

1. Not Sport

The first step toward establishing skateboarding as an art is dispensing with the label "sport." Skateboarding is not a sport. Any resemblance to baseball, basketball, football, or any other athletic competition is accidental and superficial.

Skateboarding centers around moving the body, of course, but this property alone is not sufficient to classify it as sport. Ballet, for example, is an obsession with movement of the body, but not a sport. Sports regulate bodily movement in quantifiable ways, so that one body's can be compared to another's as precisely as possible, and the superior movement identified and celebrated. These regulations include all of the rules of a particular game, the referees who monitor play, some means of keeping score, and grouping bodies into teams under the guidance of trainers and coaches. Sports that become popular organize themselves into leagues and establish tournaments under the watchful eyes of governing bodies. The prevailing *ethos* of sports is competition, the singular goal victory. At the end of play, a clear winner, whether an individual or a team, stands above the loser. Sports with professional

ranks and international reach legitimately crown their champions the greatest players in the world, until the next cycle of contests replaces him, her, or them. Compare gymnastics to ballet. Gymnastics has all of the regulatory apparatus necessary for identifying national, international, and Olympic champions and earns the classification "sport." Gymnasts proudly describe themselves as "athletes."

Skateboarding rejects the regulations of sports. Skateboarding has no rules, no referees, no trainers or coaches, and no proper teams.* A skater sets and breaks his own rules, if any, and serves as his own trainer and coach. This personal freedom is skateboarding's principal attraction for many young people, who otherwise suffer under adults' rules in every other aspect of their lives. Numerous professional skaters have identified this individual liberty when asked what first drew them to skateboarding, or what drew them away from sports to skateboarding instead.

Practitioners of the traditional arts enjoy the same freedom. Skaters' interest in drawing and painting, music, dance, acting, or filmmaking, therefore, is no coincidence. Likewise, traditional artists are often fond of skateboarding, incorporating it wholesale, or borrowing bits and pieces for use in their own work. Over its history, skateboarding intertwined first with rock'n'roll and later hip hop music, for example. Graffiti art and other graphic design, as well as photography and videography, have also enjoyed long and fruitful collaborations with skateboarding. As a result, skaters routinely have led the mainstream youth culture as tastemakers.

The larger society, however, often fears those who indulge in too much freedom and feel little

regard for rules and authority, especially when such people group together. For this reason, skaters have justifiably earned reputations as rebels.

Additional stereotypes have also accumulated in the popular media. A skateboard, usually a laughably outdated or cheap poser model, is a frequent prop to identify "troubled" or "troublemaker" youth in television programs, ranging from teen soap operas to crime shows for adults. Drug addict or dealer, thief, gang member? Give the actor a skateboard, says the show's Director. The next chapter examines the criminality of skateboarding itself. Rejecting the suggestion that skateboarding is a reliable indicator of all sorts of other delinquent behaviors is sufficient here.

Unfortunately, young athletes often adopt the prejudices of popular media, parents, teachers, and coaches. Sometimes they absorb these misguided impressions passively. On other occasions, adults explicitly implant them. Whatever the source, athletes often attack skaters without provocation. Sooner or later every skater confronts the verbal and physical abuse of "jocks" who derive their identity from their victories on the playing field. An independent act as simple as rolling down the street, minding one's business is too threatening to be ignored by people who lack the bravery to regulate themselves and depend instead on structures and accolades provided by others. Such people are even incapable of harassing their peers individually; gangs of older athletes hassle a younger, solitary skater.

Many young people have also come to skateboarding for relief from the zero-sum competition of sports.* Those who have failed to meet the athletic expectations of adults or peers find

solace in the supportive network of skateboarding. "Poor athletes," once free of the constraints and pressure of sports, have often become extraordinary skaters.

Skating alone, whether leisurely cruising or the intense concentration required to develop and master new tricks, is enormously pleasurable and rewarding. More often skaters rove in packs, and they certainly compete among themselves to pull the gnarliest tricks. Even under these circumstances, though, a collaborative effort to improve, to protect one another from danger, and above all to have fun dominates the activity. For this reason, skaters who are otherwise complete strangers easily mix with one another and form friendships; everyone wants to have a killer session. The suspicious glares, puffed-up chests, even violent confrontations between members of opposing sports teams and their fans, from street games, to high school contests, to professional play, are largely unknown in skateboarding. Skaters want to meet riders from other parts of the country and from abroad; they want to skate *with*, not *against* unfamiliar peers who may have new tricks and fresh spots to show them. Skateboarding has even shed the "locals only" exclusivity that sometimes hampers surfing. There is simply more pavement to go around for longer stretches of the year than coastline ideal for wave-riding during a few short months. Skaters are generally happy to share prime spots too, as evidenced by the reappearance of the same terrain in different companies' videos year after year. Often one team's video is generous enough to include shots of friends who ride for other sponsors when they pull some sick trick at the spot that occupies the day's

filming. No sports team shows moves by players from opposing teams in its season highlights.

Before skateboarding can shrug off classification as sport, however, someone may protest, "What about contests? Certainly their regulations, judges, and winners make a sport out of skateboarding?"

