before the cachet of post-1970s extreme sport, groups of 1950s surfers and 1960s skateboarders were breaking new ground for sport. Little in the modern era compares to Greg Noll paddling into skyscraper waves at Makaha with no secondary support in case of a wipeout. Noll defined extreme, or at least set the bar against which all future surfers measured the idea of extreme.

Skateboarding had its extreme side as well, and while it was at work, skateboarding was also at war with itself. Conservative American society was closing ranks by 1965. With the first hints of counter-culture appearing on the landscape, and the promise of increased involvement in Southeast Asia, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society did not have a place for anything rogue. The perception of surfers among much of the public was just that: surfers were degenerate outcasts with no productive purpose. They did not add to
society; rather, they selfishly drew on the abundance of the American economy as sustenance to their myopic view of life’s meaning: always finding the next perfect wave. This was the kind of hedonism that was part and parcel of new sport development: self-absorption was the key to technological and stylistic progress. But Americans feared that hedonism, especially as it clashed with what they commonly perceived as the appropriate—read corporate—role of individuals in society.

Only *Sports Illustrated* managed to capture some of the budding popularity of surfing, and the sport’s efforts to mainstream itself through fashion, music, haircuts, and movies. Various articles in 1964 and 1965 tried to capture the technological advances represented in foam filled, fiberglass boards, and the kid-next-door quality of surf clothing and dancing to Jan and Dean with your friends on the beach. Something had to change in surfing and in skateboarding as well. Some new spirit had to evolve that legitimized the twin sports and keep them from being marginalized by American culture and besieged with stereotypical avarice.

The watchword for surfing was *professionalism*. Being professional at anything meant everything that was American at the time: measurement, discipline, rules, excellence, wealth. Professionalism was the antithesis of “soul-pursuit,” the polar opposite of doing something for the sake of doing it. When prominent alpinists like Sir Edmund Hillary or Rheinhold Meisner were asked about why they climbed Himalayan peaks, the response always included some form of, “because they were there.” No one outside the climbing community ever understood this idea. The notion that sport could be something other than
competitive, that excellence achieved during competition was on par with excellence achieved alone, was beyond the grasp of 1960s Americans.

That same need for professionalism as a counter-balance to soul-pursuit existed in skateboarding. This represented quite a conundrum. From its first issue, *SkateBoarder* focused wherever possible on the organized and professional side of the sport. Competitions, rallies, and the professional character of athletes like Torger Johnson, Tommy Ryan, or the Hilton brothers, dominated the magazine’s pages. It seemed that Severson was worried that without the legitimizing patina of professionalism, skateboarding might end up backwatered or criminalized in the conservative sports landscape of the 1960s. Rather than let this happen, Severson and *SkateBoarder* actively painted skateboarding as sport populated by athletes where traditional forms of competition and measurement took place. As antithetical as this was to the soul-pursuit aspect of skateboarding, Severson believed he was protecting the sport he promoted.

Throughout the first four issues, writers and editors never missed a chance to accentuate professionalism. They also chastised radical skateboarding. After his editorial in the first issue, John Severson took aim at skateboarders who simply went too fast. The very thing that drew so many to the sport, the danger and the speed, was Severson’s bane. He even asked the question everyone in his intended audience already knew the answer to: “Why race downhill on a skateboard?” Likely, everyone who read Severson’s plea responded the same: because we can. The very rationale Severson originally employed to mainstream the sport—its measurability—undermined the argument against going fast. Competition required speed and everyone who competed understood that to win, it did
not make sense to spend time outside competition going slow. Severson was fighting a losing battle against the increasingly extreme nature of the sport.49

Before the advent of the “International” Skateboard Championships, skateboarding needed to be international. In its second issue, spring 1965, SkateBoarder focused a light on England and the growing popularity of the sport in Europe. Corky Smith traveled across the Atlantic and located skateboarding in London and all along the Cornish coast. Smith observed that there were no elder statesman, no mentors in the skateboarding community. British surfer and skateboarder Roy Giles said, “I think the youngsters are going to have to grow up first to become the backbone of British surfing-skateboarding.” That first wave of English skaters, who started dying their hair beach blond in hopes of emulating the California surf and skate scene, awaited a figure such as Tony Alva, who arrived a decade later.50

Even though news of European skateboarding did not appear until the October issue, skateboarding was well established in France, Germany, and Italy before SkateBoarder started documenting it. French surfer and skateboarder Arnaud DeRosnay “had been stoked on skateboarding” after seeing a group of visiting California skateboarders in Paris in mid-1964. DeRosnay mail-ordered a couple of boards from the U.S. Upon their arrival at his apartment, he took the decks and a crew of skaters, piled into his Mini-Cooper, and


started trolling the streets of Paris in search of skateable terrain. His brother Joel
documented the rogue quest in pictures and prose, and published it in SkateBoarder.\textsuperscript{51}

Coupled with Smith’s U.K. adventures, the skateboard travelogue was born. For a
generation afterwards, SkateBoarder documented the various trials and travels of the
world’s best skateboarders in daring tales of stealth entrances, police evasion, and the
discovery of twenty-five foot concrete pipes in numerous, undisclosed desert locales.
These stories in the 1970s found their nexus in the simple pastorals of the 1960s, as
DeRosnay managed to be sincerely excited by the discovery of a perfectly pitched
sidewalk studded with perfectly placed awning poles to slalom through. In these stories
was the stuff of classic western tales, as skateboarders became heroes in search of justice
in the form of legal access to pedestrian concrete.\textsuperscript{52}

Telling stories and spreading the gospel of motion was integral to the skateboarding’s
popularity. These skaterlogues found much of their inspiration in the contemporary surf
films of the early 1960s. Just as the small parade of surfers in the films of Bud Browne
and Bruce Brown tried to locate and surf the perfect break, before the sets closed out or
the public closed in, skateboarders tried to carve the seamless pitched expanse of various
sidewalks and promenades that stretched from Venice Beach, California to Venice, Italy.
Even the language that writers like DeRosnay used borrowed heavily from the surf
narrative model:


\textsuperscript{52}Ibid.

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“But it was too late and a French gendarme was there in an instant and demanding to know what was going on. Shaking a finger at Arnaud he said: ‘Roller skating is expressly forbidden on the Champs Elysees.’ ‘I'm not roller skating—I'm skateboarding!’ The gendarme pulled back looking at the skateboard in Arnaud’s hand as if it were a ticking hand grenade. He shook his head and that was all the skateboarding that day on the Champs Elysees—the slope had quickly closed out.53

The effect of crowds on open expanses or of police on access were likened in the skate travelogue to weather and landowners in the surf narrative. DeRosnay and his crew simply moved on to other “breaks,” to the Trocadero, where the pavement was described as “glassy.” DeRosnay concluded his surf/skate epic with the same optimism every surfer/skater needed to hear: “In Paris the sidewalks are always up.” In Europe, much like the progression of skateboarding in America, imitation was still the dominant paradigm. The sport, even according to many skateboarders, owed its existence to surfing; consequently, skateboarding lacked its own voice and sense of self. It appeared to be trapped between the competing poles of John Severson’s quest for mainstream legitimacy and surfing’s preeminence as the counter-culture sport of imminent social dropouts. The full measure of that initial paradox was typified in the 1965 American Skateboarding Championships.

Skateboarding was born in a competitive spirit. A look beyond the charity patina of the Anything On Wheels Derby photo revealed the desire of those children to win. From its inception, SkateBoarder pushed the competitive aspect of organized skateboarding, disdaining anything that smacked of recklessness or aberrance. Skateboarding might be a sport if it could be measured, if someone won and lost. Skateboarders as a group may

53 DeRosnay, 19.
have been in love with the potential for deviance and freedom that skateboarding represented, but early skateboarders had also been raised in the competitive model of baseball and football. Urban skateboarders tended to have been byproducts of traditional sporting models. Those models carried with them the need for winning and losing. More than 100 people participated in Makaha's 1963 competition at Pier Avenue Junior High. Skateboarding was put on display during the half-time show of a professional football game, implicitly locating it in the community of competitive sport. By early 1965, competitions had proliferated, and not just in southern California. Clubs formed everywhere, in towns of every size, in elementary schools and colleges. Everywhere these groups formed, competitions followed. Skateboarding's democratic appeal even transcended class lines, up and down the socio-economic ladder. *Newsweek* reported in 1965 that Wesleyan University sponsored an invitational tournament for nearby institutions. Princeton and MIT also sponsored competitions. Legitimacy seemed within the skateboarding world's grasp.54

The constant push toward the center of the sports landscape accelerated when *ABC*'s *Wide World of Sports* decided to cover the May 1965 American Skateboarding Championships. Held in Anaheim, California, the contest boasted an international field of athletes that came from Mexico, Europe, and New York City, as well as the obvious Californians. In 1965, many still likened skateboarding to the hoola-hoop, as a useless childhood whim that would inevitably give way to more serious and relevant pursuits like

career and family. The most striking thing about the ABC broadcast was that it was
couched in the language of real sport, with professional athletes and standards for judging
wins and losses.55

The first years of skateboarding culminated in a 1965 mainstream press bonanza that
featured the sport’s most prominent female star, Pat McGee. As a professional
skateboarder, Pat McGee split her time between practicing tricks, teaching Johnny Carson
to skateboard on The Tonight Show, and taking the joys of the new sport to every corner
of America. In 1965 she did demos across America, from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin. She
described Sheboygan, Wisconsin, as “a pleasant town except for the mosquitos.” McGee
also landed a May 1965 cover photo on Life magazine. Describing skateboarding as a
“craze and menace,” Life called the skateboard the “the most exhilarating and dangerous
joy-riding device this side of the hot rod.” Melodrama aside, business was business, and
skateboarding was hot: between 1962 and 1965, retailers sold more than 50 million
skateboards.56

The importance of skateboarding to groups further inland resulted in something many
California kids would have thought impossible: skateparks in places like Phoenix,
Arizona. As more and more city administrations tried to grapple with the advancing
hordes of wheeled youths on city streets, private companies found a growth market for
cement. Phoenix rarely led national trends at this time, but in skateboarding, Arizona’s

55 Los Angeles Times, June 19, 1965, B2; “Boy, 14, Captures Skateboard Title,”
Los Angeles Times, May 24, 1965, B10; “Skate Board Expert Awaits Tour,” Los Angeles
Times, June 17, 1965, WS4

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budding metropolis was first. Located at the Legend City Family Fun Center, The Pipeline featured a one-thousand foot inclined concrete track for Phoenix skaters. The Pipeline’s most prominent feature was that the track was constructed in a snake-like pattern, with numerous twists and turns. The structure made straight-line skating seem obsolete. This facility further confirmed the irrelevance of geography with respect to skateboarding’s non-coastal popularity.57

The popularity of the 1965 championships prompted another transformation of skateboarding in southern California: the skatepark. This combination of commercial ingenuity and technological opportunity quickly outstripped The Pipeline. Following Phoenix, California’s first dedicated space for skateboarding opened in summer 1966, when Surfer’s World U.S.A. on West Lincoln Street in Anaheim welcomed its first customers. Originally constructed to host the 1966 National Skateboard Championships, it was billed as a “sure cure for restless summer days.” Surfer’s World was nearly three acres of concrete built around the needs of amateur and professional skateboarders. It charged for admission at a rate of thirty-five cents an hour or one dollar for the entire day and featured a resident professional, Larry Harnden. With special rates for families and parties, Surfer’s World boasted “wholesome fun, [so] bring the kids.” Harnden’s son, Larry Harnden, Jr., remembered the facility as very busy and always full. Surfer’s World included ten skateboard courses of varying degrees of difficulty, each with race lanes. They were all constructed with sufficient pitch to generate downhill speed, and included

an up pitch at the end into which skaters could safely bottom out. There was a freestyle area in addition to the downhill area.\textsuperscript{58}

The evolution of Surfers' World was unquestionably a response to the intensifying love/hate relationship municipal governments had with skateboarding in the 1960s. These early facilities were not equal to mid-1970s parks like Carlsbad in southern California or Skateboard City in Florida. But their presence in the mid-1960s confirmed the fact that sufficient pressure from municipalities coupled with skateboarding's growing national popularity to produce the kind of dedicated space that dominated the skateboard and skatepark industry a decade later.

Surfer's World U.S.A. and the Pipeline were not the only type of response to skateboarding's popularity. The city of Portland, Oregon possessed a progressive spirit that embraced skateboarders. Portland's City Park Bureau closed a 1,500-foot run in Mt. Tabor Park to nothing but skateboard traffic during after-school hours. Letter writers to SkateBoarder indicated that as many as 300 skateboarders each day took advantage of this municipally designated park. The Portland example clearly suggested that city administrations were not uniformly opposed to creating or modifying space to accommodate young skateboarders.\textsuperscript{59}


\textsuperscript{59}"Skatepost," \textit{SkateBoarder}, October 1965, 7.
Popular myth suggests that skateboarding went through various declines and rebirths. Buffs have described these phases as waves, each interrupted by definite troughs where skateboarding disappeared, and each defined by a set of dates that seemed hard as concrete. On the surface, it would be easy to mistake some of these periods as indicators of the demise of skateboarding. But the data indicated another story.

It is true that skateboarding did not receive consistent levels of press during certain periods, but this alone does not prove participation waned. Skateboarding’s first “demise” was a byproduct of simple economic forces, the classic boom and bust cycle. With skateboarding, boom and bust happened almost simultaneously. In those aggressive days between 1963 and 1965, numerous production facilities cropped up in all parts of the country. Vita-Pakt, Hobie Alter’s backer, had manufacturing plants from Anaheim, California to Tulsa, Oklahoma. The 1965 New York Toy Show was a frenzy for skateboard manufacturers. Vita-Pakt sales director Edward Morgan predicted industry sales in excess of $100 million for 1965. But the nascent industry was soon victimized by age-old tactics that favored liberal contract laws in the aggressive post-World War II economy.

As a way of hedging against slow delivery, retail buyers placed duplicate orders with different manufacturers. They knew they could simply cancel any orders they did not need after acquiring the product they wanted. Unaware of this practice, manufacturers and

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61 Stevenson interview; Alter interview, May 4, 2005.
distributors took millions of dollars in orders and worked vigorously to fill them, only to have huge orders cancelled for various reasons. Jack Evans, the national sales manager for Los Angeles-based Nash Manufacturing Company, estimated that his company’s 1965 gross sales in skateboard equipment would exceed $25 million. Nash was shipping approximately 500,000 skateboards each week after the New York Toy Show. What Evans could not know was how many of those boards began piling up as retailers started cancelling orders. The unintended overproduction created a glut in supply that translated into overstocked warehouses all over the country. The on-hand skateboard decks depreciated in value every day. In Oklahoma City, skateboards sold for $2.50 in October 1964; by 1965, retailers could only get $1.00 for the average unit. This story repeated itself across America, as companies that roared to life in the ads of SkateBoarder quietly disappeared, as did the magazine itself.®

Skateboarding’s first lull was not just economic. Try as they might, boosters were never able to convince the public or elected representatives that skateboarding was as safe and normal as football or baseball. Instead, the sport was treated as a fad, like the hula-hoop or the pogo stick, and a dangerous and anti-social fad at that. The move toward legislating skateboarding out of existence began at nearly the same time as the sport itself. Well before Mark Richards had the idea to open a skateboard and surf shop twenty miles from the nearest beach, skateboarding was on its way past the craze phase and into the municipal menace phase. As early as 1958, skateboarding’s popularity produced mixed

responses among southern Californians. While kids gravitated toward the sport for its freedom and fear, adults who wanted to keep sidewalks safe for adults lobbied to have skateboards banned from most public thoroughfares.

The Los Angeles Times reported the first effort at such a ban in June 1959, not long after Roller Derby Corporation introduced the first retail skateboard, the Skee-Skate. Students from the Pasadena Youth Council urged Pasadena city directors to outlaw skateboards in Pasadena. Their rationale, which earmarked skateboarding's story in almost every city and town across America, was that skateboarding caused too many injuries. At least six teenagers had been injured in the thirty days prior to the Youth Council's request for a ban. In a manner that repeated itself everywhere skateboarding appeared, youths and adults divided into two camps: those who thought the risk of injury was worth the reward and those who did not.63

As skateboarding surged in popularity, with participation estimates well into the millions by 1964, no place seemed immune from the wheeled assault of sidewalk surfing. The adult backlash, which Newsweek named as the greatest threat to skateboarders, was more a byproduct of the era than the direct cultural threat represented in skateboarding. The mid-1960s were not a benchmark for American unity. As the number of threats to public safety mounted daily, skateboarding was destined to find an unaccommodating adult public. By 1965, that public was hostile. In Bountiful, Utah, police Chief D.O. Anderson confiscated all visible skateboards out of hand, labeling them a public health menace. In Chattanooga, Tennessee, police Traffic Chief Lamar Boyd used an old city

ordinance banning “coaster toy vehicles” from the streets to make war on skateboarding. Similar reactions cropped up everywhere, from Sheboygan, Wisconsin to Jacksonville, Florida to Montclair, New Jersey. Municipal codes were either reinterpreted to include skateboarding or created in order to facilitate criminalizing the sport.64

Skateboarding received little consideration for its likely economic benefits. Given the impressive sales figures skateboarding put up in 1964 and early 1965, overlooking the sport’s profit potential was an unusual case of economic opportunity ignored. In addition to highlighting the fierce municipal and civic opposition that skateboarding faced in the mid-1960s, these responses simultaneously demonstrated the ageographical appeal of skateboarding. By 1965, the proximity of an urban location to any emulative surfing population was not important to skateboarding’s base of support and participation. Regardless of that base of support, a wave of opposition had gathered force and carried with it the more effective power of law. Economic concerns aside, skateboarding needed more than teenage or media allies: it needed people in power to see its value to youth. That support did not come for decades.

Extant power structures perceived skateboarding as a threat because of considered what they perceived as the sport’s similarity to other forms of social deviance which manifested at nearly the same time. These municipal and non-governmental elites labeled skateboarding as rogue even as skateboarding boosters worked desperately to mainstream the sport. Even before the 1965 National Championship, the California Medical

Association (CMA) decided enough was enough. The state that spawned the skateboarding menace should be the first to reveal its demonization. In March 1965, CMA announced in a report titled “Skate Boards: A New Medical Menace” that skateboarding had recently exceeded the bicycle as the number one cause of recreational accidents among children. Eventually the fight involved other national influence groups, such as the National Safety Council. The Council announced that based on numerous reports and studies, “skateboards do constitute a safety hazard” unless riders exercised extreme caution. As the movement to exclude skateboarding from public places spread across America, skateboarding seemingly died out. By the end of 1965, twenty American cities and four European countries had banned skateboarding from city streets and sidewalks.65

Between 1966 and 1972, although skateboarding fell into disfavor among social elites and became anathema among parents and public safety/health groups, it did not disappear. Skateboarders did not, en masse, stow their skateboards in the closets with the hula-hoops and pogo sticks. Equipment available in the late 1960s was technologically inadequate to the demands of ever more aggressive skateboarders. But those limitations only dampened enthusiasm, they did not cause skateboarders to give up all hope that better technology would arrive. The lack of press or public awareness, often cited as proof that skateboarding disappeared during this period, was really a testament to skateboarding’s enduring place on the American sporting landscape. In a trend that

repeated itself two subsequent times in skateboarding's history, the sport simply left the public eye and moved back to the streets. Local contests continued between 1966 and 1970 in direct opposition to anti-skateboarding legislation that continued to be introduced or passed after 1965. This suggests that participation stayed constant or increased in this presumably dead period.\textsuperscript{66}

Without much media focused on the sport and with the demise of \textit{SkateBoarder}, participants practiced their sport in the streets and parking lots and school playgrounds of most urban centers. An entire generation of 1970s professional riders grew up in this period, weaned on the same asphalt banks that trained early 1960s stars like Stevie Hilton and Danny Bearer. The stars of the late 1970s did not learn to skate in 1971 or 1972. They learned to skate on the tail end of skateboarding's initial entrance into American society. Undoubtedly, skateboarding was a victim of its own success. Without controls on industry or the kind of singleness of purpose that seems evident in the early twenty-first century, the over production of product caused various corporate ventures to retreat or even fold.

All that product that was supposedly gathering dust in the warehouses of America sold. The glut, while painful, was only temporary. Even though the price of a skateboard in Oklahoma City decreased by half from 1964 to 1966, the slowdown in production allowed sales and prices to begin rebounding as early as 1968. By 1970, Vita-Pakt's

Hobie skateboard, the redesigned Super Surfer, sold for $7.00 at retail toy and sporting goods stores. Through the 1960s, manufacturers like Vita-Pakt, Nash, and others stayed in the business, producing new boards every year.\textsuperscript{67}

There is very little hard data for skateboard manufacturing or sales between 1966 and 1973. Most of the numbers come from industry insiders, sales projection reports, or are attached to individual sectors of the larger skateboarding industry, such as complete skateboards versus individual wheel sets. Before 1977, in the Census of Manufactures, all board sports, including skateboarding and surfing, were lumped into code 394495-98: Other Sporting Goods. In 1967, those “other sporting goods” accounted for $112 million in manufactures; in 1972 they accounted for $138 million.\textsuperscript{68} The category included such notable items as scuba gear, shooting accessories (not guns, ammunition, or clothing), and diving boards. Effectively, the only major retail item in the group was the skateboard. Other factors, such as contests and continued prohibitive legislation, suggested that skateboarding was a leader in the “other” category. Skateboards increased in price after a brief slump, implying people were buying and not attracting the media’s attention radar.

Although the publicity for skateboarding waned between 1966 and 1973, participation rates remained fairly constant. Mark Richards remembered sales figures staying level in this period. Prior to the urethane revolution, Richards opened a second Val Surf store in


1973 in Woodland Hills, California, even further from the beach than the first store. Annual regional competitions continued throughout the 1960s, with contests stretching from Chicago to New York to Florida. By 1975, when SkateBoarder began publication of its second volume, skateboarding was already a national sport.

The millions of skateboards that kids purchased during Richard Nixon’s first term as President presented an alternative to the cliche of the era, the Silent Majority hypothesis. During skateboarding’s dark years, the sport simply was outside the public’s purview. In the most basic terms, the stunning popularity of skateboarding between 1975 and 1990 resulted as much from technological innovation as from skateboarders who learned to skate during the mid- to late 1960s. That breed of radical, vertical skateboarders, typified by young men such as Tony Alva, Stacy Peralta, and Jay Adams, shepherded the sport through its least visible period. They emerged in 1973 alongside something called the urethane wheel.
BEYOND HORIZONTAL: FROM DOGTOWN TO HAWKTOWN

"Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential. But it was the minds of 11 year olds that could see that potential."

--Craig R. Stecyk III

The contemporary landscape of youth sport was shaped principally by the transformative power of skateboarding. Skateboarding’s progression from horizontal to vertical planes allowed the sport to achieve a verve that could not be matched. That progression was a classically American and western tale. It was American in the sense that industrial processes and the cross-application of technology, such as the use of urethane, made it possible to expand the sport’s horizons. It was western on two levels. Just as water had always played a pivotal role in the West’s evolution, the lack of water in the 1970s brought about terrain changes that opened up entire new venues for skateboarders. The mythic western dynamic to explore uncharted territory, to conquer that which had not been conquered, drove the way skateboarding evolved in the post-1970

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American West. Skateboarding followed the same model of development as surfing before it. Beginning as a recreational or proto-cultural pastime—surfers only skated when the waves were bad—skateboarding progressed into the intense pursuit of vertical terrain as technology improved. After new technology, such as the urethane wheel, allowed previous limits to be exceeded, corporate interest followed and subsumed skateboarding, making sport out the toys of children.

The Zephyr team became the most influential skateboard team ever assembled. Their influence was derived from two sources. At a basic level, they were the most talented skateboarders of their time. They rose to prominence at exactly the same time that the urethane wheel became available and capitalized on a combination of technology and media, with the rebirth of SkateBoarder in 1975. On another level, however, the Zephyr team managed to make themselves into a mythic force, principally through the photographic genius of Glenn E. Friedman and the romanticized prose of Craig R. Stecyk III. SkateBoarder dedicated hundreds of photos and almost as many pages of text to the “exploits” of Dogtown skateboarder, from barging into and skating private backyard pools to treks into California’s deserts in search of twenty-five foot concrete irrigation pipes. Real or contrived, the Zephyr riders did for skateboarding what Blake, Downing, and Noll did for surfing: they married a lifestyle to the sport. It was the Zephyr team that took skateboarding beyond its provincial affiliation with surfing, and made into a sport that did not need underpinning in anything else.

The team was comprised of twelve teenagers from west Los Angeles, primarily Santa Monica. The Zephyr team was just as important to skateboarding as the geography in
which the team evolved. The urban corridor west of Los Angeles, comprised of Santa Monica, Ocean Park, and Venice Beach, was the incubator for the second major phase in the sport’s evolution. The area known as Dogtown is “where America’s manifest destiny collides into the Pacific Ocean, a place where the fabled Route 66, the roadway of American dreams, terminates.” In the 1970s, the economic stratification of Santa Monica placed Dogtown firmly on the wrong side of Wilshire Boulevard. South of the boulevard was simply not as fashionable as north, the figurative wrong side of the tracks.²

Though not a gang in the modern sense of the word, the members of the Zephyr team inherited a sense of territorialism from their surfing peers that shaped them as a clearly defined community. Outsiders were not suffered well by the Z-Boys, as the Zephyr team was known, and most attempts at community expansion from the outside were rejected. Credibility and talent were the twin currencies of Dogtown, and even these did not always guarantee access to the system of secret pools and concrete ditches that served as battlegrounds for the vertical revolution.³

Before there was a Dogtown, there was Pacific Ocean Park (POP), and the amusement park located on Lick Pier. In 1892, real estate entrepreneur Abbott Kinney and his business partner, Francis Ryan, purchased a large piece of waterfront property for development as a seaside resort. In 1898, Kinney built the 1,250-foot long Ocean Park Pier. Kinney subdivided the surrounding land into modest lots and by 1901, Ocean Park included 200 cottages and a post office. As a seaside attraction, Ocean Park became a


³Tony Alva, interview by author, January 14, 2004, Oceanside, California.

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tourist destination that was at the heart of southern California’s appeal. The length of coastline that stretched from Ocean Park to Venice became known as “the Coney Island of the West.”

By 1907, the city of Santa Monica annexed Ocean Park and the town flourished. During this period, Ocean Park shared many characteristics with its northern neighbor, Venice. They both embraced and were largely defined by the local pier and amusement culture. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, amusement piers drew large crowds to the beach. Numerous amusement piers evolved in the Ocean Park district between 1900 and 1956: Fraser’s Million Dollar Pier; Pickering Pier; Ocean Park and Lick Pier.

In 1956, CBS and the Los Angeles Turf Club acquired the lease on the Ocean Park Pier. They proposed to build a $10,000,000 nautical theme park to compete with Disneyland. It was located one mile south of ground zero on the border of Santa Monica and Venice Beach. Ironically, it became the last survivor from a score of post-World War II amusement parks at various piers between Venice and Santa Monica. Opening day came two years after CBS acquired the lease. On July 28, 1958, more than 20,000 curious people and dozens of Hollywood celebrities crowded toward POP. Sunday’s 37,262 paying customers brought traffic jams to the area. During the first six days, the new park outperformed Disneyland.

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Sponsored by Coca Cola, Pacific Ocean Park offered amusements on par with the golden age of the pier. Visitors entered the park through Neptune’s Kingdom, where they descended in a submarine elevator to the oceanic corridors below. A large diorama filled with enormous and wild creatures covered an entire wall. Motorized artificial turtles, manta rays, sawfish, and sharks glided by over coral reefs and hanging seaweed. Inside the park was a replica of a New England harbor called Fisherman’s Cove. What pier boosters did not understand was the level of invisible competition with the park.

The assumption of POP’s developers was that amusement was amusement, whether it was 1920 or 1950. But America had changed. The novelties offered at Lick Pier in the early twentieth century were unparalleled because there were very few entertainment alternatives. But by the 1950s, automobiles defined transportation and recreation. The new POP pier competed with drive-in movies, rock-and roll, and the destination vacation. Electronic entertainment had also matured, offering Americans television and movies that cut directly into the pier’s market share.

Despite the allure of its offerings, the pier slowly lost money. Second season attendance was worse than the first. The owners decided to close the park in October for the remainder of winter. They wanted some breathing room to explore other options for the property. One month later, developers announced they the sale of the park to John Morehead for $10,000,000.⁶

In addition to the competitive entertainment atmosphere of the 1950s, the park continued to lose customers because POP was in a run down, seedy part of town. Bums

⁶Stanton, 165, 177.

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and winos accosted customers for money on nearby streets. This set up a typical struggle for the era, a place that the young desired but their parents forbid. Local teenagers, told parents they were going to a movie and sneaked down to POP. The park had trouble maintaining its operation. It offered a large number of rides and attractions for the price, but with such a high overhead it had to skimp on maintenance. Rides were often broken, and everything deteriorated as a result of salt, sea, wind, and sun. Soon the park was as run down as the surrounding geography.7

By the mid-1960s, POP had degenerated. Attendance spiraled downward and the urban core that surrounded the park deteriorated into something less than surly. In 1967, POP went bankrupt and closed, its complicated structures abandoned. The rides and attractions were auctioned off in 1968. Except for a few restaurants along Ocean Front Walk, the park was shuttered and its empty buildings were off limits.

The first of many arson fires started on December 29, 1969. The seaward end of the pier burned while two dozen firemen fought the blaze. Six months later, on May 27, 1970, a midnight fire destroyed Lick Pier while thousands watched. More fires in 1971 and 1973 burned the old Egyptian Ballroom and the roller coaster ride building and maintenance shack. The last and largest fire came on July 12, 1974 and burned most of that night and all of the following day. By the time it burned itself out, the old Casino Garden building was gutted and only thirty percent of the original pier remained. The pier was totally demolished that winter. The only indication that a pier once stood on that spot was a sign warning people not to swim there due to possible underwater hazards. Those

7Stanton, 177, 183, 186

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hazards had been there as long as fires had chipped away at the pier. Although the pier once created amusement opportunities for thousands, its departure left behind a debris-infested surf break that became known as “The Cove.” This area became the stage for the next revolution in sport and changed America’s understanding of what a playing field could be.89

On the south side of the once vibrant pier, The Cove offered local surfers the chance to display their talent as well as their “localism,” the exclusionary cultural practice where surfers enforce controlled access to particular surf breaks. As a rule, surfers considered locals exclude those from outside a defined geographic boundary. The degree to which locals assert their assumed property rights varies considerably. Some groups and beaches had long-established reputations for engaging in intimidation and violence. The Cove was one of those spots.10

While some surfers do not agree with the idea of localism, others contend it is necessary for cultural preservation. Non-locals bring unwanted influences to the break; moreover, they compete with locals for the limited resources that are represented in available surfable waves. At The Cove, people from San Fernando were the most visible targets of localism.


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The San Fernando Valley was a “sweaty, gridlocked, waffle-iron Los Angeles suburb.” Known simply as “The Valley,” it was separated from the California coast by low mountains that were bisected by winding roads, such as Malibu Canyon and Topanga Canyon, which cut through the mountains, providing beach access to Valley residents. Urban legend has it that on a summer day in 1962, a group of Malibu locals attempted to block the canyon roads to keep the good waves to themselves.¹¹ Over the next thirty years, Valley surfers, known as “Vals,” were routinely victimized by local surfers at numerous Southern California beaches, including The Cove. “The flattening of tires, the breaking of car windows— it could get vicious,” remembered Val Surf’s Mark Richards. “If you showed up at a surf spot with an attitude, you were asking for trouble. It’s just that Valley surfers were automatically tagged for having an attitude whether we had one or not.” Because more and more people wanted to learn how to surf, the beaches became more crowded. Locals claimed waves as their property. They tried to banish Vals, casting them mythic villains in a mythic turf battle.¹²

Vals were viewed as outsiders who invaded local beaches. They stole the waves, polluted the scene, and denied locals the possibility of perfection. Part of the motivation for discouraging non-locals from surfing at The Cove was a manufactured paternalism: only the locals had the necessary knowledge of water and debris conditions to surf safely.


Locals were saving the invaders from themselves. Outsiders arrived and became part of the threat matrix by virtue of their ignorance of the water’s geography and the relationship between the break and in-water obstacles. Amidst the rubble of the POP were young surfers who wanted to become part of the Zephyr surf team, which they considered the one true mark of distinction among youth culture in Dogtown. Eventually, these young hopefuls would take their skills in the water onto dry land and complete the revolution begun in the late 1950s.\footnote{Scheibel, “Making Waves with Burke,” 258-259.}

Dogtown was hardly upscale. As surfing breaks went, the waves at Pacific Ocean Park were not extraordinary. Indeed, the dangers associated with surfing between abandoned pylons and metal girders left over from the pier’s heyday made the experience much more than an average session at Malibu or Zuma. Every time people surfed the POP, someone could have died from colliding with fixed objects in the water. The young athletes who became Dogtown’s skateboarding elite were raised in this intense atmosphere of localism and meat-grinder surfing. That experience shaped their skating and their lifelong belief in the sports they pursued.

In the evolution of western sport, Dogtown achieved its significance out of its proximity to certain elementary and junior high schools, and to the existence of banked asphalt surfaces. It also owed much of its celebrity to a small surfboard shop located at the corner of Bay and Main Street. Founded in 1972, Jeff Ho/Zephyr Productions was the brainchild of local surfers turned surfboard manufacturers Jeff Ho, Skip Engblom, and Craig R. Stecyk III.\footnote{Scheibel, “Making Waves with Burke,” 258-259.} The Zephyr shop was modeled on the early 1950s cottage industry
developed by men like Hobie Alter and Bob Simmons. Ho and Engblom, the principal shapers, were more interested in the artisan aspect of surfboard making than the financial gain. This shop was the segue from the Zephyr surf team to the competitive Zephyr skateboard team.

The Zephyr shop focused on building and retailing custom surfboards. Jeff Ho became the board designer for the shop. He produced not only unique shapes and one-of-a-kind boards, but with the artistic help of Craig Stecyk, the graphic designs of Zephyr boards were unparalleled for the early 1970s. Influenced by the color of the 1960s and the Latino/graffiti street culture of Santa Monica, Zephyr Productions became a specialist's specialty shop. The more commercialized mainstream surfing became, the more iconoclastic and anti-mainstream Ho and Engblom tried to be. Their boards reflected the cultural diversity that was south Santa Monica. Asian, Latino, Anglo symbols all found their way onto Ho's boards. Not coincidentally, the teenagers that eventually made up the Zephyr skateboard team evinced this same cultural diversity.\(^\text{14}\)

Tony Alva and Jay Adams originally met when Adams and his mother picked Alva up hitchhiking his way to Malibu to surf. Jim Muir and Alva belonged to the Santa Monica Third Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), skating together after various LDS functions. Shogo Kubo came to the Zephyr team from Little Tokyo in west Los Angeles. The team members spent much of their free time on the streets and at

the beach, perfecting the skills that became their craft, a set of moves and values that obsessed American skateboarders for thirty years.\textsuperscript{15}

To promote their product and the aesthetic that was Dogtown, the shop sponsored the Zephyr surf team. This was a common practice for southern California surf shops. Ho and Engblom chose members not only based on their surfing ability but their commitment to local turf and competitive spirit. Faced with the probability of being injured by ocean debris during any surf session or having to fight off “invading” outsiders, Zephyr surfers were a tough crew. As more and more of the younger team members arrived at the shop on skateboards, Ho and Engblom decided the shop should support a land-based competition team in addition to its surf team. Although the members of the Zephyr skateboard team originally aspired to be part of the surf team, many of them were more talented on their skateboards than their surfboards.\textsuperscript{16} This reality made the decision to sponsor a skateboard team more practical. The team members continued to surf, but they practiced on their skateboards around the shop every day. The team was Dogtown’s vehicle for entrance into the national sporting lexicon.

All of the original Zephyr team members were interviewed for Stacy Peralta’s 2001 documentary film, \textit{Dogtown and Z-Boys: A Film About the Birth of the Now}. Wentzel Ruml, Allen Sarlo, and Stacy Peralta reflected on how many of the team members came


\textsuperscript{16}Alva interview.
from single parent homes. The Zephyr shop became home for many of the team, and team membership was regarded as an invitation to an extended family.

Despite the popular perception of skateboarding as child’s hobby or fad, the Z-Boys found themselves in a highly competitive environment, where performance was the prerequisite to continued team membership. According to Jeff Ho, the work ethic was intense. He said of the time, “We worked, we fucking worked. Creating new moves, new this, new that. Everybody brought something to the team, everybody did something different. Everybody had a different style.” Far from the laid-back, neo-hippie image that surrounded surfing and skateboarding at the time, competition and excellence were the twin markers of “traditional” sport and were integral to the Zephyr model.17

The birth of the Zephyr skateboard team coincided with the most significant technological innovation in skateboarding: the development of the urethane wheel. Wheel technology had not improved beyond the clay-based wheel of the early 1960s. Although Hobie Alter and Larry Stevenson tested urethane in the mid-1960s, price and availability precluded urethane’s entrance to market. As late as 1971, skateboarders struggled to find new or more technically viable equipment. Skateboarding was a nominal category on the retail 1970 retail landscape. Sporting goods manufacturers and retailers considered skateboards less important than hula-hoops or the yo-yo. In this climate of technological stagnation, a Washington, D.C. based surfer and skater named Frank Nasworthy became a cultural and sport icon after a fateful trip to Virginia.


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Frank Nasworthy, son of U.S. Navy flight instructor George Franklin Nasworthy, Sr., was born in 1951, at the naval hospital in Pensacola, Florida. Like many of his generation, Nasworthy was enamored of the beach lifestyle, inspired by beach imagery and the music of the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean. After learning to surf, Nasworthy also learned to skateboard in the early 1960s. His story is archetypal: he started with a piece of unshaped, scrap wood and wheels cut from roller skates. The Nasworthy family moved every few years, as was common with navy families, but eventually settled in the greater Washington, D.C. area.

Nasworthy shared the sentiment of others from his generation: he felt skateboarding was a natural dry land compliment to his first passion, surfing. But clay wheels did not allow a skater to replicate the smoothness of surfing on land. While in Washington, D.C. during summer 1970, Nasworthy met up with an old high school friend, Bill Harward. They decided to look up one of Harward’s college friends, Richard Heitfield, who lived thirty miles away in Purcellville, Virginia. When they got to town, they could not find Heitfield. Harward knew Heitfield’s father ran a small factory and might be found there. Searching for Harward’s friend, Frank Nasworthy found Creative Urethanes, owned and operated by Vernon Heitfield.¹⁸

While strolling around the shop, Nasworthy spotted fifty-five-gallon drums filled with urethane roller skate wheels. Creative Urethanes had a contract to produce a small quantity of replacement roller skate wheels for Roller Sports, a chain of roller skate rinks. Roller Sports wanted a wheel that was more durable than the traditional clay wheel, even

¹⁸Frank Nasworthy, telephone interview by author, July 9, 2005.
if it was softer and less fast. Nasworthy noticed that the diameter of the axle holes looked very similar to the axle diameter on his Makaha skateboard. He reasoned that the urethane wheels would fit his board. Heitfield informed Nasworthy that the wheels in the drums were slightly defected and were going to be thrown away. Instead, Nasworthy departed Purcellville with a gift of thirty sets of wheels and returned to Washington, D.C.\(^{19}\)

The nation’s capital was a skateboarder’s paradise. Miles of skateable concrete with little or no legal restrictions on where skateboards were permissible. Nasworthy gave a few friends wheel sets, and all of them decided this was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Their riding became smooth and seamless, just like surfing. But Nasworthy did not see his discovery as revolutionary in any way; instead, he thought he had been the recipient of good luck and a bright idea at the right moment. There was no indication he would pursue any financial gain from urethane skateboard wheels.\(^{20}\)

After Nasworthy’s mother passed away in 1971, he moved to Encinitas, California, just north of San Diego. He spent his time waiting tables in restaurants and surfing. Over time he grew tired of having no money and started formulating a business plan make some money. The first idea he developed was the urethane skateboard wheel. Nasworthy’s decision to pursue the urethane wheel demonstrated that skateboarding was in no way on hiatus. He saw many skateboarders on waveless days in the greater San Diego area and was convinced of the urethane wheel’s imminent success. He contacted

\(^{19}\) Nasworthy interview.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.
Vernon Heitfield in Virginia and placed an order for 1,000 urethane wheels, modified slightly to accommodate the same bearing system as the clay wheels they replaced.

In the same manner that Phil Knight popularized early Nike athletic shoes, Nasworthy took his idea to the streets. In spring 1973, he loaded his urethane wheels into the trunk of his car and traveled the California coast selling the wheels to surf shops. He ran into resistance as Hobie Alter and Larry Stevenson had a decade before. In fact, Nasworthy tried to sell urethane wheels to the manager at the Hobie Surf Shop in Dana Point, only to be refused because the urethane wheels wholesale price of $1.00 was twice the retail price of clay wheels.\(^{21}\)

Nasworthy ended up giving half of that first 1,000 wheels away for free to young skaters. Without a model to work from, he knew the best way to secure sales later was to generate buzz in the present. The wheels were fast and provided tremendous traction on concrete and asphalt surfaces. They were an order of magnitude more maneuverable than clay wheels of the 1960s. The plan worked. In April 1973, Nasworthy formed Cadillac Wheels and released a urethane skateboard wheel marketed to surf and skateboard shops across the country. The demand was so great that Cadillac soon could not supply the demand it had created. In the first sixteen months of operation, Nasworthy sold approximately 150,000 wheels, principally through word of mouth advertising as *SkateBoarder* had not yet been revived. Less than two years later, in February 1975, Cadillac Wheels joined Bahne Skateboards, the largest producer of decks at the time.

\(^{21}\text{Ibid.}\)
sufficient wheels for the market place. In 1975, Bahne sold more than 1,000,000 Cadillac wheels to young skateboarders across America.\(^2\)

The importance of the urethane wheel was not immediately apparent. At first, the wheels simply improved the performance of any rider on a horizontal plane. The wheel's ability to maintain contact with the ground as well as the increased surface area of early urethane models made skaters faster. The unique traction quality of the material improved all maneuvers: riders felt like they could do anything, from slides to carves to slalom. As is often the case in an evolving sport, technological improvement inspired the desire to push limits.

In this context southern California skateboarders tried once again to push the sport beyond the horizontal and into the vertical. Like skaters from the 1960s, urethane wielding skateboarders looked non-horizontal planes as the best venues for emulating the surf model to which many still clung. In 1973, Tony Alva and Jay Adams went to Skip Engblom with a set of Cadillac wheels. Engblom realized the obvious superiority of the wheel and started carrying them in the shop. The performance ethic of the Z-Boys, coupled with new technology, produced a level of skateboarding that transcended the accepted limits of the day as well as gravity.\(^3\)

This development of the retail urethane wheel accompanied the second entrance of southern California's unique topography into the evolution of skateboarding. The essence

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Mark Richards, interview by author, October 3, 2001, Valley Village, California; Alva interview.