They do not. Unlike proper sports, contests represent a small, uncharacteristic sector of skateboarding. The skateboarding universe does not revolve around contests, whether professional or amateur. Nor would the disappearance of contests be the death of skateboarding. In fact, skateboarding has weathered periods of unpopularity in which contests did vanish almost entirely, and these droughts of public competition eventually proved salutary for skateboarding as a whole.

Consider the nature of professional contests. On the surface, they have eligibility requirements for participants, clearly defined formats, dedicated spaces, judges, spectators, and sponsors, like any sporting event. Profound philosophical differences between skateboarding contests and other sporting events emerge, though, when we scrutinize the level of esteem granted to the winners.

Major League Baseball, the NBA, and the NFL legitimately crown the Yankees, the Lakers, or the Cowboys the year's undisputed champions, and fans of every team within the league, however grudgingly, must agree that their players have proven themselves the finest in the world by emerging victorious from the end-of-season tournament.

Although skaters may recognize Andy MacDonald as the winner of this year's Dew Action Sports Tour, for example, they do not conclude from

his contest victories that he is the Greatest Vert Skater in the World for the year or even that very day. In the back of every skater's mind, when the judges declare the winner of a professional contest, is the afterthought, "Big deal; other skaters rip just as hard or harder." This feeling crystallizes further when typical skaters answer the question, "Will skateboarding ever become an Olympic sport?" They reply, "No," at the very least and often add, "I sure hope not." Skaters recognize that apparently elevating skateboarding to the peak of international athletic competition actually would cheapen it by suggesting that contests, however prestigious, measure skill accurately and definitively.

So strong is this conviction regarding the contingency and triviality of contest wins that many professional skaters have used their runs to mock the contest structure, including the sponsors that have compelled their participation. At the high point of skateboarding's popularity in the 1980s, for example, Mark Gonzales wore his sponsors' stickers on his body to declare his status as a mere commodity.* Likewise, Neil Blender pulled only a few mock tricks at the street contest in Tempe, Arizona in '86, instead spending most of his run spray-painting a grimacing face on the wall of the course.* At Del Mar during the same year, he filled his run with nearly identical inverts and axle stalls on the coping in deliberate contrast to the spectacular airs demanded by spectators and judges for victory. More recently Mike Vallely has expressed his rage at the sportification of skateboarding through high profile contests by actually destroying portions of the course during his runs; he has up-ended ramps, broken obstacles with

the force of his landings, and even rammed his head into walls.*

Players who speak ill of Major League Baseball, the NBA, or the Olympic Committee, even outside of a particular game, let alone during play, face sanctions, fines, and suspensions. Fans who disapprove of a particular player's performance or the management of a certain team still will not suffer anyone who badmouths the Platonic Ideal of "the Game."

Today most pro skaters forego contests entirely, instead demonstrating their skills through videos and magazines, without incurring any doubt or resentment from the skateboarding public. There is often an inversion of the priorities of sports fans in the minds of skaters. If we declare, "Pro X rips," to an average pack of young skaters, they do not respond by asking, "Oh yeah, how many contests has he won?" Instead, the assertions are likely to run the other way: "Pro X wins a lot of contests," someone proposes; "Sure, he's a good at contests, but his video parts aren't that great," skaters may reply. They realize that contests are artificial. A particular pro rider, by chance or training, may be especially suited to them, but the totality of his appearances in magazines and videos is a better measure of his talent. There will never be a market for "skateboarding cards" that, like baseball cards, spell out a pro skater's contest wins or any other statistic on the reverse.*

For many skaters, the preferred venue for direct contact with pros is not even the contest. Often they would rather meet their heroes at a demo at a neighborhood park or shop parking lot. There are two reasons for this preference. First, pro riders at a demo, provided they are not too road-worn by weeks or

months of touring, may be more likely to try the most difficult tricks, since there are no judges keeping score and no prize money at stake. A demo crowd's cheering gratitude for even attempting a big trick may replace the contest's temptation to skate conservatively.

More importantly, though, demos provide a chance not merely to witness your favorite pro perform from a distance, but often to skate alongside him and thereby meet him personally. After the official "demonstration" of the pros riding around the course alone, an open session of everyone present usually ensues. Standing beside a pro skater, as you both wait for your turn at an obstacle, is initially thrilling, but the deeper value of the experience emerges with the secondary realization, "He's a skater, just like me; and I'm a skater, just like him." This sort of fellowship between pro and amateur, formed by actually practicing the activity together, is unheard of in proper sports, save for a few charity and exclusive pay-to-play events.

Too great a role for professional contests may damage skateboarding as a whole. Recently the dangers have reached new a threat level, as skateboarding has become so visible and profitable that it is unlikely to slip again into a period of purgative unpopularity. A healthy flippancy toward contests has begun to erode in pro vert contests especially. They have begun to take themselves seriously, inching away from skateboarding's virtues of freedom, creativity, and collaboration, and drawing nearer to the relentless competition of ordinary sports.

The history of contests explains this recent, unsettling trend in pro vert. In the '70s and '80s, well meaning parents, teachers, and civic leaders in search