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of Dogtown skating derived in part from its proximity to five local schools: Paul Revere Junior High, Kenter Canyon Elementary, Bellagio Elementary, Brentwood Elementary, and Mar Vista Elementary. These schools, like many in canyon-laden southern California, were built on topographies that demanded asphalt banks to level out the playgrounds. This kind of banked asphalt could be found all over southern California, in any community where schools were nestled into the numerous foothills, not just in the coastal communities. Asphalt banks, varying from ten to forty-five degrees in pitch, were the first transition to vertical skateboarding. These landscapes anticipated the skateboard parks of the late 1970s, providing nascent skateboarders with a concrete wave on which to maneuver. The Dogtown skaters took their cues from early 1960s skaters who rode banked asphalt on the limited technology of clay wheels.\(^{24}\)

Skateboarders made indescribably unique use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden, the asphalt and concrete byproducts of industrialization. It was skateboarders who employed the handiwork of civic expansion in ways never dreamed of by the original architects.\(^{25}\) As with many sports, skateboarding had to evolve to remain interesting. The slowdown it suffered through in the late 1960s was caused primarily by public misunderstanding and a shortage of technological innovation. A healthy spirit of rebellion and the effects of Frank Nasworthy’s urethane wheel combined to overcome that downturn. With technology and the inspiration of banked asphalt came the belief that more was possible, that excellence might give way to perfection.

\(^{24}\)Richards interview; Alva interview.

The catalyst for this evolution of the sport stemmed from a climatological situation that produced unanticipated rewards. In the 1970s, California suffered through one of the most intense droughts in its history. In southern California, where lawns and swimming pools were part and parcel of residential living, various city governments passed water conservation ordinances that criminalized unnecessary water use. The result was an inordinate number of large swimming pools were drained and left dry and unused. These semi-abandoned pools became the landscape for vertical skateboarding.

For most skaters, skating the vertical walls of empty swimming pools began as a difficult proposition. Regardless of technology, weight transfer, balance, and sufficient speed to maintain contact with the pool's walls were early obstacles, but like every evolution, skill and desire overcame initial setbacks. Early 1960s efforts at pool riding met with difficulty primarily because wheel technology was not advanced enough to allow necessary traction or speed. Urethane changed the smoothness and fluidity of riding skateboards on horizontal planes and opened up vertical planes to a new and aggressive generation of skaters.

The competitive atmosphere of skateboarding fueled the nascent pool sessions. Riding higher on the wall with each skate session was first, then riding over the top of the pool light. Eventually skaters tried to make contact with the first row of tiles, then bounce their wheels on the lip or coping. Frontside and backside grinds, where the board was propelled just high enough to allow the trucks to scrape the pool's coping, were the

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“hottest” moves of the day. The pinnacle maneuver in these heady days was the one-wheel kick-turn, where a skater rode high enough to almost exit the pool and pivot, turning their board on a single wheel that contacted the coping. In photographs from the period, this maneuver offered a very dramatic edge.\textsuperscript{27}

The dominant medium for disseminating this southern California phenomenon was \textit{SkateBoarder}. After a ten year hiatus between 1965 and 1975, publisher Steve Pezman and editor Warren Bolster decided the new sport revolution demanded serious attention and resurrected \textit{SkateBoarder}. The second volume, published in 1975, heralded the arrival vertical revolution by featuring Greg Weaver on the cover skating the upper part of a backyard pool. The image was powerful and the magazine became a huge hit. After one year in print, \textit{SkateBoarder} reached a circulation rate of more than 300,000 copies per month.\textsuperscript{28}

The magazine also provided a forum for skateboarding’s evolving mythos. During the first five years of republication, the voice of Craig Stecyk III found its medium. In addition to his involvement with the Zephyr shop, Stecyk was a talented local artist, journalist, and photographer. Perhaps his greatest gift was the way he captured the attention of young skaters who read his articles in \textit{SkateBoarder} with rapt attention. Stecyk’s affiliation with the Zephyr shop gave him access to the Z-Boys and their

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{27}Alva interview; Beato, “The Lords of Dogtown,” 66.}  
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{28}Elliott Almond, “Magazine Mirrors Explosive Popularity of Skateboarding,” \textit{Los Angeles Times}, September 18, 1977, 10K; Brooke, \textit{The Concrete Wave}, 71.}
particular style of skateboarding. He also captured in print and picture their many secret pool sessions.

Craig Stecyk’s writing, in particular a series that became known as the Dogtown articles, gave readers across the nation the kind of snapshot they needed. Countless aspiring Z-Boys, in Ohio or Georgia or Texas, read of the exploits of the Z-Boys. Tension abounded as Dogtowners “poached” pools, evaded police, and skated away into the sunset. The descriptions had the dramatic flair of dime-novel westerns, but enough 1970s dystopic edge to make them interesting to generation of kids weaned on marijuana and hard rock. In his debut article, “Aspects of the Downhill Slide,” Stecyk wrote:

“Downhill somewhere past 45 [miles per hour], the fine line fluctuates. It’s at a different place and time for each rider, but after 45, it becomes increasingly apparent. An all-encompassing awareness of an impending bad situation...An entity you don’t want to look at, yet have the urge to see. Downhill, one inch to either side or one inch past this intangible line and it suddenly becomes a physical presence. By the time you see this line, it’s all over anyway....”

Wentzel Ruml, one of the original Z-Boys, observed, “the more illegal they make it, the more attractive it becomes. They (police) chased us off the schoolyards...and out onto the streets. Now they want us back in the school yards.”

The new Skateboard fomented the rogue image of 1970s skateboarders, especially the Z-Boys. Covert pool riding—covert because California law enforcement considered the activity criminal trespassing—was covered monthly by SkateBoarder. Stecyk continued to write articles about individual Z-Boys and still more articles about the exploits of Dogtowners at various secret spots in California. Accompanying many of these articles

were the photographs of Glen E. Friedman, who became the Annie Leibowitz of
skateboarding and punk rock. Friedman's photos captured in still frame the extreme
moment of any given maneuver. Those images caught the last possible extension of a
body or board in the temporal space of a pool or ramp, rarely (if ever) giving any hint that
the maneuver had failed. As did their mythic cowboy predecessors, who always won the
day and the girl, pool skaters never crashed and made it seem like anyone could do what
they did if they invested enough effort. The truth of cuts, scrapes, and broken limbs, as
well as police chases and numerous arrests, was something unsuspecting readers
experienced for themselves.

American youth consumed these new heroes and the stories that came with them. The
impact was inspirational. Kids fantasized about living like a Z-Boy, skating like a Z-Boy,
being a Z-Boy. Henry Rollins, former lead singer for the punk rock band Black Flagg,
remembered, “you’re reading this 3,000 miles away in a town that has snow. So we’re
living through it vicariously and we would live for that magazine. It was our radio station
‘cause you’re not seeing any of these people move, you’re just seeing the photos in the
magazines.” The skating public responded to SkateBoarder with great enthusiasm, as the
magazine’s circulation rose to more than 1,000,000 issues per month in 1978.30

The progression of events followed predictable pattern. Warren Bolster’s
SkateBoarder circulated skateboarding globally, before any organized Internet did the
same, and the fame and fortunes of the original Z-Boys grew accordingly. Certain riders
carried more cachet than others, such as Tony Alva, Jay Adams, and Stacy Peralta. But

30 Dogtown and Z-Boys, 2002; Alva interview; Richards interview.
most profited at least a little through a combination of their affiliation with the Zephyr team and their unrivaled commitment to the burgeoning sport. Publishers, riders, and, of course, manufacturers all prospered in multiple ways. As the celebrity for each of the Z-Boys increased, they came into demand by a growing number of skateboard equipment makers. Endorsements for skateboarding, as unlikely as it seemed at the time, came pouring in for the die-hard Dogtown crew.31

A few personalities emerged from the Zephyr team and the larger Dogtown skateboard scene, personalities that changed skateboarding and the larger face of sport in the American West. Tony Alva was renowned for many reasons, not the least of which were his abilities on a skateboard. He performed the first aerial maneuvers photographed for a national audience. Alva also embodied the kind of presence that is de rigueur for contemporary athletes: equal portions of bravado, arrogance, humility, showmanship, and stewardship. Alva made skateboarding more than a hobby—he made it a profession. For millions of budding skate devotees, Alva was skateboarding for the better part of a decade.

Tony Alva was born September 2, 1957, in Santa Monica, California. Like many of the athletes and personalities in this revolution, Alva was a first generation Californian. His mother was raised in Holland and his father hailed from Salt Lake City, Utah. Refugio Alva, a Mexican-American who became Mormon through adoption, moved to Santa Monica in the mid 1950s.

31Sal Ruibal, “Far Out! Cutting-edge Sports Have Roots in ’70s,” USA Today, April 17, 2002, 1A.
Tony Alva graduated from Santa Monica High School in 1975, but not before changing the world he lived in. Alva started out as a conventional athlete. In his adolescence, he played organized basketball and baseball, coached periodically by his father. He spent time hanging around the Santa Monica Boys Club, located a block from his home. While his father worked--the Alva household was a single parent home at this time--Alva discovered he was very competitive, especially when it came to physical sports. Before entering high school, Alva participated in numerous organized sports: a diving and swim team, a hockey team, competitive judo, and a junior high school football team. By the time he reached high school, he was “over all of that.” Despite his father’s hopes for a career in professional baseball, Alva gravitated toward board sports.

Contrary to popular myth, Tony Alva rode a skateboard before he ever surfed. Although the two sports complimented each other, it served Alva’s professional interests to maintain the legend that surfing begat skateboarding in his life. Surfing was the mythic soulful core of his skating. In truth, Alva’s first board-based endeavor was on a homemade skateboard, replete with clay roller skate wheels and a hand cut, semi-round nosed oak board. As did skaters in the San Fernando Valley a decade earlier, Alva and other skaters developed a principal love for surfing, but only after skating first. Surfing had more street credibility among older Santa Monica peers. It was also the key to membership at the Zephyr shop. But Alva started out on a primitive skateboard, riding the smooth sidewalks of Santa Monica.33

32 Alva interview; e-mail message to author, February 12, 2005.

33 Alva interview.
Alva started skating in the same way that much of southern California youth started: a piece of crude wood, cut to shape, with roller skate wheels attached to the bottom. In his own account, Alva started getting “serious” about skateboarding at ten years old. This was around 1966, the same year that national enthusiasm for skateboarding started to wane, and sales took a precipitous downward turn. As more and more groups or organizations or individuals offered a public stand against skateboarding, skaters such as Alva embraced the rogue nature of the sport. America in the 1960s was starting to come apart, as the mainstream lost control of its tenuous grip on the counter-culture and Vietnam. Rogue was vogue, from sex to war to sports, and so skateboarding went underground to hibernate. What emerged from this cocoon in the mid-1970s was Dogtown.

In junior high school, Alva began competing in small, local skateboard events. The ethic that became Dogtown was honed on the amateur competition circuit. All of Alva’s sporting talents, including his time on the high school diving team, coalesced in skateboarding. There was nothing soft or soulful about the sport in this era. Skate sessions at Paul Revere Junior High, the first place Alva skated on a banked asphalt surface, were informal competitions. Everyone who skated had a style, and the point was to make sure everyone knew your style was superior to theirs. The skating was fast, the maneuvers were intense, and getting time on the banks was tantamount to being able to catch the most waves in the ocean. As Alva’s interest and skill level soared, he knew he wanted to be a professional skateboarder. The memory of his skate mentors—Torger Johnson and Danny Bearer—was not so distant. They lived a lifestyle that Alva worked to emulate. The
semi-professional skateboarders of the mid-1960s were the model for Alva’s simple plan: to become the best skateboarder in the world.  

The advance of skateboarding as a sport was directly related to modifying the paradigms that governed the activity. Although Alva and others put early 1960s skaters on pedestals, the progression of technology demanded that new role models be created. Alva and the rest of the Z-Boys looked to iconic surfer such as Larry Bertleman, a stylist of the new order, for their inspiration on asphalt. Custom boards and urethane wheels allowed maneuvers similar to the cut-backs and carves of surfing’s shortboard masters. This new surf-inspired stylistic approach made nose riding and upright stances anathema to this fledgling skateboard crew. Treating asphalt like water allowed Alva to cross-train, so that surfing improved his skating and visa versa.  

For a brief period, before corporate America entered the scene, skaters like Alva pushed their sport forward through simple improvements in style and technique. This was the golden age of skateboarding, after clay but before incorporation. At this moment skaters such as Alva were driven to be better because being better was an end in itself. The idea of a payoff came later. Here skaters struggled to be better than each other. This also became part of the Dogtown ethic, the idea that anyone in America could be great—they just had to skate like southern Californians. They became their own role models, skating on land the way cutting edge surfers carved on water. Alva observed in  


2004 that "the Dogtown guys were basically the guys that were one step ahead of everybody...from the streets to the banks to pools, into the skateparks, into the pipes...because nobody really realized that they could tap into that potential until they started seeing us do it."

Tony Alva and others propelled skateboarding into the vertical plane. In 1973, somewhere on the north side of Santa Monica, Alva skated his first empty swimming pool. Riders nicknamed it the Rabbit Hole, an allusion to the tightness of the pool’s dimensions. According to Alva, urethane made this advance possible. Alva’s skating evolved as skating and skateboard technology evolved, and as his surfing progressed he skated more on the days where waves were thin or blown out. Alva and the other Z-Boys were already skating banked asphalt walls, performing high speed surf maneuvers, when the Zephyr team headed to the first national skateboard competition in a decade, the 1975 Del Mar Nationals. Sponsored by Bahne Skateboards, the Del Mar competition was important for two reasons. The venue itself was antiquated, utilizing a large wooden ramp as an artificial hill for the slalom competition and a small, flat dance-floor for the freestyle competition. There were no concrete surfaces, no pools, no half-pipe ramps. This was not a competition on the vertical plane. As a result, the industry and most of the non-Zephyr competitors demonstrated just how out of touch they were with the current trends in skateboarding. The second reason Del Mar was significant was that it became the venue for aggressive skating’s entrance into the world.\(^\text{35}\)

\(^\text{35}\) Alva interview; Beato, “The Lords of Dogtown,” 70; *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, 2001.
When the Zephyr team arrived in Del Mar, the venue’s structural format was set up on an archaic model, one that did not suit the progressive style of the Zephyr team. The entire site looked like the 1965 championships in Anaheim. Del Mar had a slalom course set up on an inclined, man-made ramp. The course surface was coated in polyurethane, much like a hardwood basketball court. In addition, Del Mar boasted a large freestyle area surfaced like the slalom course. What the Z-Boys did not find at Del Mar was concrete. No banks, no vertical walls, and no long-cement hills.

The Z-Boys used their quiver of maneuvers on the horizontal freestyle surface. Jay Adams, Peggy Oki, and Stacy Peralta stunned audience members and judges alike. Kurt Lederman observed in 1975 that "there was so much aggression, they were more like a street gang than a skate team."^37 Bob Biniak remembered of the event, "it was like a hockey team going to a figure skating contest."^38 What ensued changed skateboarding forever. The maneuvers of semi-vertical skating did not cross over completely to the horizontal freestyle arena, but the audience and judges were dumbfounded. The entire Zephyr team seemed to have arrived from some other point along the spectrum of accepted skate style. Performing the same high-speed turns, carves, and jumps used on banked asphalt, the Zephyr team upstaged the field of competitors while taking home a single trophy. The only Zephyr team member to win in any category was Peggy Oki, who took first place in the women’s junior freestyle event. Jay Adams and Tony Alva finished third and fourth in their divisions. The maneuvers the Z-Boys performed were less

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important than what happened later. After the competition, as the crowds realized that another kind of skating existed outside the insular 1960s model of ballet and nose wheelies, corporate sponsors stepped forward and took notice. 39

Corporate skateboard manufacturers approached many of the Zephyr team members with offers for endorsements and sponsorship. The aggressive style of skating at Del Mar was clearly the wave of the future, and corporate skateboarding recognized that fact instantly. Soon after Del Mar, Kent Sherwood took his fiberglass board design and formed Z-Flex, initially employing his son Jay Adams, Tony Alva, and Jim Muir. Corporate loyalty was determined by the contract companies offer; as a result, Z-Boys and other professionals moved at will from sponsor to sponsor. Eventually, Alva, Adams, and Bob Biniak started skating for Logan Earth Ski. Stacy Peralta went to Gordon and Smith Skateboards while Jim Muir partnered with skater Wes Humpston to form Dogtown Skates, a company Muir still runs. Within six months of Del Mar, the Zephyr team ceased to exist, its core members picked up by other, better financed companies. A year after Del Mar, the Zephyr surf shop closed its doors. 40

Although the Zephyr shop and team never recovered, skateboarding as a sport benefitted. Participation skyrocketed after 1975. Corporatization brought increased availability to high-quality equipment at lower prices. SkateBoarder carried the message that there was an ethic to aspire to in modern skateboarding. Between 1975 and 1980, the


40 Richards interview, May 1, 2004; Alva interview; Nasworthy interview; Beato, “The Lords of Dogtown,” 71; Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 56-59.
majority of both text and photos in SkateBoarider centered on some member of the Zephyr team or on Dogtown skating in general. That urban, anti-establishment ethos was coopted by corporate America.

Corporatization was not inherently a bad thing. On the contrary, it was part of the process of becoming mainstream. For sport to become democratized, for any sporting endeavor to expand, the economic power of corporate America was essential. The alternative nature of skateboarding enhanced the ability to make money. As did surfing before it, skateboarding came with an attached lifestyle. Skateboarding was more than just the board and the concrete: it had its own clothing, its own music, its own urban edge. The same kind of discourse that informed surfing’s nascent years also developed around skateboarding. People who skateboarded were constantly trying to rationalize their choice of sport to the non-skating public. The rogue element of poaching pools did not improve the image of skaters. Skateboarding became what surfing was before it—something people embraced as a package. This idea of total commitment, promulgated by the popularization of the Dogtown lifestyle, made the second corporate phase of skateboarding both possible and predictable.

As the notoriety of Dogtown skaters grew, many of the more urban social edges of skateboarding started to fade away. As the motivation to profit became part of the skateboarding landscape, professionalization eclipsed the guerilla aspect of skating backyard pools. Magazine covers soon featured skateboarders wearing company logos on competition style jerseys, often photographed in non-competition settings, such as skating in abandoned reclamation pipelines in some unnamed desert.
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the skateboard industry became a self-promoting, money-making machine. As Dogtowners began promoting various products, from wheels to safety equipment, sales skyrocketed. By 1980, sales of skateboard merchandise topped $700 million. Buying translated into participation, and participation offered economic incentive for those who wanted to create appropriate venues to skate. At this point, the mythic nature of the Z-Boys clashed with the reality of skateboarding for the majority of American youth.

Magazine articles, especially the photos, portrayed an America dotted with abandoned or unguarded empty swimming pools. Since this was definitely not the case outside of southern California, urban landscapes changed to accommodate this new sport. Finding safe places to skate that were still fun was always a problem for skateboarders. When Surfer's World opened in Anaheim in 1966, it mimicked the dominant expressive style of skateboarding at that time, freestyle and head-to-head racing. But as the urethane revolution took skateboarding beyond horizontal, the challenge of finding enough vertical concrete grew.

Obviously, in the ever more vertical world of post-urethane skateboarding, pools were the optimal venue; but, they tended to be privately owned and came with a degree of risk, principally trespassing fines and jail time. In almost the same year that Surfer's World U.S.A. peaked in Anaheim, a twelve-year-old New York kid named John O'Malley fell in love with skateboarding. O'Malley and his friends spent hour after hour trolling the streets of Long Island in search of better, steeper, smoother places to ride, often ending up at asphalt straightaways that dotted Salisbury Park. O'Malley also embraced the evolving
competitive side of skateboarding, winning back-to-back state freestyle championships at ages eleven and twelve. He stood as further evidence that skateboarding never really died out, it simply fell out of favor with adults and the media. Skateboarding continued to epitomize the ethos of speed, grace, and motion, all driven by its impenetrable link to surfing. True to that message, when O’Malley graduated from high school, he left New York and settled in Carlsbad, California, just north of San Diego.41

When O’Malley arrived in California, he sensed real possibility. It was 1973, and urethane was about to be widely available. The skate scene in southern California was different from O’Malley’s experiences on the East Coast. Out west, a lifestyle centered on board sports was part of the landscape. Fellow skateboarder and next-door neighbor Jack Graham approached O’Malley one summer day with an idea. Watching kids get arrested and hassled, Graham wanted a dedicated space where skateboarding was legal and encouraged. After a friend of Graham’s son was killed by a car while skating in the street, he and O’Malley pursued the idea a skateboard park with vigor.42

Graham was a long-time friend of Larry Grismer, a local businessman who owned the Carlsbad Raceway, an off-road auto and motorcycle track and drag strip that operated for about thirty years. Because terrain had a compatible grade and was already zoned as commercial property, Graham and O’Malley chose the empty fields near the raceway, at the intersection of Palomar Airport Road and Business Park Drive, to begin the skatepark

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revolution. O’Malley observed that, “Carlsbad was the seed, and is part of roots of any, and every, skatepark that has been built and ever will be built.”\(^{43}\)

Fortunately for skateboarding, skateparks experienced a bi-coastal birth. In 1975, Carlsbad, California gave birth to the skatepark. At almost the same time, Skateboard City opened in Daytona, Florida. The early experience of these parks and their bi-coastal popularity spawned a deluge of skatepark construction. The new “for profit” model was followed by developers and investors across America. City governments started inviting companies to bid on municipal skateparks as a way of keeping skateboarders off the streets and away from neighborhood pools. The synergy between sales and venues seemed limitless.\(^{44}\)

Geography was no longer part of the explanatory matrix of skateboarding: skateboarding was everywhere. In its first week of operation, the Wizard Skateboard Park in Wilmington, North Carolina grossed nearly $8,000 despite a seventy skater maximum capacity. The Solid Surf Skateboard Park in Fort Lauderdale, Florida had a paid attendance of 3,200 skaters over its first four-day holiday weekend of operation.

O’Malley and Graham announced that their company, Skatepark Constructors, had


\(^{44}\)Elliott Almond, “Two Skateboard Parks Will Be Constructed in County,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1976, 6D.
stopped signing contracts in fall 1976 in order to successfully complete all the business they had solicited in their first year as a design team.45

One year after Carlsbad opened, around twenty skateparks dotted five states. By 1980, there were more than 100 skateparks in western states alone. Prior to the fear and reality of litigation, municipal governments constructed skateparks, such as the Aala International Park Skating Rink in Honolulu, Hawai‘i. Without strict liability, private contractors and cities were free to pursue their motivations, for profit or public order. By 1980, more than 300 skateparks operated nationally.46

As venues became ever more available for amateur skaters, professional skateboarders added to the money-making nature of the sport through competitions. Contests, once considered passé by early elites, became monthly events. The spread of contests beyond southern California, into both Midwestern and east coast parks, spoke volumes about the exponential growth of the sport. Contests pitted corporate teams and sponsored riders in the kind of aerial maneuvering 1960s skaters could never have imagined. If pool skating spawned vertical skating, contests perfected it. The pressure associated with winning on behalf of the sponsor led to rapid upward progress in the sport’s intensity and physical prowess. Originally the province of the select few, aerial skateboard maneuvers were the fare du jour at contests in the late 1970s and early 1980s.


The surge of vertical competition culminated in a new event designed around large, manufactured half-pipe ramps: an aerial contests where winners were determined by the number of vertical feet they could fly over the top edge of the ramp. The caveat was that the aerial had to be safely landed back in the half-pipe. Skaters like Christian Hosoi and Tony Hawk excelled at this early innovation, an event that had as much to do with talent as raw nerve. In a half-pipe ramp with walls fifteen feet in height, a twelve-foot aerial put the rider twenty-seven feet above the bottom of the ramp. Around these types of athletes another following developed: skateboarders who emulated skill more than lifestyle.

Corporate skateboarding was little different from corporate surfing. There evolved two distinct groups of participants: the sponsored and the un-sponsored. The un-sponsored riders rejected what they perceived to be the soulless exploitation of their sport. But sponsored riders, especially former Z-Boys, managed to maneuver the complex maze of managing image and profits. Some riders became moguls themselves. After a brief stint with Logan Earth Ski, Tony Alva decided his best hopes lay in riding for his own company.47

In 1977, Alva had a banner year. On national television, he became skateboarding’s first national champion, defeating some the same riders he lost to in Del Mar two years prior. Even Alva’s mentor, Torger Johnson, only managed an eighth place in the men’s overall standings. The same year, SkateBoarder held an awards ceremony to announce the results of its first ever worldwide reader’s poll. The ceremony announced who readers considered the best skateboarder in the world. Not surprisingly, Alva was the winner of

47 Alva interview.
this honor as well. Not long after these two achievements, Alva started Alva Skates. He was nineteen years old.\footnote{Ibid.}

Making boards that featured his own name as a logo, Alva ushered in a new take on the athlete/product relationship. Alva’s company was unusual from the start. Alva Skates introduced and popularized a number of critical innovations, some of which had nothing to do with technology. According to Alva, his company began two technical trends: laminated boards and wide boards. Prior to laminates, skateboards were cut from stock, from planks of oak or maple. They were notoriously thick and heavy. Alva employed German engineer Pete Zender to overcome these obstacles. Zender designed boards constructed from thin layers of the same material, but laminating those layers on opposing grain patterns, a technique borrowed from the construction industry. The 1960s construction trade developed many methods which could be employed effectively in the production of skateboards.\footnote{Ibid.}

When Zender met Alva in the mid-1970s, Zender already experimented with laminates as well as boards based on chemical composites. Zender brought Alva various ideas for decks. Alva took Zender prototypes out to local pools or schools and field-tested the designs, returning with feedback for the engineer. They tried everything: boards with balsa wood cores, styled after surf boards that used similar techniques; laminate boards with five or eight holes drilled through the deck, to lighten the deck even further. While progressive, these designs did not result in a durable product. Alva’s experience with

\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}

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early fiberglass decks that shredded after a few days hard use taught him that kids would value a board they did not have to replace every month or even every three months. The needs of his future consumers were early a part of Alva’s corporate goals.\textsuperscript{50}

Eventually, the first Alva deck was born. It was a simple seven-ply maple laminate with a raised tail, just under eight inches wide at its middle. Zender’s laminate design was amazing. The effect was to thin out the deck without sacrificing its strength or structural integrity, much the way plywood derived its strength as flooring material in the housing industry. The boards were also noticeably more responsive during use. In much the same way that chromolybdenum was an improvement over high-tensile steel in bike frames, laminated decks offered a degree of flex that did not detract from the ride. Skaters became aware of more of the terrain’s subtleties through a more supple ride. Less rigid meant more responsive without meaning less strong. Add to this design a raised tail section, created by warping the laminate with water and pressure, and the boards became aggressive, vertical machines.

Modifying the traditional width, which at the time stood at approximately eight inches, Alva Skates built eight-, nine-, and eventually ten-inch wide skateboards. He unveiled the ten-inch deck to the public at the Henry Hester Invitational contest in 1978.\textsuperscript{51} The idea was simple: a wider surface provided more stability. This allowed even more performance on a ramp or in a pool, but it especially improved the decks stability during aerial maneuvers, which by 1978 were increasingly more aggressive.

\textsuperscript{50}Ibid.

On the non-technical side, Alva Skates introduced the skateboarding world to advertising that reflected the edge and attitude of the company’s founder. The first Alva Skates advertisement appeared in December 1977 and featured Tony Alva in the foreground. He stood with his arms crossed and looked as gangsteresque as someone could in the pre-gangsta world of 1977. In the background was an Alva skateboard. Most of the ads that followed over the next five to ten years were little different. Working with graphic designer Eric Monson and photographer Raul Vega, Alva inspired an advertising campaign where the product was subordinated to the image of the man. It was brash and unprecedented, and it was avant garde at its most notorious. As much as other companies ridiculed both Alva and his ad campaign, they could not argue with his success. As Alva Skates tallied sales in the millions of dollars, dozens of other companies followed Alva’s lead, cultivating the personalities of their riders and building a product line around images that had little to do with the actual product.\footnote{SkateBoarder, December 1977, 58; Alva interview; Dogtown and Z-Boys; Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 78-80; http://www.angelfire.com/indie/dogtown/alvaads.html.}

Skateboarding enjoyed a halcyon era between 1973 and 1980. Once again, investors flocked to the market. In this incarnation more avenues of profit were part of skateboarding’s budding economy. In addition to hard goods, such as wheels, decks, and trucks, the technological advances of post-urethane skating demanded new and better places to skate.

The modern skatepark was the pinnacle and they came in great numbers. Hundreds of concrete playgrounds became part of the urban landscape, sometimes on the fringes and
other times in the heart of urban centers. The vast majority were designed by investors seeking profits.\textsuperscript{53}

Although the concrete boom only lasted a few years, secondary market sectors developed in the late 1970s. Clothing and other soft goods took a more prominent place. When \textit{SkateBoarder} magazine reappeared in 1975, Val Surf ran a full page ad that featured five skateboards, one pair of surf sandals, and twenty-six different T-shirts.\textsuperscript{54} Reliable numbers for the ratio soft good to hard good sales do not exist, but estimates for 1977 ranged from $400 million in combined hard and soft goods to as much as $600 million. The revenue of this period, much like the 1960s, added to the legitimacy and the struggle for acceptance by an industry that by 1977 had been part of the landscape for almost twenty years. Only in 1977 did the federal Census of Manufactures gave the skateboard its own SIC code for tracking the value of goods shipped to wholesalers. Prior to 1977 skateboards and surfboards were lumped into the “other sporting goods” category. The raw value of completes—full skateboards—was $49.5 million in 1977. This did not include components, such as individually sold wheel-sets or trucks, and certainly did not take into account any soft goods or accessories. With the retail prices based primarily on doubling the wholesale price, the industry was looking at $100 million in sales for complete skateboards alone.\textsuperscript{55}


\textsuperscript{54}\textit{SkateBoarder}, summer 1975, 8.

Without question, the first phase of skatepark building was short-lived. Most of the
300 parks added to the landscape between 1976 and 1980 did not survive. Almost as
quickly, bull dozers arrived to remove them. No one cause precipitated the demise of
skateparks. Increasing insurance premiums were part of the equation, as was the payout
for successfully litigated injury claims. But skateparks were a victim of their own success.
The industry was very fractured and lacked the kind of survival instinct that it later
acquired. For skateparks, this new found economic and participatory success resulted in
an unintended and untimely death. As the number of skaters and skateboarding images
proliferated, more and more skateparks were built. Starting with Carlsbad, at 6.9 acres,
newer parks were bigger, better, and more expensive. As more parks were built, skaters
went to the bigger facilities, leaving behind small- and medium-sized operations. The
industry began to cannibalize itself. As attendance at one park increased, use of others
dropped off.56

Had participation rates in the sport at large kept pace with construction, increasing
insurance rates would not have been a problem, but rising costs were not met by rising
use and revenues faltered. Skateboarding remained a street sport. The other dimension
that skateparks helped introduce was the corporate aspect of the industry. The industry’s
corporate came from sponsorship and contests. No one seemed to notice that participation
rates, while increasing during the 1970s, did not translate into increased attendance at

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Times Magazine, September 12, 1976, 40, 80-83; Sarah Pileggi, “Wheeling and Dealing,”
Newsweek, September 1, 1975, 21-24; “Wheel Crazy,” Time, October 2, 1975, 46.

56Jered Bogli, “A Brief History of Skateparks,” Clamor December 2000/January
2001, 63.
skateparks. Skateparks cost money to enter, they cost money to eat at and shop at, and they cost time and money for parents who had to shuttle their kids to the facility. What the industry elites did not take into account was the fundamentally street-kid character of the sport. Once the novelty of skating at an enclosed, legal space wore off, the cost associated with going to skateparks were level with those of going to amusement parks. Skateparks became one-trick ponies. For skateparks to be truly successful, they had to become free.57

As the skatepark industry imploded, other factors shook the industry to its core. As occurred during the mid-1960s, manufacturers started to over produce equipment. This presented a real problem in a sport that was struggling to expand participation. As skateparks started to feed on each other, skateboard manufacturers suffered from a stagnant consumer base relative to the number of decks in the marketplace.58

In the 1970s, with demand on the upswing, prospective capitalists had little trouble starting a production company. Decks in this period required very little beyond the basics to manufacture: the only warping was on the kick-tail section; the board-stock was all seven-ply maple laminate; and finished units seemed to be guaranteed sellers. What was critical was image, expressed in the graphics that evolved on the underside of skateboard decks. From 1965 to the mid-1970s, every skateboard company used its corporate logo as the sole board graphic. When Alva Skates started changing the way skateboard companies advertised, those same companies reevaluated their board’s graphic design.

57 Bogli, “A Brief History of Skateparks,” 63-64.

58 Richards interview; Alva interview; Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 90.

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The 1980s witnessed the marriage of art and sport as skateboard graphics redefined the relationship between products and image. Alva, Powell-Peralta, and eventually Vision Skateboards all brought something new to the mix. Graphics blended medium and message, expressing emotion and attitude, and, without question, facilitated sales.

Regardless of the limits of skateboarding’s success, the industry still did not understand the problems of overproduction. As company revenues faltered, the price of doing business went up. Revenues slowed and companies were unable to afford sponsorship. Professional riders felt the pinch first. Between 1980 and 1985, the number of sponsored skaters dropped significantly. Lance Mountain, one of the original members of Stacy Peralta’s traveling team of professional skaters known as the Bones Brigade, remembered getting paid $50 dollars a month, with the amount dropping to $15 by 1984. In an effort to salvage their sport, professional skaters such as Lance Mountain, Tony Hawk, Christian Hosoi, and Mark “Gator” Rogowski took vertical skating to its most extreme.59

In 1978, skateboarding technique evolved to another level with the invention of the “ollie.” Alan Gelfand, a thirteen-year-old skater from Florida, developed a move the allowed riders to pop their boards of any flat surface. It was accomplished by snapping the tail of the board against the ground hard enough to cause the entire board to rise upward. In the same motion, the rider’s foot slid slightly forward, “grabbing” the board as the shoe clung to the coarse grip tape that covered every skateboard. The effect was to

create a no-handed aerial on either horizontal or flat surfaces. With the birth of the “ollie,” pros began to experiment in the vertical plane in ways the Z-Boys could not imagine. Aerial maneuvers became the bar against which all skating was measured. Freestyle became extinct.60

Flash was the overarching element to skating between 1983 and 1990. Various skaters developed spinning aerials by rotating their bodies and boards 540 degrees while catapulted six feet above the top of a fifteen-foot ramp or bowl. Aggressive riding was the response to corporate woes, as skaters competed not only for prestige but for the few fully sponsored slots that remained with manufacturers. Many skateboarders had developed a working class mentality about their sport, using it to do more than just have fun: professional skateboarding paid for cars, home mortgages, and insurance.

Skateboarding had always been an industry but by 1985 it had become a business. In California alone, the Wall Street Journal estimated that in 1985, more than 10,000 people a day worked in skateboarding related jobs. Only a few of those jobs, compared to the number of amateur skateboarders, were as sponsored riders. As the strains on the industry began to show, as skateparks closed and revenues dropped off, being a professional skateboarder had little future. For the few who remained, opportunities abounded. Very few professional riders meant that companies could spend enormous resources promoting one skater. Unlike the 1970s, when companies promoted entire teams, the economic


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considerations of the 1980s resulted in personality cults that were predicated on the same “rags to riches” mythology that nurtured the hopes of early nineteenth century Americans. In the twentieth century, the sport was exceptionalized in these atypical riders, young men who rose above to find greatness. Their “rock star” status was monitored and cultivated by industry elites whose companies hovered at the edge of insolvency.61

Without question, skateboarding affirmed the technological lifestyle. As a sport, it depended on technological growth and innovation. The urban landscape: concrete--asphalt, metal railing--was the crucible that forged contemporary skateboarding. Moving the sport from the street to skateparks was always a little strained. In 1977, when asked if skateparks were the future of skateboarding, if all skateboarding should be done in skateparks, John O’Malley replied, “I didn’t learn to skateboard in a park.” O’Malley insisted that skateparks offered the quickest learning curve for riding non-horizontal surfaces.62

But in the end skateboarding was a street sport, a pool sport. The full measure of Craig Stecyk’s observation, that it was eleven year-old kids who understood the full potential of 200 years of American technology, was found in the transformation of skating during the 1980s. The mistaken analysis of 1966-1972 period would not be made. Sales dropped off. Participation was not as intense as the industry and media made it out. But the technological imperative would play a definite role in the way skateboarding survived and eventually prospered. Skate videos were the new medium, and Marshall


McLuhan's exhortation that the medium was the message was typified perfectly in skateboarding.63

A 1984 video called Skatevisions captured much of how skateboarding tried to reinvent itself. Using many classic motifs—disrespect for authority, cavalier dress and behavior, street style, and a singular rebel personality—Mark “Gator” Rogowski—Skatevisions told viewers that skateboarding was more than a sport, it was a lifestyle. It set a dramatic new tone. Nearly every video from this period capitalized on that classic surfing motif of marrying lifestyle—dress, music, behavior—to physical activity, to sport. In skate videos, masses of young amateur skaters saw that the uniforms never came off—skateboarding was something you lived as much as did. The other obvious appeal to skate videos was in their kinetic representation of skateboarding. Videos were unlike the still photography that dominated magazines such as SkateBoarder, which was finding heavy competition for market share with the creation of new magazines such as Thrasher and Transworld Skateboarding.64

The birth of the modern skate video had the same effect on the sport as urethane. In that decaying journalistic market, skate videos capitalized on the blossoming popularity of video music entertainment, made possible by the creation of MTV in August 1981 and the steady spread of cable television across America during the 1980s. The skate video presented a somewhat romanticized image of skateboarding: perfect moves, top-flight

63Bolster, 110; Davidson, 48-49.

equipment, and theme music. Most of all, the pictures were moving. Rather than being forced to conjure the beginning and end to every still image from a magazine, viewers saw the entire move, from horizontal to vertical and back. Indeed, the video often presented the audience with sequenced runs, ten to twenty linked maneuvers, much like what took place during two-minute competition runs at later televised skate contests such as the Gravity Games or the X-Games.65

In the 1980s, sport continued to be influenced by the world at large. Music, corporate greed, and suburban alienation became buzzwords and beefsteak for an industry that took a severe hit with the demise of skateparks. The 1980s was marked by the apex of the vertical phase of skateboarding. Unlike the early twenty-first century, where skate contests and the “business” are equally split between street and vertical, the 1980s was all about going big.

Despite the bravado image of the sport, the industry teetered during the Reagan years. According to the Census of Manufactures, the value of wholesale transfers of complete decks dropped from $49.5 million in 1977 to $3.7 million in 1982. These numbers should be interpreted in terms of changes to the retail skateboard industry: the proliferation of deck, truck, and wheel manufacturers likely made complete setups less popular than picking each component separately and assembling the whole thing at home. More and more decks were coming pre-drilled for mounting trucks, unlike the 1970s when a skateboard shop had to drill the deck with a special jig that centered the hole pattern and spaced the trucks from nose to tail with the appropriate wheelbase. As an enduring sport

65Skatevisions, 1984; Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 112-113.
skateboarding once again experienced the pangs of product saturation, struggling with itself for a consumer base that was not expanding on par with production.\textsuperscript{66}

There were two approaches to drawing in more participant consumers. The first, perfected by Brad Dorfman’s company, Vision, was to mainstream the idea of being alienated and disaffected. Although it seemed like a contradiction in terms, the fact is that many youths hung out on the edge of their “alternative” sports looking for segue into the center. Vision tried to sell them that credibility. John Hogan, former manager for the Vision skateboard team, explained:

“The art department at Vision developed the concept of Street Wear, a concept of big logos that in some way would distinguish the wearer as part of the subculture that was skateboarding. In a way it was pretty attractive, at the very beginning at least, it was attractive to skateboarders because it finally had a way of legitimizing the culture. The mid-80s was the genesis of skateboarding being marketed to the mainstream of American youth. Vision was definitely at the epicenter. For those people on the edge of the skateboarding culture, if you weren’t sure you wanted to be a rebel skateboarder, once you saw it in Nordstrom’s, you could say ‘yeah, yeah, I accept that.’”\textsuperscript{67}

In this model, skateboarding started to leave behind its surfing roots. As much as 1970s skaters such as Alva or Peralta tried to emulate surfers like Larry Bertleman, that imitative experience only lasted as long as skateboarding remained at or nearly horizontal. As the sport moved into pools and became more vertically oriented, it changed. Bertleman turns could be done on vertical surfaces, but they interrupted the flow of the ride, bringing riders to a near standstill at the bottom of a wall. The progression


\textsuperscript{67}\textit{Stoked}, 2002; Brooke, \textit{The Concrete Wave}, 111.

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became more radical, more sequenced, as movements on the skateboard climbed higher
and higher up the pool’s walls, eventually leaving the pool altogether with the birth of the
aerial.

The process of shedding the surf nuance in favor of something uniquely skate-based
began with the Dogtown evolution; it was completed in the 1980s by Tony Hawk,
Christian Hosoi, Lance Mountain, and Mark Rogowski. “Always before, the skater
wanted to surf and emulated surfing,” explained Dick Metz, founder of the Hobie Sports
retail chain and partner of surfboard king Hobie Alter. “Now it’s rad to be a skateboarder
and the skateboarder is more rad than the surfer. Skateboarders dress differently, act
differently—it’s become more progressive and stylish, while the surfer has evolved into a
conservative thing.”

The strategy worked well. As the participation base expanded, sales began to
rebound. The Census of Manufactures indicated that the value of wholesale transfers of
complete decks rose to $48,000,000 in 1987. Sales of overall individual hard goods and
soft-goods also skyrocketed. More than 20,000,000 skateboarders turned skateboarding
into an industry that grossed almost $250,000,000 in wholesale individual equipment
sales and another $240 million for accessories and clothing in 1987. Larry Gordon, owner
of Gordon & Smith and a long-time mover in the industry, observed: “It’s too established
to die. Like the bicycle or surfboard business, once something like this become

68Mary Ann Galante, “Calif. Companies Ride to Success With Skateboarding,”
Los Angeles Times, April 17, 1988, 20.
established, there’s an ongoing market-new kids, kids that wear out equipment or want to buy newer things."  

The second way that the industry attracted more kids was to emphasize the most radical aspect of the sport: vertical skateboarding. Technology had kept pace with the intense athleticism of the skateboarder. Urethane wheels were redesigned, allowing for varying degrees of hardness and size, such that certain wheels were ideal for concrete and others more tuned to the newest competitive evolution: ramp skating. Boards were milled wider and wider, with numerous models ranging between ten and eleven inches wide, a far cry from the average eight-inch width of the mid-1970s. The increased width provided more stability for executing and landing big aerials, especially on ramps. The advantages of ramp skating were many. Compared to skateparks, where vertical competitions took place in concrete bowls that mimicked swimming pools, ramps were modular—they could be broken down and set up in venues that accommodated thousands of people.

By 1987, more and more competitions took place during the year on portable ramp systems. Ramps were less injurious to skaters than concrete. Bailing out of a failed maneuver on a ramp did not have to mean great bodily harm, as plastic-capped knee pad technology allowed a safe knee slide to most exits. The effect was to magnify the confidence of skaters and amplify their tricks. On ramps, ten-foot aerials became common place and where spinning aerials became part of the landscape. Companies like Vision, Galante, ibid; Bureau of the Census, 1987 Census of Manufactures, vol. 39 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 39B-15.

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Swatch, and various hard goods manufacturers promoted skateboarding as a spectator sport, with fledgling cable and network television coverage.70

In the middle of all of this vertical chaos was Bill Silva, the first mainstream agent for action sports athletes. An important marker for mainstream appeal is the ability of any athlete to become a brand name in their own right, when that athlete can endorse trans-industry products. The most conspicuous example is Tony Hawk, who can promote everything from super markets to breakfast bars, from good nutrition in milk ads to ads promoting increased literacy among elementary school kids. The cross-market appeal makes the specific sport idiosyncratic—it is the athlete that is important. Bill Silva correctly identified the mainstream nature of skateboarding and freestyle BMX and built a sports management company on that premise. Impact Management was the first of its kind, dedicated to promoting “action sports” athletes.

Silva helped develop the traveling action sports show. The forerunner to Tony Hawk’s “Boom Boom Huckjam,” an early twenty-first century multi-sport, non-competitive tour featuring skaters, freestyle BMX, and motorcycle Moto-X riders, was the Swatch Impact tour. The Impact tour was the first that combined skateboarding and BMX ramp riding. “The more we got into the management thing, the more clients we signed up, the more we realized there were limited means to promote these athletes’ careers,” Silva told the Los Angeles Times in 1988. “There were a couple of skateboarding magazines, a couple of bike magazines and maybe five contests a year, not counting occasional in-store appearances by top professional riders co-sponsored by

70Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 110.
manufacturers and individual retailers.” As a result, Silva said, “We came up with the concept of putting on a demonstration-exhibition tour that would bring these athletes to retail stores around the country, not just to one or two stores in one or two cities.”

Silva designed and promoted the Swatch Impact tour similar to a traveling rock concert, with choreographed light shows, music, and sequenced skateboard/BMX riding. Stacy Peralta came along as the traveling commentator and the event was marketed to television and local news channels. Musing to a Chicago Tribune reporter during the Chicago leg of the Swatch Impact tour, former professional Mark “Gator” Rogowski explained much of the ennui of skateboarding in this phase of its history:

“I’ve pulled ligaments, broken both wrists and knocked out all my front teeth over the past 12 years. You exchange scars for money; each one has a story. I had no idea I’d make a living from this when I started out. Money didn’t inspire me. It was the physical release of anxiety and aggression, such a great way to faucet energy....Skateboarding was a chance to do something as an individualist thing rather than a team sport.”

The Swatch Impact Tour lasted two full months and made thirty-five stops from coast to coast and everywhere in between. Silva’s tour boasted audiences of between 5,000 and 10,000 people.

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72 Arnold, ibid.


74 Boulware, ibid; Arnold, ibid; Stoked, 2002.
Contemporary sports revealed that the only limit to the playing field was limit imposed by technology. When skateboarders moved away from the horizontally oriented skating of the 1960s to the urethane driven vertical skating of the 1970s and 1980s, skateboarding found new life. Transmogrifying the playing field was something participants in many sports wished they could do, but only skateboarding and eventually mountain biking and surfing actually accomplished the task. But skateboarding faced the problems of its own success. What the sport needed was a new iconic figure that represented all the mainstream aspirations kids who wanted to skate without being considered criminals.

Bill Riordan, a sports agent who at one time represented tennis star Jimmy Connors, got interested in skateboarding during its mid-1970s resurgence. Riordan said anything that generated a half-billion dollars in sales could not be all bad. Cynicism aside, Riordan made a trenchant observation: “To make this sport viable in America, you need to create national heroes to sustain it.” At the time, 1976, Riordan was talking about his newest athlete, Ty Page.75

Very few people outside the industry remember the great skateboarder Ty Page. That has a lot to do with media. In all fairness, Page never got the kind of exposure that Tony Hawk eventually received. Everybody knows Tony Hawk. But what Riordan did not understand was that skateboarding was never about heroes—it was about good guys and bad guys. It was a mythic western that played out in weekly or monthly shoot-outs at

Tony Alva mused on the confrontational aspect of the sport when he observed: “We always had such a hardcore attitude. Our attitude was like, ‘We skateboard—fuck you!’ We are what we are because we skateboard and that’s it.”

Sometimes the goods guys won, sometimes the bad guys. Both categories went on to become millionaires through endorsements and sponsorships and have their own companies or television shows; some went to prison or committed suicide, unable to deal with the furtive nature of the “business” that had evolved around the sport of skateboarding.

Vertical skating, like freestyle skating from 1960s, became a one-trick-pony. While the visual appeal was undeniable, especially for television, the simple fact was that very few people could replicate the experience they saw on TV. A marked participatory gap evolved between what the average skateboarder watched and what they could do themselves. The equipment, the ramps, the revitalized industry, everything was in place to sell vert to the public. But the public could not do aerial spins or “ollies” ten feet off the ground. So the image was all that could draw in the average skater.

But youth culture started changing in the 1980s. The common assumption, especially by executives at companies like Vision Street Wear, was that American kids did not mind skateboarding had been co-opted by large corporations. The image of a skateboarder such as Mark Rogowski wearing a hat, sunglasses, wristbands, watches, T-shirts, pants, shoes, and socks with the Vision label became comic. American kids were not immune to the

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76Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 79; Alva interview.

77Hiss and Bart, “Free as a Board,” 83; Deford, “Promo Wiz,” ibid.
incredibly cynical excesses of corporate leaders, in or out of the industry. The tail end of this corporatized phase in skate history took place in a parallel universe with the Iran-Contra scandal and weekly junk-bond scandals. The image of the badass vert skater was tarnished by the obvious effort to profit.

Over-milking the promise of vertical skating had inverse effects on profits. In 1992, as America sent Bill Clinton to the White House, the wholesale value of complete skateboard sets dropped to $12,000,000 for the year, down from $48,000,000 in 1987. At the same time, hundreds of smaller start-up companies, board labels too numerous to list, flooded the market. Former sponsored skaters as well as disaffected up-and-comers took chances on small, grunge-style companies that only wanted a small piece of Vision’s market share. The Action Sports Retailer Show, once a venue for 100 or more vendors, became a supermarket. By 1992, the ASR show boasted more than 800 vendors, with skateboard-related companies increasing their presence four-fold.

One of the consistent truths about contemporary sports is that they do not stay the same for long periods of time. Surfing, mountain biking, and especially skateboarding all managed to reinvent themselves as external forces and pressures threatened their progressively centrist position on the sporting landscape. Something happened to the sport of skateboarding, something very quiet and very reactionary.

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79http://www.asrbiz.com/asr/overview.jsp; Brooke, The Concrete Wave, 138-139; Alva interview; Richards interview.

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Skateboarders responded to corporatization and took skateboarding back to the streets. As the last few big skateparks closed, such as Del Mar Skate Ranch in San Diego and Upland in San Bernardino County, park riders went back to skating in the streets. They used the single most versatile maneuver available—the ollie—to jump off stairs, over obstacles, and launch onto handrails. The ollie had been part of vert skating for a while, but its practice was not yet universal. Street skating applied much of vert skating to common urban fixtures: axle grinds on pool coping were the same as axle grinds on curb or parking barrier; tail-slides on a ramp were the same as tail-slides on a hand rail; catching two or three feet of air in a bowl was like doing an ollie off a four-foot loading dock behind the local supermarket.

From an economic perspective, street skating was the future of skateboarding. It appealed to the same demographic that skateboarding had appealed to in the 1960s: every kid who did not have access to a pool, ramp, or skatepark. Street skating again democratized skateboarding. Vert skating remained part of the landscape: they were the heroes, the legends, the rock stars. Tony Hawk continued his meteoric rise to fame and iconic status. Vertical skating continued its progression into ever more complex maneuvers, many of which made use of techniques developed in the new brand of street style. But at a participatory level it was street skating and the new ethos born of anti-corporatism, that propelled skateboarding into the dead center of youth sport.

As the sport reached a juncture in the late 1980s, skateboarding was forced into another period of relying on its roots for survival. To maintain viability, the sport changed again, this time going backwards. In this newest phase of the sport, skateboarders
appropriated space formerly defined as public or common and removed the limits to its potential. Once again, skateboarders redefined and expanded their own playing field through technology and style.

In the atmosphere of the era, these spatial appropriations were natural. The innovative nature of skating propelled it beyond its extant environment, paradoxically thought of prior to street skating as limitless. But skateboarders had always been adept at discovering limits and then progressing beyond them. Because the ollie turned horizontal terrain into three-dimensional terrain, allowing street skaters to propel their boards above flat ground and over benches or onto walls or up steps, the landscape changed meaning. Stacy Peralta observed that, “Skaters can exist on the essentials of what is out there. Anything is part of the run. For urban skaters the city is the hardware on their trip.” The glaring aspect of street skating was its public domain: skateboarding no longer happened in backyard pools or in skateparks located down some suburban road. It was in the middle of business districts and public parks, outdoor malls and university campuses. Produced in 1988 and 1989, Peralta’s skate videos *Public Domain* and *Ban This* capitalized on this very element. They depicted skaters popping ollies and jumping over cement planters and fire hydrants, onto the sides of buildings and over cars. Skaters made the same kind of appropriations in the 1990s that they had in the 1960s and 1970s. Between 1964 and 1965, the first four issues of *SkateBoarder* were riddled with photos of skaters riding down multi-storied circular parking garage ramps, riding backyard pools, down the middle of streets and on sidewalks. That tradition of spatial appropriation continued in the 1975 reincarnation of *SkateBoarder*, adding “super-architectural” spaces to the
complex of the skater's playing field. Street skaters democratized the sport forever by adding a maneuver that almost anyone could learn and made almost any hard surface part of the playing field.\textsuperscript{80}

Part of the way out of stagnation was paved by the California State Assembly. As the numbers of skateboarders, principally street skaters, grew during the 1990s, public spaces were the favored terrains of skateboarders. Since pools were fewer and further between and the vertical terrain at skateparks bulldozed into memory, skateboarders modified the dominant style to accommodate the most available skateable surfaces. The problem was the natural rate of injury that followed and the fear that liability would be assigned to property owners—even if those owners were municipal governments.\textsuperscript{81}

In response, Assemblyman Bill Morrow, a former skateboarder himself, spearheaded modification of an existing California statute that codified a list of "hazardous recreational activities." The list already included activities like surfing, rock climbing, mountain biking. The statute made cities and counties immune from lawsuits filed by people injured on public property while engaging in any of these hazardous activities. In its original form, the skateboarding law applied to people more than fourteen years old who were using a public park. It also applied to adults on public property where skating


\textsuperscript{81}\textsuperscript{81}"New Laws from the State Capitol," Sacramento Observer, December 31, 1997, A5; Tracy Johnson, "Tired of Hassles, Skateboarders Seek Own Space," March 31, 1997, 1A.
and skateboarding were permitted. The law stipulated that if notices were posted advising skateboarders of the liability limitation, legal redress for injuries was severely restricted. The full measure of the law’s impact became apparent within a few years.  

Although it was designed to insulate municipalities and counties from litigious individuals, the lack of legal contestation over AB 1296 heralded something else. Not only were cities shielded, they could also build skateparks for youth. The double benefit was clear: providing dedicated, municipally funded space for skateboarders meant less wear and tear on other public fixtures and the whole endeavor was effectively free of liability. Without question, if municipalities could have been shielded in a similar fashion during the 1970s, the landscape of sport would have looked much different much more quickly. As it was, AB 1296 was better late than never.

The great age of municipal skateparks was shepherded by city managers who tried to placate angry skateboarders banned from streets and sidewalks. After AB 1296, local officials from across the United States came to Huntington Beach for guidance. The city built the first of its two parks in 1993. In addition to following California’s lead on park planning, local and state legislatures imitated AB 1296 widely after 1997, which exempted cities from most skateboarding lawsuits. Bill Fowler, Huntington Beach’s superintendent of recreation and community services, reported that direct municipal involvement in skatepark administration, as well as the shield from liability afforded by AB 1296 resulted in no claims filed by injured skateboarders against his city. Fowler was

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an early advocate during this renewal period. He chided cities that turned up their noses at skateboarders. “Recreation isn’t just for certain people,” he said. “Skateboarding is a sport like any other, and skateboarders deserve a place to do their thing.”

After trying since 1993, Morrow, an Oceanside Republican succeeded. He was exactly what the rebounding sport and industry of skateboarding needed. Legislative consideration of the sport’s central place in the sporting landscape, made skateboarding a hazardous activity, much like rock climbing or surfing, a testament to the agency of the participants. As a result of cities and counties not being sued for injuries in skateboard parks, growth was possible. “Many cities weren’t able to build parks because of the high cost of liability insurance or the risk of going without it,” Morrow said. “This has spurred many communities to build.”

For the small cadre that designed skateboard parks, times were good. “We’re working with 23 cities on 35 parks,” said Steve Rose, a Fullerton landscape architect who designed the parks in Huntington Beach and did a feasibility study for parks in Ventura. The ripple to other counties and other states continued. Between 1997 and 2002, municipal governments, city and county, constructed more than 2,000 public skateparks. The only state in America that did not have a skatepark in 2002 was Tennessee. In 2005, there are still in excess of 1,000 city/county skateparks in operation, with proposals for nearly 2,000 more. Perhaps more telling than the municipal response to AB 1296 is the

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82Ibid.
geographic breakdown of where those parks are located. California was ranked number one, with 200 parks in 2002. But of the ten states with the highest number of parks, western states only occupy sixth and ninth place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of Skateparks</th>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>200</td>
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<td>Illinois</td>
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<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<td>Washington</td>
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<td>Wisconsin</td>
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By January 2005 there were more than 3,200 public and private skateparks in America.

Over four decades, skateboarding became the center of youth sport and very nearly the middle of the entire panacea of sport. The underlying complexity to skateboarding that only appears sporadically in traditional/core sports is skateboarding constantly rides the line between expression and sport. It also possesses a creative and innovative energy that seems to belie its transformative effect. One of contemporary sport’s key assets has been its capacity for innovation and change. Whenever a structural, technical, or participatory stumbling block cropped up, skateboarding or surfing or mountain biking always adapted. But as America entered its fifth decade with skateboarding, this cutting edge sport became a paradox. In 1995, skateboarding at its core was little changed from

85Heidi Lemmon, SPAUSA, e-mail message to author, 5-25-05; http://www.sitedesigngroup.com.

86http://www.skateboard.com/frontside/GetLocal/parks/.

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the 1960s. It was still dominated by young men who rode skateboards in places they were
told they should not; it was still a sport that married action and lifestyle elements like
dress, hairstyle, music, clothing, and language; and it was still a sport that depended only
on the interplay between participant and equipment.

The creative energy that possessed skateboarding in the early 1970s was not only
found in skateboarding. The larger landscape of sport seemed touched by something only
technology and the late 1960s could produce. Tony Alva's assessment of his own
contribution to sport history and the evolution of modern sport was paradoxical. He did
not suggest in a 2004 interview that he changed sport; rather, Alva contended that what
he and the Z-Boys did was marry sport to a lifestyle. They popularized something that
was already happening on the streets of southern California and every other urban center
in America.\footnote{Alva interview; \textit{Dogtown and Z-Boys}, 2001.}

The fusion of street culture, interdisciplinary board sport, music, and attitude
coalesced to produce an energy that traditional sport had lacked for some time. The
despair that came after the 1960s was pushed aside by a group of teenagers in southern
California who refused to accept mundane interpretations of what sport meant. They took
a hobby, a toy, and the ridicule of elites and transformed those obstacles into a modern,
aggressive sport. Skateboarding may have been something to do or even something to get
good at before 1973. But after urethane, laminates, and Dogtown, skateboarding was a
sport. It was competitive, profitable, and generated a participation rate on par with any
traditional team sport.
The reinvention of skateboarding did not take place in a vacuum. Sport as a category reflects the surrounding world. Skateboarding absolutely affirms this model. Far from being different than traditional/core sports, skateboarding started working its way to the center of American sport as early as the 1960s. Those first years saw skateboarding modeled on the dominant ethos of conservative America. It seemed to only be minutes after Val Surf ushered in the retail phase that companies joined the matrix and brought the “team” oriented element to the sport, to a sport that should have been driven by individualism and rebelliousness. Technology brought skating back into the landscape of media coverage and the 1970s made skateboarding its own. In this era, quite unlike the 1960s, skateboarding was never really a team sport.

Mirroring the more hedonistic character of the decade, skateboarders in the 1970s thrived on the cult of personality, as Alva, Peralta, Adams, and others reigned supreme. In this incarnation, athletes allied with corporations but were promoted as individuals. There was an incredible effort to maintain a stylized, gunslinger/rock star image for the more talented and socially alienated riders. The more left-of-center any skater’s behavior, the more their signature skateboard-model sold. In essence, the more radical riders were, the more centric they became. The point was to foment participation, to drive skateboarding in from the fringes without losing the edgy appeal. This trick proved difficult, but the 1970s character of skateboarding created a model for successive decades.

In Peralta’s *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, Alva states that “without us there wouldn’t be any extreme sport, there wouldn’t be any X Games.” Perhaps. The most enlightening aspect of this study is just how untrue that statement ended up being. At the exact same time,
almost the same year, that Alva, Adams, Peralta, and the rest of the Z-Boys were
propelling their sport upward and onward, beyond vertical, another group of intrepid
bicyclists named Ritchey, Fisher, Kelly, and Breeze were doing the same thing to cycling,
500 miles north in Marin county, California.
CHAPTER 6

THIS AIN’T YOUR DADDY’S SCHWINN: MOUNTAIN BIKING
IN THE EXTREME WEST

In the July 1995 issue of MtB Magazine, a full-page advertisement appeared featuring a portrait of Fisher Mountain Bikes founder, Gary Fisher. The text beneath the photo read, “Gary Fisher: He invented the mountain bike in 1974.”¹ The advertisement does not make any references to how the mountain bike changed cycling or society. It just wanted people to know who came first. The sad part is that it is not true: Gary Fisher did not invent the mountain bike. No one person invented the mountain bike. In fact, it really does not matter who invented the mountain bike. The process that surrounded the mountain bike’s evolution, from the 25th Infantry’s experience in the late nineteenth century to the Pearl Pass Tour in the 1970s is the core of the story of the mountain bike. During that 100 years, cycling became something else. It became easier, more advanced, and more open to access. In a word, the mountain bike democratized cycling not only for Americans, but for the world’s citizens as well.

¹MtB, July 1995, 11; Gary Fisher, interview by author, December 6, 2003, San Anselmo, California. Fisher maintained that the ad was not his idea. He pointed out that the ad was conceived after Trek Bicycles purchased Fisher Mountain Bikes. Trek also purchased the rights to Gary Fisher’s name. Fisher was obliged to do the ad per contractual obligations to Trek.
During the second half of the twentieth century, the American West became the place where innovation in sport flourished. Not only in surfing and skateboarding, but also in cycling. Long considered the province of effete Europeans and tawny, granola crunching American twenty-somethings, participation in cycling diminished after 1945. Cycling fell from its position of prominence among both elites and the middle classes during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once a respite for workers as well as a marker of trans-class identity for managers and owners of capital, cycling served a valuable function in pre-World War I America. Freedom of motion, the promise of horse, the wagon, the streetcar, and the automobile, was perfected in the bicycle. The bicycle possessed exactly the right combination of mobility and individualism that Americans always desired.

But America’s involvement in a pair of global wars led many Americans to reorient their thinking about “frivolous” activities such as cycling. More than ever, sport was married to the evolving corporate/team ethos of post-war industrial/suburban society. There was no more time for childish pursuits like riding a bike. Having survived World War I and the ensuing the influenza epidemic, the Depression, and Hitler, Americans entered the post-1945 era with a strong sense of purpose and obligation. The enormous economic opportunities available after World War II pushed many Americans toward a reorientation of their thinking, not only about work but also about play. Productivity and responsibility were the new watchwords in America’s post-war psyche, and bicycle riding did not underpin or augment those values. Automobiles presented a more efficient means of transportation for “getting the job done.” In short, the bicycle became useful only for people who could not or would not drive a car. Its technology seemed more suited to kids

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or professional athletes. What brought Americans back to the bicycle and opened cycling up to more people than ever was the mountain bike.

Mountain biking did not begin as a western activity but it followed a classic western model. The paradox of the West has always been the gulf between the myth of individuality and the reality of community and cooperation. As a sport, mountain biking was promoted like most of the so-called “extreme” sports: it was individualistic, it did not depend on team participation, it was the antithesis of corporate road cycling. For mountain biking, all of these descriptors proved wholly untrue. As did most sports born in the West, mountain biking evolved out of intense cooperative effort, it involved community as a shaping force, and it was almost never pursued individually. The notion of using a bicycle designed for paved surface transportation in an off-road setting is not unique to the American West. But the sporting, competitive aspect of mountain biking, as well as the technological evolution of the mountain bike was certainly of western origin.

In the early 1970s, a group of off-road riders from Cupertino, California began a revolution by adding road cycle multi-gear systems and motorcycle drum brakes to balloon tire beach cruiser bikes. Another group of riders just north of San Francisco in Marin County completed the process with dedicated frames and corporate structuring. The composite bike, originally known as the “clunker,” was America’s first mountain bike. The nascent mountain bike industry soon followed. This marked one of the great sea changes in bicycling history and the entrance of the West onto the roadmap of cycling history.
Bicycling as a leisure activity went through other major shifts before the mountain bike revolution. In the 1880s velocipedes, highly undemocratic contraptions with enormous front wheels driven by attached pedals, gave way to the “safety bicycle.” The safety bike featured an important innovation: the separation of steering and propulsion. Pedals attached to crank arms turned a chain ring, located directly below the rider at about the mid-point on the bike. The chain ring drove a rear wheel fitted with a companion sprocket. With the crank arms and pedals removed from the front wheel, steering became a more precise function. This is the bicycle as most Americans recognize it. Even the safety bicycle was not the product of a single inventor—it evolved over time and out of experimentation.

The evolution of the safety bike was also a reaction to terrain and demand. Henry J. Lawson of Coventry, England, who produced a rear wheel chain-driven bicycle which compelled other manufacturers to improve their own safety designs. Lawson sensed that the criticisms of high-wheel bikes would make them obsolete, especially given the potential with safety bikes. Lawson introduced the Sussex Giant in 1876, which featured an eighty-four-inch lever driven rear wheel. The Sussex Giant evolved into the Safety Bicycle, introduced later that year. Lawson unveiled the Bicyclette in 1879 and demonstrated at the Stanley Show in 1880. Like the Cupertino riders nearly 100 years later, extreme terrain applications and unrivaled durability were something that impressed onlookers. The Cyclist reported “here, indeed, is safety guaranteed, and the cyclist may
ride rough-shod over hedges, ditches, and other similar obstacles." In 1885, John Kemp Starley, also from Coventry, introduced a version of the safety bike called the Rover Safety. It was the first model to have all the attributes of a modern bicycle design, including steering that did not rely on bridle-rods. Starley admitted that safety was not his primary concern. His design focused on maximizing the rider’s power efficiency, especially for uphill movement and travel over rough terrain. "The Rover is absolutely the outcome of a determination to obtain advantage previously unknown in a bicycle...particularly with regard to hill climbing." These considerations were part and parcel of the innovations achieved in California in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Numerous engineers, tinkerers, and enthusiasts contributed to the first great sea change in cycling, the shift from big-wheeler bikes to safety bikes. In America, participation in cycling followed much the same line as Europe. Extreme uses of bicycle also mirrored the European prototype. In 1896, Lt. James A. Moss, a long-time booster of bicycle technology, organized the 25th U.S. Infantry Bicycle Corps. Originating in Missoula, Montana, the Bicycle Corps was staffed by African-American soldiers with enormous fortitude. Moss was determined to prove to the Army that the bicycle was a viable transportation tool for the modernizing American military. Between 1896 and

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3 Quoted in Dodge, 99; Herlihy, 237-239.
1897, Moss led the 25th Infantry through a series of off-road experiments in military cycling.\(^4\)

The technology of bicycling may have advanced in the late nineteenth century, but Moss and the 25th Infantry did not benefit from those advances during the initial Bicycle Corps field tests. The first trip made by Moss and his troops covered 126 miles, round trip between Fort Missoula and Lake McDonald. The bikes still employed wooden rims and frames held together by welds designed for street riding. In addition to rim and frame problems, troops encountered broken pedals, loose chains, and endless punctured tires. They also endured three days of wind, heavy rain, mud, and precipitous inclines and descents that tested both their strength and their cycling prowess. But Moss was convinced the bicycle could be adapted successfully to the rigors of military service.

By 1897, Moss and his commanding officer, Col. Andrew S. Burt, another avid cyclist and advocate of athletics, decided that a larger test was needed. But any more extensive testing demanded hardware modifications. Moss acquired specially designed bicycles from the Spaulding Bicycle Company. Spaulding wanted to submit their designs to rigorous field testing and so donated the equipment to Moss and the 25th Infantry. The physiographic demands of the West compelled technological evolution and Spaulding accommodated Moss's various requests. The new bikes had steel rims, luggage racks, frame cases, and came complete with repair tools and extra parts. The rims were laced on

more durable spokes and the front end featured heavier gauge side forks with headset crowns for improved steering. The chains were enclosed in gear cases, adding to their defense against off-road obstacles. The impending field test required all this technology and more.5

The 25th Infantry Bicycle Corps committed itself to completing whatever mission might be planned for summer 1897. Moss chose an audacious trek: Fort Missoula to St. Louis, Missouri. The field test covered just over 1,900 miles. Moss staffed his contingent with twenty men, all chosen primarily for their physical conditioning rather than their cycling ability. With bicycles that weighed in excess of seventy pounds when fully loaded, the 25th pedaled out of Fort Missoula on June 14, 1897. The fact that they were black soldiers made no difference to the residents of town of Missoula, as citizens clapped and cheered the double file procession of bicycle-mounted troops streaming past. The local paper called the event “one of the most important journeys ever taken out of this city.”6

Nearly six weeks later, the 25th Infantry approached St. Louis. On July 25, local cycling enthusiasts rode out to meet the members of the 25th and escort them into town. The soldiers were met with cheers and accolades greater than the cheers that began their arduous journey. The entire city of St. Louis applauded their arrival, again with complete indifference to their ethnicity. The St. Louis Star heralded the soldiers’ feat as “the most


marvelous trip in the history of the wheel.” The trip itself also amounted to one of the most rapid military movements in history. Excluding six days for rest, the 25th spent thirty-four days in the saddle, averaging between fifty and sixty miles per day. Whether or not the bicycle was considered a viable military technology, the 25th Infantry proved the off-road bicycle’s ability to transport men and material over terrain previously restricted to horses.

The experiences of the 25th Infantry suggest that bicycle was always destined for more than its intended use on the road. The West was long considered a proving ground, real or contrived, for both people and technologies. As the West evolved over the 29th century, and became linked to that “proving ground” image, real advances took place. Every sport that depends on technology experienced various changes that resulted from advances in technology. Surfing advanced because of fiberglass and polyurethane-based foam; skateboarding evolved because of urethane wheel technology. Mountain biking became a sport less because of new technologies and more because of new applications of existing technology.

The same argument applies to the printing press. As with most inventions, the ingredients for technological revolution were already available: there was paper and artist’s oil paint that was easily modified into suitable ink. Prior to Gutenberg, imprints were used in the textile trade and even separate letter stamps were used in foundries to identify metal wares. Books were already printed using wooden blocks and block books

even continued to compete with type-formed books for a period. Indeed, for work that required no revisions, block prints were better. But Gutenberg's moveable metal type won out for two reasons: movable type vastly increased the range and flexibility of production and movable type reduced the cost of production. The impact of the mountain bike on society was on par with that of the printing press, but the model was analogous. Various men and women took extant technologies, reformulated their relationship, and produced a bicycle that the world seemed to be waiting for, a bicycle that democratized access to the sport.

Many of the innovations made by early bicycle designers contributed to the development of the automobile industry, a genuine irony given the adverse effect of automobiles on cycling's popularity. Many early automobile and motorcycle designers started out as bicycle designers, including Gottlieb Daimler of Germany and Bill Harley and Arthur Davidson of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Charles and Frank Duryea, who launched the first successful American auto manufacturing firm in 1893, began as bicycle mechanics. Alexander Winton, who built the first American high-performance car in 1897—a 12-horsepower model that could do 33.7 miles per hour—started as a bicycle manufacturer in Cleveland. Even Henry Ford started as a bicycle tinkerer. He used many bicycle parts, including a saddle, on his first "quadricycle" in 1896. Pope Manufacturing Company built on the popularity of its Columbia Bicycles when it opened a motor-carriage department in 1897. Cycling enthusiasts also clamored for better roads,
led by the League of American Wheelmen, which was by 1890 the world's largest athletic association.⁸

Motorized vehicles ultimately led to a decline in the popularity of adult cycling between 1900 and 1930, particularly in the United States. The average annual bicycle production in America fell from 1,000,000 units during the 1890s to 335,000 units during the 1920s. Prices declined seventy to eighty percent during the same period. Cycling was like most other sports that evolved in America during the twentieth century: it was affected by combinations of external forces, such as competition from automobiles, and technological limitations. Cycling also had to change drastically in order to survive and prosper. As skateboarding eventually found empty swimming pools, cycling found single-track mountain trails.⁹

Off-road bicycling was always an arduous proposition, but with gearing systems that made overland and uphill travel possible for riders of limited strength, sales began to reflect expanded use. Mountain biking found its developmental pattern in a post-World War II combination of technological innovation, personal initiative, and media hype. What is certain is that a group of riders near Mt. Tamalpais, in Marin County, California, began using cruiser style bikes for high-speed, off-road riding.

The common thread to the way that sport changed in the American West was how that change was driven by combinations of personalities and technologies. Just like surfing


and skateboarding, mountain biking became a sport principally through the efforts of specific men and women who were unsatisfied with the sporting opportunities available to them. As did surfers and skaters, they also believed that technology could provide doorways to new sports.

Principal among those personalities was Joe Breeze, founder and owner of Breezer Bikes in Fairfax, California. Breeze was born in San Francisco in 1953, the fifth generation of Breeze children in California. Like most middle-class American kids, Breeze was early into bikes, riding for the first time at the age of five. “I remember my first ride. It was kind of handed down a thousand times but then I got Raleigh Sport three speed when I was in third grade,” he recalled. “I rode that to school and had that for many years. In fact I got it to the point where, okay, I want to put the drop handle bars on it and cut back the fenders. Kept moving towards the racier bike kind of thing.” This was always Breeze’s approach: better, stronger, faster.

Of all the sports he played as a youngster, cycling held the greatest appeal for Breeze. With his three-speed bike, he actually road out of Mill Valley to bowling allies or social events. In his estimation, he “got around a bit.” Early on, Breeze recognized trends and markers. “There were a few neighborhoods that were kind of leading the way, but in sixth grade I borrowed a friend’s Schwinn Varsity and we would ride out to West Marin, my brother and I, and occasionally went with my brother out to Point Reyes.” Breeze got into

Joe Breeze, interview by author, December 5, 2003, Fairfax, California.
road bikes through his dad, who had been riding high-end European road racing bikes since the 1940s.¹¹

Breeze followed much the same line as many of the athletes in parallel sports. He played little league baseball as an adolescent; in high school he played soccer and rose on an inter-school road racing team, competing against other kids in greater Marin County. Breeze’s father helped his son see the bicycle’s potential. Joe Breeze knew from a fairly early age that bicycles could be used for more than just getting around: they could be used for recreation. By the time he turned fourteen years old, Breeze and his brother were riding long distances from Mill Valley. On one memorable ride, out past Fairfield on Highway 12 going to Lodi, they were stopped by the police, who thought the Breeze brothers were running away from home. They called the Breeze home and were told it was “okay for Joey and Rich to be out there on the highway.” After that incident, the Breeze brothers carried a notarized letter of permission from their parents to avoid more calls from law enforcement personnel.¹²

The confluence of talent and personality in Marin came from another source beyond Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher. The founder of the world’s first mountain bike company, MountainBikes, Fisher’s early years were slightly different than those of Joe Breeze. Although he was born in Oakland, California, Fisher’s upbringing was fairly transient. Only six months old, his U.S. Navy father moved the family to Guam, where Fisher lived until he was almost four. Eventually his parents divorced, after which he lived with his

¹¹Breeze interview.

¹²Ibid.
mother in Beverly Hills until moving back to San Francisco. He was six years old. Then there was more moving: to Daly City, to Burlingame, and finally, at fifteen, he moved to Marin. Like Breeze, Fisher started his cycling career at five years old, with the Schwinn Spitfire he rode around Beverly Hills. When he got to Burlingame he discovered road cycling and European style racing, and freedom that it afforded him.\textsuperscript{13}

Fisher was a bright kid but felt he did not fit in, not surprising given his large number of moves and schools--eight--by the time he got back to northern California. The intricacy and effort attached to being a good cyclist and the fact that much of the success was derived through individual effort drove Fisher early toward his career. By the time he got to Marin, he was already a cyclist. Drawn into the sport by Larry Walpole at the Belmont Bicycling Club, Fisher also remembers his first Legnano racing bike as the marker of his arrival into a new identity. Fisher identified himself as a cyclist: it was what he did and what he lived. When he got to Marin, he had been racing for three years.\textsuperscript{14}

The road cycling boom that contextualized the mountain bike revolution came on the heels of larger changes in American views of physical fitness during the 1950s and 1960s. A great number of baby-boomers went through grade school when there was great emphasis on physical education. The Cold War era was marked by the development of an important factor influencing the modern fitness movement known as the “Minimum Muscular Fitness Tests in Children,” or Kraus-Weber test. A 1954 study conducted in the United States and Europe administered this test to 7,134 children, measuring their

\textsuperscript{13}Fisher interview.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.

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muscular strength and flexibility in the trunk and leg muscles. The study reported that close to 60 percent of American children failed at least one of the tests. In comparison, only nine percent of children from European countries failed one of the tests. During the Cold War, these startling numbers launched political leaders into action to promote health and fitness. Fitness and cycling also took on national significance after publicity surrounding President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s first heart attack in 1955. Paul Dudley White, a Boston heart specialist called as a consultant, recommended bicycling as a therapeutic activity for coronary patients and those at high risk of coronary disease, including Eisenhower.15

Soon after the Kraus-Weber report and his own cardiac problems, Eisenhower ordered the President’s Conference on Fitness of American Youth at U.S. Naval Academy, which was held June 18, 1956. The group that assembled recommended a cabinet-level office that focused on youth fitness programs and activities. One month later, on July 16, Eisenhower signed Executive Order 11074, which created the President’s Council on Youth Fitness. The Attorney General, and Secretaries of Interior, Agriculture, Labor, and Health, Education, and Welfare served as committee members. The Executive Order specified one objective: to improve existing programs and promote additional efforts to enhance the physical fitness of Americans. The first Council identified itself as a “catalytic agent” and concentrated on increasing public awareness. A

President’s Citizens-Advisory Committee on Fitness of American Youth was confirmed to give advice to the Council.\textsuperscript{16}

Unlike many federal panels, the President’s Council went to work on the problem as they understood it. The Council funded another Conference on Physical Fitness of Youth in 1957 and developed a plan of action. That plan initiated the first nationwide pilot study of 8,500 boys and girls, ages 5 through 12, and resulted in a national testing program. In 1963, prior to the Presidential Physical Fitness Awards, President John F. Kennedy created the Cycling in the School Fitness Program to promote wider cycling among kids and adults. Schools genuinely emphasized physical fitness. As a result, Americans like Breeze and Charlie Kelly and Otis Guy were outside at Park School in Mill Valley doing jumping jacks on the asphalt. As Breeze recalled, “there was just this little extra emphasis that physical fitness is a good thing for you and I think there were a lot of people around who had the similar emphasis to do more, to see it that way, so naturally a number of us grew up with receptivity to getting out there and being active, especially on bicycles. My sister and some friends of hers actually started a bike club, it was during Eisenhower’s reelection and it was the I Like Ike Bike Club.”\textsuperscript{17}

Breeze was not alone. Americans had started to reevaluate the bicycle and invigorated physical education values helped spur sales. In February 1962, Paul Dudley White dedicated the first bikeway in the United States in Homestead, Florida. White had always


\textsuperscript{17}http://www.fitness.gov/history_fact_sheet.html; Herlihy, 361; Breeze interview.

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been a strong proponent of cycling and never hesitated to let listeners know that he thought most Americans were slaves to the automobile. He believed that no one should sit still for more than an hour without getting some exercise. That same year, the *Velo Sport Newsletter* became the *Northern California Cycling Association Newsletter*. At the time, there were about 1,500 racing cyclists in America. Between 1960 and 1966, annual bicycle sales in the United States increased from $3.8 million to $6 million. Technology had started to favor the rider who wanted help riding uphill. American buyers turned in large numbers to the sophisticated offerings of European bike manufacturers and later to Japanese manufacturers who made bicycles more aesthetically attractive and easier to ride by radically reducing their weight and adding gears to help with climbing hills. Compared to the fifty or sixty pounds typical for the one-speed balloon-tire bicycle of the 1930s and 1940s, the kind Breeze and company used off-road in the early 1970s, the three-speed English racer averaged only forty-five pounds and the dérailleur ten-speed weighed under thirty-five pounds. The upward spiral was in place. Americans spent $7 million on bikes in 1970. By 1973, the same year Frank Nasworthy introduced urethane skateboard wheels to an eager youth culture, American bike purchases exceeded $15 million.  

The nexus of creative activity in the cycling world was Marin County. This was the place where, as Joe Breeze put it, “critical mass” was attained. The right combination of people, technology, media hype, and commitment fused. Breeze and Fisher pursued road cycling with gusto during the 1960s. Both became Category I riders at different times. Part of the interest they shared from their involvement in Velo Club Tamalpais. Joe

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Breeze found fat-tire biking, a reference to the wide, balloon style tires on their off-road bikes, in a roundabout way. Breeze had long been interested in bicycle history. “I have had that bug since I was little,” he recalled. “I think my father told me a lot of stuff way back when and I have just kind of been following it, kind of a freak about it, about that kind of history.”

In 1972 when he and other Marin riders formed Velo Club Tamalpais, there were other like-minded people such as Otis Guy and Mark Vendetti. They all shared an interest in telling others about bicycling, “letting the secret out of the bag,” as Breeze described it. Various members of the club wanted to restore old bicycles and show them to people, display them through public use. The idea was to generate a greater appreciation of bicycles by popularizing their vast heritage. Most Americans were unaware of the role the bicycle played in the modernization of both economy and culture. In the surging numbers of sales in the 1960s, most of those bikes were kids’ models. They were purchased by Americans who rode the tide of post-War prosperity during the 1945 to 1970 period.

While contemporary Americans might have a better appreciation for the importance of the bicycle, in the 1970s this was not yet so. Bicycles were still viewed by many as a child’s toy. The bicycle had been relegated to the backwater for so many years, removed from the public’s purview by price and competition from cars, Americans were not easily shaken from their stupor. The majority of bikes available at the time were cruisers built for children or multi-geared road bikes that sported drop down handle bars and one-inch

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19 Breeze interview.

20 Ibid.
tires. Little innovation took place in bikes for everyday Americans after the World War II. The number of recycled Schwinn Excelsiors were a testament to the stagnant design epoch. Joe Breeze had been to Europe and witnessed how the Dutch and others had included the bicycle in their transportation landscapes. The Europeans understood that the bicycle was more than a child’s toy: it was the perfect vehicle for translating human power into locomotion. Breeze and others wanted to bring Americans into the light. Even with road racing and getting the results of a race published in the local newspaper showed people how they could get from one place to another in a respectable amount of time. For Breeze, Vendetti, Fisher, and Guy, the antique bike experiment was just another way to turn people on to cycling. When they traveled around California to road races they would check the old bike shops and the county dumps or any place that looked promising to find an old bike.21

One fine day in 1973, Breeze and Mark Vendetti, a former member of Larkspur Canyon gang, another group of Marin cycling enthusiasts, were fishing through the inventory at Alex LaRiviere’s Branciforte Bike Shop in Santa Cruz. Breeze found some beat-up cruisers from the 1920s, none in very good condition. They were approached by one of the shop employees who told them about a large number of old bikes out behind the store. They went out, looked down the row, and Vendetti yelled out that he found one worth taking. It was a blue Schwinn-built 1941 B. F. Goodrich. They paid $5 and left. Once outside, Breeze said out loud, “what am I going to do with this?” Vendetti replied that they would strip the bike down, take it to the top of Mount Tamalpais, and ride it as

21Ibid.
fast as possible down the fire roads and trails that criss-crossed the mountain. Breeze was
stunned. Even with his knowledge of cyclo-cross, Breeze had not considered that another
form of cycling recreation existed.22

Breeze had friends in high school who rode fat-tire bikes, and he had half-jokingly
insisted that he would never ride one of those things. The fat-tire cruiser geometry ran
hard against everything Breeze understood to be fast and efficient about the bicycle. After
returning to San Rafael and cleaning up his new clunker, Breeze took it for a test ride. “I
took it for a little spin up the street and, ah, wow, this was so different. That was the big
draw. This was different. It was like road racing was ballet and this was like football and
they were both enjoyable, they were just different.” The implication for his new bike was
stunning. “It immediately dawned on me that we know all those [paved] roads throughout
Marin and Sonoma County and we know them so well, but here, right in our backyard, is
Mount Tam.”23

Gary Fisher had a similar reaction to his first fat-tire experience. He recalled thinking,
“Holy Toledo, man, this was like riding a roller coaster out here. I had ridden every paved
road in a huge radius around here. In training, you are riding all cinched up all the time
and this was just a completely different thing. I had known these guys since high school
and I had hung out with them doing other crazy stuff with them but not like this. I said,

22Ibid.

23Ibid.

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'yeah I am a bike rider I can do this,' and I went out and rode with them and I said, 'like, wow this is incredible stuff.'

Breeze modified the bike until it weighed a svelte fifty pounds. He hitchhiked up to the top of Mt. Tamalpais, where rode back down along a railroad grade, the leftover trail bed from a scenic railway that went to the top of Mount Tam between 1898 and 1930. The trail cut down the mountain all the way into Mill Valley. He remembered feeling amazed. "I just had a ball. I go, 'man, this is incredible' and I kind of went from there. When I wasn't road racing I was doing this and everyday I was riding on Mount Tam down some single track or another and just having a great time with Mark Vendetti and Otis [Guy]. The three of us, everyday we were out there."

There were many steps in the evolution of the modern mountain bike and certainly no single inventor. People had been riding off-road since the advent of the bicycle. It is probably more surprising that it took so long to develop the kind of bicycle transportation equal to the task of riding in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chuck Eliot pointed out that, "bicycle adventurers have been tackling the 'rough stuff' for well over 100 years. It started when they first put brakes on bikes. For 30 years after that, there were no paved roads. There were only dirt roads." Even when pavement started to appear, dirt remained the dominant passageway for decades, especially in rural areas. The 26 x 2.125-

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24Richard Nilsen, "Clunker Bikes: The Dirt Bicycle Comes of Age," The CoEvolution Quarterly, spring 1978, 114; Breeze interview; Fisher interview.

25Breeze interview.

inch “balloon” tire fired people’s imaginations about the possibilities of off-road travel. Ever since the balloon tire was introduced in this country in the early 1930s, people rode off-road on fat tires, but those groups and individuals came and went. They either were not connected to the bicycle industry or were in an area or time with little hope of inspiring others to use bicycles in this way. Those innovations remained isolated. It was not until the 1970s in Marin County, California, that a group of cyclists had the tenacity to develop their hobby into what would become a national and global craze.

In the early 1970s, bicycling made a resurgence in America. In the adult class, the popular bikes were road bikes. The San Francisco Bay area, including Marin where Joe Breeze and Gary Fisher lived, was a hotbed of road cycling. With so many cyclists in Marin, there was much greater potential for the cross-pollination of ideas. In this era, there was also a greater degree of willingness to explore new ideas. Many of the Marin road cyclists discovered off-road cycling in the form of cyclo-cross racing, a European off-road version of road racing using sculpted skinny tires. They trained on Mt. Tamalpais.²⁷

Mt. Tamalpais had for decades been host to many isolated cases of off-road, balloon-tire use. One group of off-road cyclists, based in Larkspur, was known as the Canyon Gang. John York, Tom Slifka, Robert and Kim Kraft and their friends even held untimed,

²⁷Charlie Kelly, interview by author, December 5, 2003, San Anselmo, California; Breeze interview; Fisher interview.
often impromptu races on Mt. Tam as early as 1971. Their riding did not go entirely unnoticed by some of the local road cyclists, such as Joe Breeze and Gary Fisher.²⁸

Once riders like Breeze, Guy, and Vendetti had committed to off-road exploration and speed runs down Mt. Tamalpais, riding these fat-tire bikes lost its stigma. By 1974, Joe Breeze and other members of the Velo Club Tamalpais began showing up to their club meetings aboard stripped-down 1930s and 1940s balloon-tire, one-speed bikes. Each of them came across their ballooner in a different way, but had all been influenced in some way by the Canyon Gang. The Velo Club riders discovered that these old ballooners were the ticket to exploring the dirt roads and trails of Mt. Tam and its environs.²⁹

Nineteen seventy-four was the floodgate year for cycling. The bike du jour for Marin off-iders was the Schwinn Excelsior. It had the right combination of downhill handling and durability. It also rode a bit clunky, which is why the Marin County riders dubbed the fat-tire bike the “clunker.” No one had yet added multi-gear shifting or brakes any stronger than the coaster brakes that came with their clunkers. The most important feature of those early bikes was their downhill worthiness. Joe Breeze observed that the appeal of riding these old fat-tire bikes was immediate. While road racing emphasized their muscular and cardiovascular strength, clunkers gave riders an outlet for displaying their bike-handling skills. Downhill runs on Mt. Tam, where speeds often exceeded twenty-


²⁹Joe Breeze, The History of the Mountain Bike As Witnessed By Joe Breeze, photocopy of original, collection of Joe Breeze.
five or thirty miles per hour, became the ultimate test of handling. Because downhill racing was the focus, many riders resisted multiple gears, opting to keep their clunkers as original as possible. They saved their technical interests for road bikes. For quite a while, the fat-tire rides were perceived a welcome diversion from the 200 to 400 miles of road riding many of the Velo Club riders completed. “For fat-tire riding we put aside our chamois shorts, colorful jerseys and cleated cycling shoes, and wore blue denim Levis and rugged hiking boots.”

From 1974 to 1976, Otis Guy, Marc Vendetti, and Joe Breeze continued to ride with one gear. The typical ride started in Mill Valley, hitchhiking up the road that ascended Mt. Tam as far as their thumbs would take them. Eventually and with much practice, the three rode the entire trip, up and back, on their one-speed clunkers. But pushing that tall 52 x 20 gear got old in a hurry. For many Marinites, the mountain’s height and the limitations of one gear created a roving eye for something better. That something better showed up in Marin on December 1, 1974, at the West Coast Open Cyclo-cross Championships, an off-road race that traditionally used re-fitted road cycles. Three racers from the Morrow Dirt Club arrived at the starting line with old balloon-tire bikes outfitted with everything that fat-tire enthusiasts dreamed about as they pushed their bikes uphill.

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30 Nilsen, “Clunker Bikes,” 115; Breeze interview; Breeze, The History of the Mountain Bike.

Members of the Morrow Dirt Club competed in 1974 because of a rule change that allowed riders to race any type of bike. Russ Mahon, the leader of the club, rode a 26-inch-wheel Montgomery Ward’s Hawthorne. By all accounts, it was a paperboy’s bike equipped with a derailleur and a ten-speed hub. It also sported thumb shifters so the rider could change gears without releasing the handlebars. For the downhill rider, perfection came with the retrofitted front and rear drum brakes, probably borrowed from a cannibalized motorcycle. Among the Marin people that saw those innovative bikes that day were Gary Fisher, Charlie Kelly, Otis Guy, and Joe Breeze. For Kelly and Guy, these were the first derailleur-gereared off-road bikes they had ever seen. Russ Mahon of the Cupertino group had first grafted derailleurs and thumb shifters onto a ballooner in 1973. The Cupertino group, which never had more than ten riders, fizzled out shortly after the 1974 race, but not before cross-pollinating Marin.

Not long after the West Coast race, the Marin riders took their clunkers to another level. Inspired by the design modifications they saw at the cyclo-cross race, many Marinites modified their bikes on that same pseudo-motocross style. The effect was to expand the intensity of their riding by an order of magnitude. Having come from competitive road racing origins, the time had come to push the sport into its own nascent competitive phase. There was a bit of a rivalry among sub-groups situated in the towns around the base of Mt. Tamalpais and since many of the riders were road racers, it was only natural that a race be held to prove who was the fastest off road.³²

The first formal, timed race occurred October 21, 1976, on the east face of Pine
Mountain, just north of Mt. Tam. The 2.1 mile, steeply pitched, 1300-foot downhill
vaporized the old coaster brakes' grease into a contrail of smoke. Because competitors
needed to repack their coaster brakes with grease after the race, the course was dubbed
"Repack." As an organized race, it figured mountain biking as revolutionary from the
beginning. The record time for the Repack, set by mountain bike industry pioneer Gary
Fisher, was 4 minutes and 22 seconds, two seconds faster than Joe Breeze’s best time. At
that pace, Fisher descended approximately 650 vertical feet per mile at an average speed
of 28 miles per hour. His time remains unbeaten. The turnout for the race grew annually,
bolstered expanding press coverage and ever improving technology. But the 1976 race
and the participatory explosion that followed proved one thing: the new bike inspired a
fad that lasted long enough to become a sport.33

What the mountain bike represented, both to the originators and the many devotees
who came later, was possibility. There was nothing restrictive about the technology. It
was as inclusive as the safety bike had once been. The mountain bike reinterpreted
landscapes and expanded their meanings. The only thing that limited that reinterpretation
was technology.

That technology came in 1977. The Repack race was instrumental in bringing
together all of Marin’s ballooner sub-groups on a regular basis. It expedited the growth of
the sport and the advancement of bike culture. In addition, the same drought that shaped
the nature of skateboarding in southern California from 1970 to 1977 allowed riders and

33Bloom, “Mountain: Part II,” 17; Nilsen, 116; Fisher interview; Breeze interview.
spectators to maintain full interest right through the warmer than usual winters. As a result, the local clunker population grew. The number of limitations inherent to pre-1950 cruiser frames also expanded.\textsuperscript{34}

By 1977, many Marin fat-tire riders sported the finest and toughest road bike components from around the world. Even a few motorcycle components were included. But all these parts were attached to the old Schwinn frames, which were strong only by virtue of their mass. Built of thick-wall, mostly curved, mild-steel tubing, the frames alone weighed about 12 pounds. They had been built to take the abuse of the toughest paperboy. Unfortunately, designers such as Ignaz Schwinn never envisioned use on Mt. Tam and in the Repack by adult gonzo athletes. The old frames kept breaking, requiring access to a welder or a new frame. It was time for a completely new frame.\textsuperscript{35}

There was no one person who invented the mountain bike. Everybody made their contribution, especially the Cupertino riders who provided much of the innovative seed to the Marin crew. Joe Breeze’s donation was building frames. He learned to build road frames from Albert Eisentraut in spring 1974. He had always wanted to build frames, ever since high-school. During a 1971 trip to Holland, Breeze noticed boxed sets of Reynolds bicycle tubing available for sale in local bike shops. It never occurred to him that building


a new frame might be as easy as purchasing the component tubing, creating a design geometry, and welding the pieces together. All Breeze had to do was learn the craft.  

While still working at Mom’s Apple Bikes in Sausalito, Otis Guy heard through the grapevine that Eisentraut would be offering a series of courses in frame building all over the United States. Guy had long desired a tandem road bike built by the legendary road frame craftsman. Eisentraut was scheduled to teach a fourteen-day seminar at his shop on 81st Street in Oakland, across the street from the Sunshine Cookie Company. When Guy told Breeze about the opportunity to learn from Eisentraut, Breeze signed up immediately. Breeze worked ten-hours a day for two weeks to learn the process. He even obtained university credits for the effort.

After the seminar, news of Breeze’s skills got out. He recalled weekly solicitations for a frame that could hold up to the rigors of Mt. Tamalpais. After numerous requests, including daily calls from Charlie Kelly, Breeze finally drew up some frame designs, based on what had been working up to that point. Not only had he ridden in the Repack but had won the inaugural race. He understood what fat-tire riders needed because they shared the same interests.

In September 1977, Larry Cragg, a local clunker enthusiast who worked as a musical instrument technician for bands such as Jefferson Starship and Sons of Champlain,

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36 Joe Breeze, e-mail message to author, June 7, 2005; Breeze interview.

37 Breeze e-mail message.

advanced Breeze $300 for tubing. Breeze decided to use straight gauge chromolybdenum airplane-frame tubing because it possessed a better strength-to-weight ratio than the high-tensile steel most Schwinn frames were made from. The resulting frame was Breezer Number One, which Joe Breeze rode to victory in the October 1977 Repack race. He built nine more bikes over the next six months. He sold each for $750, fully equipped with a water bottle, air pump, spare tube, and repair kit. He wanted people to be able to get into the woods and back. Charlie Kelly, Wende and Larry Cragg, and Otis Guy were among the first purchasers.39

The significance of what he had accomplished was clear to Breeze, even at the time. “It was the very first time you had a bicycle built for a purpose, built for what we were doing,” he recalled. Bicycling had expanded beyond its intended user base and its conceivable user space and another technology had to be developed that met those demands. The Breezer, like the other purpose-specific mountain bikes that followed, met that requirement. As revolutionary as all of this fat-tire fusion was, the real revolution was in the way the mountain bike was used off the mountain, in the cities, and on the roads. What Breeze and the other participants in that period did not completely comprehend was how the mountain bike’s geometry and componentry would be embraced by tens of millions of people all over the world. Spreading the word was as much accidental as it was purposeful. That same cross-pollination that took place

39Kelly interview; Bloom, “Mountain: Part II,” 18; Fisher interview; Breeze interview.
between Cupertino and Marin also took place between Marin and Crested Butte, Colorado.\textsuperscript{40}

They say it happened like this: on a crisp September afternoon in 1978, six Marin cowboys ambled into Crested Butte, Colorado. Charlie Kelly, pony-tailed and swaggering, sauntered into the Grubstake Bar and Grill and announced, “We’re here for the ride.” The assembled locals raised their heads, looked at each other, and continued to party. The unspoken response seemed to be, “What ride?”\textsuperscript{41} So began the Third Annual, but second actual, Pearl Pass Tour, a rough and tumble race/tour from Crested Butte to Aspen over 12,700-foot Pearl Pass. The way it really happened was similar to the way fat-tire riding evolved in Marin.

The Crested Butte to Aspen ride began like many western rivalries. In 1976, a group of Aspen motorcyclists rode to Crested Butte via Pearl Pass. They invaded the Grubstake Saloon, a “locals only” spot, and drank and danced through the afternoon and into the night. A small contingent of Crested Butte residents, mostly members of a local firefighting crew known as the Hotshots, decided to return the favor. Their method of transportation was the bicycle. They picked up old heavy-wheeled one speeds, like the original clunkers, for the trip to Aspen, which included a harrowing 20 mile descent at the

\textsuperscript{40}“Full Bore Cruisers,” \textit{Bicycle Motocross Action}, January 1980, 75-76; Nilsen, “Clunker Bikes,” 116-117; Breeze interview; Breeze, \textit{History};

The Crested Butte Pilot described the event like some combination of *Shane* and *Blazing Saddles*:

"Fifteen klunker riders (perhaps we should explain that a klunker is a no-speed bicycle comprised of only the essentials – fat tires, handlebars, pedals and a chain) left the Grubstake with a cheer Friday morning at 9. I heard them because I live next door and didn’t make it out of bed to take a going away photo....Everyone began dropping like flies up the Brush Creek Road, but seven hardy riders made it to base camp located three miles below the pass summit....They were soon joined by the support vehicles... containing the drop-outs and the Klunker groupies...The group and groupies made camp, enjoyed a steak fry and consumed one keg of beer, three bottles Schnapps, 2 gallons of wine, and 3 bottles of champagne....Then, according to [Bob] Starr, everyone got drunk and passed out on the pass. Saturday morning dawned under gray skies and a drizzle. The tour members sprung up bright and early only to find someone had raided the donut stash during the night. Everyone was checked for donut breath. No luck, the culprit remained at large. [Rick] Verplank and Starr then began pushing their klunkers to the top and over the pass, outracing the support vehicles. Richard Ullery became at that point the first man in history to cross Pearl Pass in a bathtub. The historical tub may be viewed in the back of Ed Bliss’ truck (minus Ullery). "The decent was nothing but horrifying, rough and rocky," said Starr. "The original drop-outs jumped out of support vehicles at the tip and all 15 rode their klunkers down the pass until just before the pavement at Ashcroft where the brakes were smoking and rear ends were seizing up."... Said Starr, "we trickled in one by one, met at the Jerome Hotel and had a party all over Aspen." Verplank expressed his gratitude to several Aspen ladies, plus Ken Oakes, at whose house the keg was finished off. 'Everyone had a really good time and we expect three times as many bikes next year,' he said."  

The Crested Butte crew may have planned a second annual tour, but it did not happen.

Marin’s fat-tire afficionados headed out to Crested Butte in September 1978. They were tipped off to the “infamous” Pearl Pass tour by an article in the spring 1978 *Co-Evolution Quarterly*. The article explained that the 1977 tour was cancelled due to drought, but that the race was on for 1978. The Marin riders were floored that people were doing the same

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43c"First Pearl Pass Tour," *Crested Butte Pilot*, September 17, 1976, 1, 10.
thing 1,000 miles away. They decided they had to check it out. Kelly and Breeze both wrote letters to Bob Starr, informing him that a group of like-minded clunkers would be at the race in September. They rolled into town only to find that the Pearl Pass Tour organizers were ambivalent about holding the event that year, that the Second Annual had never even happened. But while Kelly and the crew were inside the Grubstake with the Hotshots, other Crested Butte locals were outside gawking at the shiny, nickel-plated Breezer mountain bikes that the Marin riders had brought with them. They knew the Marin riders were serious.

According to Joe Breeze, the more important catalyst for igniting the third annual tour was Wende Cragg. When the Crested Butte guys, regulars at the Grubstake Bar and Grill and manly seasonal firefighters to boot, saw that the Marin group included a woman, Breeze remembered, "their machismo just kicked in." Later that week, at the crack of a shotgun, six Marin Breezers and seven Crested Butte clunkers took off to Aspen for the two-day tour. News of the new technology and its ability to change cycling had made it to another cluster of cycling. The Crested Butte Pilot reported, "This superior equipment allowed the California contingent to ride almost all the way up the pass. The Crested Butte riders, on the other hand, spent most of the climb pushing their first-generation, one-speed Schwinn Klunkers the ten miles up the pass to camp."  

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44Breeze, History.

Within a couple of years all but one of the seven Crested Butte riders had moved on to new endeavors, but the Pearl Pass Tour continued every year thereafter and contributed important momentum to the sport. The Pearl Pass event also provided a peephole view into the singular importance of the bicycle in Joe Breeze’s life. Breeze did not obtain his driver’s license until he was 26 years old, and only so that he could help out with the driving to Crested Butte. He was so excited by the tour and the act of driving that he drove the entire way without relief from his fellow riders.\(^4^6\)

After Crested Butte, the mountain bike industry around did not just evolve, it exploded. Word was out about the new phase in cycling’s history. People started contacting bike shops in Mill Valley, San Anselmo, and Fairfax about buying clunkers. Very quickly there was the demand for an industrial approach to the new market for mountain bikes. Tom Ritchey, a road bike builder in Palo Alto, had been riding off-road for years with California cycle-tour pioneer, Jobst Brandt. “Jobst Rides,” as they came to be called, included riding single-track on road racing bikes with nothing larger than silk, 300 gram, tubular racing tires, also known as “sew-ups.” As the balooner craze emanated from Marin, Ritchey was ready for even rougher riding. He decided to go all the way with the larger volume balloon tire. Gary Fisher, who had earlier chosen not to purchase one of those first Breezer bikes, was looking for someone to build him a fat-tire frame. Word got back to Fisher that Tom Ritchey was interested in making such a frame and Fisher asked

\(^4^6\)Malone, “The Wild Ones,” 66; Bloom, “Mountain,” 21; Breeze interview; Kelly interview.

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Ritchey to build him one. Ritchey decided to build three: one for Fisher, one for himself, and one for Fisher to sell.\footnote{Rob Buchanan, “Birth of the Gearhead Nation,” \textit{Rolling Stone}, July 9, 1992, 84; Breeze interview; Fisher interview; Kelly interview;}

In January 1979, Ritchey borrowed Wende Cragg’s old Schwinn and rode Repack. Ritchey was completely taken with the new ride. He came again in March and brought three unfinished frames with him to show his progress. He delivered the finished frames about one week later. Then Ritchey built nine more frames on speculation that he could sell them. When it became apparent that the San Mateo area was not ready for fat-tire bikes, he asked Gary Fisher if he would sell them in Marin. In September 1979, Fisher picked them up. Back in downtown Fairfax, he ran across his buddy, Charlie Kelly. Showing him the gleaming frames crammed into his car, he asked Kelly if he would like to go into business with him to sell Ritchey’s frames. They immediately pooled together their cash at hand—all $200—opened a bank account, and came up with the company name: MountainBikes. It was the first business established to sell nothing but fat-tire bikes.\footnote{Eddie Arnet, “Gary Fisher’s Mountain Bike Memoirs,” \textit{Mountain Bike Action}, August 1987, 65-68; Breeze interview; Fisher interview; Kelly interview.}

Fisher and Kelly, along with Ritchey, more than any others to that point, showed a powerful commitment to the fledgling sport and got down to the business of getting fat-tire bikes into the hands of more people. By his own admission, Ritchey approached the
new market like a capitalist—he wanted people to ride and enjoy these new bikes but he also wanted to make money. This was not a lifestyle pursuit for Tom Ritchey.49

To make the mountain bike popular, people had to sell it. The revolution could be carried out by Americans who were willing to modify their own Schwinn frames, taking their cue from the Marin clunkers, but that prospect was unlikely. All of the participants in the evolution of the mountain bike pursued their roles with different motivations. Ultimately, the best businessman won out and that was not Breeze, Kelly, Fisher, or even Tom Ritchey. Besides having a good idea of what they needed to accomplish, Fisher and Kelly both had natural talents for marketing. Fisher had a knack for colorful quotes and Kelly excelled with the written word. Kelly penned numerous articles for publications that ranged in exposure from Esquire to Outside Magazine. One of the most comic assessments, which revealed Kelly and Fisher’s struggle to secure legitimacy, was a review of the Ritchey/MountainBikes model in Adventure Experience. Kelly called the mountain bike “the culmination of a six year program of research and development.” 50

Although lacking somewhat in basic business skills, both were nonetheless quickly able to expand the awareness of fat-tire bikes to what turned out to be a large and receptive audience. Ritchey had considerable frame-building experience, and was already showing a great deal of ingenuity in making road racing bikes more mechanically efficient. He was


a very capable machinist and a real artisan, and he was prolific. Ritchey was able to deliver to MountainBikes large numbers of quality fat-tire frames, forks, handlebar stems, and bottom brackets on a timely basis and business took off. They started out offering mountain bikes for $1,400.00. Priced beyond most people’s reach, mass marketing was just around the corner.  

The next step in the evolution was increased bike production. By 1981, a few large bicycle companies were eyeing the rapidly developing mountain bike market. A lot of people were plunking down $1,400 for the Ritchey designed MountainBike. While Ritchey was an extremely prolific frame builder by the time he was twenty-four years old, raising capital to expand exponentially was not in the cards—he was too busy building frames. Fisher and Kelly were having too much trouble with the nuts and bolts of their business, and at the time there were no large-scale, high-quality bicycle subcontractors in the United States.

Specialized Bicycle Imports of San Jose, a bicycle parts distributor, had amassed a small fortune developing and marketing high-performance road-bike tires starting in 1976. Company founder Mike Sinyard then parlayed that into building and selling complete road bikes. In 1980, at a trade show, Sinyard bought four Ritchey MountainBikes. His designer, Tim Neenan, suggested they do a Specialized mountain bike. Sinyard agreed and took his Ritchey to their factory in Japan. This became the

51 “Ten Men Who Changed The Sport,” 102; Arnet, “Gary Fisher,” 67; Ritchey interview; Breeze interview; Fisher interview; Kelly interview; Buchanan, “Birth of the Gearhead Nation,” 84.

model for the first Specialized Stumpjumper, which made its debut in September 1981 at a bicycle trade show. Its first model year was 1982 and it was distributed at a retail price of $750. Combined with the distribution network that Sinyard worked with, the less expensive, equally capable Stumpjumper set the industry bar for the next decade.  

Thousands of Stumpjumpers were sold within a couple of years. The company started advertising with small, black and white ads in the remote pages of Bicycling magazine. The fervor over these mass produced bikes was immediate. By August of 1982, ads for the Stumpjumper proclaimed, “It’s not just a new bike. It’s a whole new sport.” Meg Lukens observed after the 1982 trade show in Las Vegas, “the first annual Interbike Show turned out to be a showcase for what some people are calling the most important innovation in the adult bicycle market in a decade—the all terrain or mountain bike.” At the Las Vegas show, the industry was transformed: mountain bikes were exhibited from Columbia, Schwinn, Ross, Fuji, Puch, Trek, MountainBikes, Moots, and Specialized. By 1983, it was an entirely new industry.  

Over the course time, between 1980 and 2005, the mountain bike industry and participation levels fluctuated. One of the constants for contemporary sports has been the urge to profit. In the high water period for mountain biking, between 1980 and 1992, when cycling participation was at an all time high—nearly 55,000,000 people—there were

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dozens of manufacturers producing in excess of 10,000,000 units annually. The price fell, the market was saturated, and companies came and went in short periods of time. The fall-out was still revolutionary. More people were riding bikes than ever before. In 2004, industry studies suggested an off-road mountain bike participation rate of more than 7,000,000 people. The mountain bike still dominates the industry as well, capturing thirty-three percent of the $5.7 billion in total bicycle sales.\(^{55}\)

The most telling figure, the number that indicates the revolution has taken place, is the average price comparison for road versus mountain bikes. When the mountain bike first became available, between 1977 and 1982, the average price exceeded $1,000. Factoring in discount chains selling inexpensive ten-speed city bikes, road bikes averaged under $300. In 2004, after twenty-five years in the market place, that relationship has reversed. In 2004, the average price for road bikes, excluding secondary categories such as cruisers and BMX, exceeded $800; conversely, the average price for a mountain bike with a front-shock suspension system was $391. The industry embraced the "clunker," rallied behind its inclusive design, went to work on improving its form and functionality, added technology that was previously only available to motorcycles, and created a people's transportation device. Between 1980 and 2000, the mountain bike fulfilled all the promise inspired by the nineteenth century hype for the safety bike. As the price dropped quickly during its first twenty-five years on the market, the quality of the mountain bike also improved, and more people every year added mountain biking to their

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retinue of sports participation. In the end, it really did not matter who came up with what bike or where they got their inspiration. They were inspired, they created, they adapted and they innovated. In Marin, Palo Alto, and San Jose, change occurred with a lightening pace and resulted in the democratization of the sport.  

56 American Sports Data, ibid; National Bike Dealers Association.
CHAPTER 7

OUT OF THE MARGINS: THE FACE OF SPORT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

On June 12, 2005, The New York Times published an article that tried to make sense of the present center of the sporting landscape. Columnist Damien Cave refused to buy into the idea that skateboarding was rogue in any way. Cave observed, “Truth is, the ultimate outlaw road sport is now about as counter-cultural as yoga. What began as a marginalized activity, prohibited by many communities and embraced by early skaters for its go-to-hell attitude, has morphed into a mainstream youth sport dominated by doting parents and rules about safety.” The title of Cave’s article, “Dogtown, U.S.A.,” denoted once and for all that skateboarding, like all contemporary sports, is every town, in every state, virtually in every country.¹

Not long after mountain bikes started to outsell road bikes in the mid-1980s in America, they were outselling road bikes in Europe as well. Cove noted that eighty percent of all skateboard-related sales are soft goods versus hard goods, denoting image over participation; that most of the skateparks planned for development in America will be built by municipalities, indicating skateboarding has been co-opted by mainstream structures; that parents are part of the picture for their skateboarding kids, not repulsed by

it. Cove seemed to believe he stumbled onto something: alternative sport was not alternative anymore. Phil Edwards said the same thing about surfing in 1967: “Having fought its way out of the sociological swamps, surfing now stands as an accepted sports entity and the sounds of sober industry are all around us.” What Edwards knew in 1967 was what every surfer, skateboarder, and mountain biker eventually knew: sport was a verb as well as a noun.²

As each year passed, more and more took up board sports while fewer and fewer took part in traditional core sports like basketball or baseball. Groups such as American Sports Data, the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, and the National Sporting Goods Association have all conducted studies for a decade or more, utilizing enormous samples to track participatory trends. All of these studies confirmed that core sports were in decline while contemporary sports, mislabeled “extreme,” advanced every year.

Skateboarding was the new baseball. While there was still merit in to traditional sport and the way it added to overall sports diversity, there can be very little doubt that formerly marginal activities were the center of sport in the twenty-first century.

Icons also changed. As professional athletes from traditional sports drowned in steroid, sex, and gambling controversies, Tony Hawk drove sales of hard goods, soft goods, grocery stores, sports drinks, and every other retail good he had a mind to endorse. The new cultural sports icons include names like Tony Alva, Bucky Lasek, Bob Burnquist, Laird Hamilton, and Bam Margera. During the 2003 Tour de France, Lance Armstrong, six-time winner of the Tour, even made a commercial featuring him on a

²Cove, “Dogtown, U.S.A.,” 7; Edwards, You Should Have Been Here, 16.
mountain bike rather than his customary road bike. Modern sport has become transcendent. Within the core of twenty-first century sports-related advertising, skateboarding, mountain biking, and surfing imagery became a permanent part of the sporting landscape. Advertisements for sports drinks or fitness clubs or SUVs included, almost without exception, skateboarding, surfing, or mountain biking in their montage of sports images.

Skateboarding, surfing, and mountain biking drive an enormous portion the current sporting landscape. The imagery and influence of contemporary sports is nearly inescapable. Given the significance of skateboarding, it seems incredible to acknowledge that there is still debate over skateboarding’s legitimacy. Within the last few years, two examples speak to the fluctuating role of skateboarding in American culture.

One of the more significant markers for legitimacy is the willingness of others to preserve something based on the perception that it is important. This is the underpinning of historic preservation: the desire to preserve and protect various things—structures, landscapes, collections—based on the perceived value of the object to society. One of the best indicators of legitimacy is when people with little or no direct vested interest in the target of preservation labor to preserve that object anyway. This was one of the great truths revealed in the 1950s struggle to save Utah’s Echo Canyon from being flooded by a proposed dam, part of the larger Colorado River Storage Project. Support for saving the canyon, in the form of letters to Congress and financial contributions, flowed eighty-to-one and predominantly from east of the Rocky Mountains. The fact of wilderness’s legitimacy, of the need to preserve something, made geographic proximity to that struggle
idiosyncratic to the measurement of the struggle's value. Skateboarding reached the milestone of being historic in the early twenty-first century, but the sport had not achieved the kind sacerdotal importance whereby people rallied to preserve the foundations of the sport.

Carlsbad Skatepark opened for business March 13, 1976, and was skateboarding's first concrete playground in the modern sense. Carlsbad was constructed to accommodate all of the sport's elements, including the vertical. Unlike Surfer's World U.S.A., Carlsbad's design elements boasted recognition of the way the sport had evolved, both physically and technologically: it was built around the advent of urethane. The park's designer, John O'Malley, soon after the construction of the newer section, photographed the Mogul Maze, which sat on the bluff just above the original bowls and reservoir. The features in these photos resemble parks built in the twenty-first century, attesting to Carlsbad Skatepark's timeless design. There was no precedent for this park: O'Malley invented a terrain for skateboarders that was so unique, it is still the model for skateparks thirty years later.

Despite the promise of a new era in the sport's popularity, Carlsbad quietly shut its doors in the early 1980s. At the time, Carlsbad was fairly remote from the burgeoning San Diego County population. Soon after its debut, bigger and better parks opened closer to metropolitan San Diego, such as the Del Mar Skate Ranch, Marina Del Rey, and Oasis Skatepark. These parks featured combinations of snake runs, freestyle areas, and bowl sections modeled on backyard swimming pools. Carlsbad became one of the first victims of skatepark success. After Carlsbad Skatepark closed down, the lower snake run and
bowl area was used as a fishing pond for a couple years before they became the foundation for Mike McGill’s Skatepark, a collection of wooden ramps set around the two bowls. After the last failed attempt to profit from the site, the owners simply buried the park under the surrounding earth. Until 2002, the entire facility, including the coveted mogul area of the old park, remained buried on the bluff above the ramps. Carlsbad Skatepark was built on the edge of the Carlsbad Raceway property which operated for about forty years.

The area had long been ignored by developers, but with the eastward expansion of North San Diego County, the raceway and the old Carlsbad Skatepark property acquired new value. Unbeknownst to the larger skateboarding community, H.G. Fenton Group acquired the land in 2002. The company quietly collected permits to bulldoze the property and build an industrial park, likely unaware of the site’s historic significance. In fact, it was only because of the imminent threat to the still operational Carlsbad Raceway that the risk of losing the skatepark became public knowledge. In August 2004, local television news channels ran a story about the raceway’s closure and fear of a subsequent increase in illegal auto street racing. Local raceway enthusiasts spearheaded a campaign to save the racetrack property, which abutted the skatepark. H.G. Fenton Group had acquired the entire parcel that contained both the raceway and skatepark. The developer announced that August they intended to raze the whole property.³

By October, local San Diego skateboarders mobilized to save the nation’s first modern skatepark. Groups such as the Tony Hawk Foundation and companies such DC Shoes stepped in to provide financial and logistical support. The early effort revolved around creating a museum and multi-use facility that surrounded the original skatepark, with certain modern skate features added to the property. The plan capitalized on the reorientation of America’s sporting landscape that had taken place over the previous forty years. Dave Bergthold, of Blockhead Skateboards, observed that, “This could have been a permanent place for future generations to experience the history and creativity of skateboarding first hand.” The site plan created a space to show the world that skateboarding did not start with the X-Games and that it was more than clothes and video games or the Boom Boom Huck Jam and who did what on which handrail. Bergthold felt the investment in Carlsbad Skatepark would have paid back into the skateboard community many times over the seemingly high price of acquiring the property. What he could not assure the City of Carlsbad was that the investment provided the same kind of diffused economic returns guaranteed by Fenton’s industrial park.4

As momentum gathered among those who hoped to preserve the skatepark site, the fight boiled down to money. In the absence of direct intervention by the City of Carlsbad, the only hope of saving this historic landmark was to raise the capital to purchase the property from the H.G. Fenton company. Even the skateboard industry failed to provide


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sufficient financial commitment. As the effort to save the park continued, the skatepark’s location increased in value. Preservationists were told the six acres that surrounded the skatepark had a market value of more than $4,000,000. To purchase just the two acres the skatepark occupied, Bergthold’s group needed approximately $1,500,000. Eventually, the Fenton Group decided they would not separate the portion of the parcel that housed the skatepark from the larger property.\(^5\)

Land swap proposals were denied. Nobody beyond the small group of activists regarded Carlsbad worthy of saving. Dave Bergthold remarked that, “all in all, this was a tragic missed opportunity to preserve one of the greatest assets from skateboarding history, the world’s first skateboard park. The skateboard industry, even with the endorsement of its own ‘official organization’ was unable or unwilling to unite and save a giant part of their own community and history.”\(^6\) The effort lasted nearly one year and had generated television news reports and a dozen newspaper stories, but was unable to stir sufficient financial support from skaters or skateboard companies. When Carlsbad Skatepark was destroyed May 12, 2005, the event went unnoticed by local television and newspaper media.

Despite the enormous loss represented in the failure to save Carlsbad Skatepark, the fact is that Americans have rarely been focused on the past or the present; this is a culture dominated by its future. While Carlsbad is iconic in many ways, American culture has a


\(^6\)http://www.carlsbadskatepark.org/.

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long history of committing some of its most important icons to the trash heap of history. In 1868, Schenectady Locomotive Works in New York built the *Jupiter* locomotive for the Central Pacific Railroad. The *Jupiter* steamed its way into history when it pulled Central Pacific’s President Leland Stanford and his special train to the ceremony that marked the joining of transcontinental railroad at Promontory Summit in 1869. After the rail lines were connected, the *Jupiter* crossed the Golden Spike and into history as the first locomotive to travel from East to West on the new line. The *Jupiter* remained in service until the turn of the twentieth century when, outmoded and unheralded, it was scrapped by a machine reclamation company for the standard fee of $1000. No indication that anyone in the period sought the *Jupiter*’s preservation exists. The locomotive’s value seems to have been measured in the same crucible of economic determinism that sealed the fate of other icons of American culture: Shibe Field in Philadelphia, Ebbets Field and Polo Grounds in New York; and, Carlsbad Skatepark.

Over time, American concern for a sense of its past slowly diminished against the flood tide of modernity and progress. Along the way, many of the symbols of various historic eras were allowed to slip into obscurity or decay. The context of those time periods framed the decisions to relegate rather than preserve. Americans have been concerned principally with the future, instead of the past or present. What has not developed is a cultural imperative that can compete with the economic determinism which has driven America since 1869. Our habit of disregarding important icons of our past was usually informed by the belief that there was more to be gained financially from the trade-off. The story of America’s redefinition of the sporting landscape reveals a more
problematic dysfunction related to its larger cultural landscape. As the center of every
temporal category, such as sport, music, or politics, changes during any given century or
epoch, a past with new focal points and icons evolves. The new story of American history
is one about loss, about things that inspire a sense of loss and suggest we have again
missed the chance. As a society and culture, we mature every so often, every few decades.
In that maturation we achieve a sense of ourselves and our past. This process should
make us capable of assessing the importance of the symbols that mark the major moments
of our past. In the end, it is not so much that we have missed the chance but why we
missed it.

A portion of skateboarding’s path to the mainstream of American culture and custom
was paved by American mothers. The involvement of moms in the sport once dominated
by Alva, Adams, and Peralta demonstrates that any claim that skateboarding is still
alternative or extreme is tenuous. Numerous factors placed skateboarding in the heart of
America’s sporting landscape. Participation rates across demographic categories, the
significant place of skateboarding within the overall American economy, and the
continued growth and stability of the sport over time all contributed to skateboarding’s
place alongside football or baseball or any other traditional core sport. Skateboarding
even vied for tradition in terms of its capacity to involve multiple generations, like
softball and sack races at weekend picnics.

Sherry Cruz, a marketing assistant for the International Association of Skateboard
Companies, grew up in New York during the 1960s. She played volleyball and enjoyed
equal amounts of rock-and-roll and surf music coming from California. In the mid-1980s,
Cruz moved to Las Vegas and pursued a degree in hotel management. After she tried her hand in the hotel industry, her writing skills landed her a job in Minneapolis at the *Star-Tribune* newspaper. Cruz exchanged sin for snow and ended what she described as “a love-hate relationship” with Las Vegas. Ten years in the Minnesota winter compelled her to embrace a long held dream: she moved to southern California and lived the coastal lifestyle. She settled in Newport Beach and noticed that everyone either skateboarded or cycled or surfed. Cruz tried to surf, but had little success. Then two things happened, almost simultaneously: Cruz’s nine-year-old daughter took up skateboarding and Cruz met Barbara Odanaka.⁷

When Cruz’s daughter started to skate, Cruz thought about joining her. It was not until she met Barbara Odanaka that the transformation from “soccer mom” to “skater mom” became possible. Odanaka was a lifelong skateboarder. She started skating at age ten with the 1975 Christmas arrival of a Hobie Super Surfer. She skated hard for a few years, and eventually became a member of the Hobie Amateur Skateboard team in 1977.⁸

After two decades of skating, traveling, and having children of her own, Odanaka decided that other moms must share her passion. In 1996, she founded the International Society of Skateboarding Moms. Boasting a membership of over 300 skating moms, the Society’s members come from twenty-five states and three European countries. The pinnacle of Odanaka’s efforts is the annual Mighty Mama Skate-O-Rama, held annually at the Society’s home skatepark in Laguna Niguel, California. The 2005 Mother’s Day

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⁷Sherry Cruz, telephone interview by author, May 17, 2005.

event hosted some 500 people, including nearly 100 skater moms. Despite the best efforts of media, moguls, and modern skateboarders to exceptionalize the sport, to give it cachet vis-a-vis some manufactured rogue status, the pioneers of the sport have continued to exert ownership and demonstrate skateboarding’s mainstream character.⁹

As sport has reoriented around skateboarding, surfing, and mountain biking, technology has made playing fields very fluid. Advances in technology have made it possible for people to do things in their forties that they could not do in their twenties. First we create the technology that lets us be young again; then we modify the environment so it can happen. Those same advances have inspired a message: playing fields are only limited by the technology that is available in any given era.

The logical extension of how contemporary sports and their technologies can reorient landscapes arrived in Palisade, Colorado, located adjacent to Grand Junction off Interstate 70. On June 27, 2004, the Palisade Town Board of Trustees unanimously approved sponsoring plans to build a whitewater park a few miles south of the Powderhorn exit off Interstate 70, at the Price-Stubb Dam in the mouth of De Beque Canyon. In mid-2003, the Western Association To Enjoy Rivers proposed a plan to physically modify a 900 foot section of the Colorado River, which flows immediately north of Palisade. The design for the Palisade Whitewater Park was the product of McLaughlin Water Engineers, a Lakewood, Colorado. The firm designed fifteen other water parks, including the one used in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. McLaughlin planned to add large boulders to the

⁹Ibid.

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section of the river just below Price-Stubb Dam and create a series of rapids where none previously existed.\textsuperscript{10}

The urge to remake nature with manufactured rapids stemmed from a May 2003 Colorado Supreme Court decision that allowed recreational stream flows for three towns. The Court handed the state’s recreational water users a major victory when it gave the cities of Golden, Vail and Breckenridge permission to use state-governed rivers to fill their whitewater kayaking courses. The decision buoyed several other Colorado communities’ plans for white-water kayak parks. In addition to the classic confrontations represented in whitewater parks—the thirsty Old West against the tourism-reliant New West—river modification presented observers with an entirely new problem of defining space.\textsuperscript{11}

As skateboarding delimited the meaning of urban architecture, whitewater kayak parks represent the kind of spatial appropriation that is inherent to contemporary sport. As the ethos evolved around skateboarding’s ability to redefine the urban world, mountain biking added new dimensions to wilderness areas and foot-trails in the West. Natural landscapes were redefined by the mountain bike’s technological appropriation of place, refiguring aesthetic landscapes as playgrounds. Surfing made obstacles to safe travel a new form sport, as tow-in technology turned large reef-breaks into surfable terrain. The


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whitewater park takes a natural space and remodels it so that it is hyper-natural by adding features that were not there already, such as rapids and eddies. In the new world of sport, where technology’s limits define the limits of sport, the whitewater park is the epitome a contemporary understanding of what sport is and where it can take place.

During the research for this project, in January 2004, I had the opportunity to interview Tony Alva. We met at the “world headquarters” of Alva Skateboards in Oceanside, California. His office was the backroom of a storefront, almost nineteenth century in its layout. There was a small display room that faced Wisconsin Avenue. To step into his “office,” I passed through a curtain that separated the front half of the shop from the back. Even though I was with Alva for almost three hours, only ninety minutes of interview took place. We were interrupted by his phone ringing or people stopping by to laud him or more often to ask something of him.

He recounted the Dogtown days, the corporate days, the dark days of the 1980s. He reasserted the claim that extreme sports began with his crew, that it became a category of analysis because of urethane and pool riding. He was wholly fixated with the production of the Lords of Dogtown movie, which went into general release in June 2005. During our interview, he took phone calls related to the film project, calls from Sony Pictures, production staff, and scouts he had employed to look for pools that resembled the 1970s pools he used to skate. He was convinced that he was going the capitalize nicely on the legend of the Z-Boys. He mentioned that he had sold the producers the rights to his life story. The event painted a picture: as sport, skateboarding, surfing, and mountain biking were extremely versatile. They were businesses, industries, competitive sports, and they
still possessed the potential to be rogue. Alva was every inch the bad boy he once was, except that in 2004, the bad boy drove an $80,000 BMW and lived in a small but very expensive house in San Clemente, California. I bought an Alva skateboard that day and asked Alva to autograph it for me. It was cool. As I walked away, I knew that I would frame the autographed deck I had just purchased and hang it in my office. I also knew I would forever covet the feeling I had on Christmas day in 1978, when I got my first Alva deck. That day was more than cool—it was perfect.
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