

FEATURES

Here in Southern California, the parameters of the Ultimate Boarder contest this month were perhaps best encapsulated in the slogan painted on a van parked at the fairgrounds: "Skate. Snow. Surf. Get paid."

To crown an all-around champion of skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding, the organizers attracted 55 competitors, ages 11 to 40, who were judged for style points in the manner of figure skating in each of the disciplines. Most came from around the state, some from as far as New Zealand. Paying a US\$300 entry fee, each athlete had to list a primary discipline.

For some, geography was destiny. The one from Oahu favored surfing. The one from Incline Village, Nevada, favored snowboarding. But others had grown up practicing all three. From Huntington Beach, California, alone came three contestants who each listed a different event as a primary strength.

Billed as a sort of triathlon for extreme sports, the contest promised purses totaling US\$58,500.

"It's a new frontier for the board sports," said Tom Curren, 44, a retired world surfing champion. "Before, you had to have all the free time in the world training at all three sports."

Derived from an ancient lineage in track and field, such challenges have become a modern marketing ploy in so-called extreme sports. As they compete for a limited pool of sponsorship money from makers of outdoor gear and energy drinks, promoters have increasingly turned to combination events to expand their audiences.

Organizers of the Teva Mountain Games in Colorado last year introduced a four-part race involving trail running, bike racing, hill climbing and kayaking. The annual Race of Champions, scheduled next winter in Beijing, has started inviting drivers from outsider styles like drifting to take on stock-car and Formula One specialists. Even mixed martial arts, the cultural juggernaut once derided as barbarism, found its sweet spot by combining the waning showmanship of heavyweight boxing with the ascendant youth appeal of Brazilian jujitsu.

While the X Games have effectively showcased a variety of outsider sports in their individual forms, some more ambitious efforts to address the crossover market have faltered. In Anaheim, developers filed for bankruptcy protection in 2002 after spending years trying to build a US\$150 million indoor action sports complex with artificial ski slopes, climbing walls and wave pools.

The modern history of mainstream sports is littered with pairings born of boredom, like the football-soccer-Frisbee amalgam known as Ultimate. Few have set the world on fire,



Above: Adam Taylor, 19, competes in the skateboarding segment of the Ultimate Boarder contest in Ventura, California, on April 10.
Below: Children skate in a fun zone skate park set up during the Ultimate Boarder event held at the Ventura County Fairgrounds in Ventura, California, on April 10.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

though Hollywood skewed the combination-sport concept in the 1998 comedy *Basketball*.

In recent years, gear companies have sought to exploit the potential crossover appeal of three sports sharing the fairly obvious common point of balancing on a board. Through online videos, athletes have learned to study one another's innovations from far-flung locales. Many of the most progressive aerial tricks of modern surfing mimic the maneuvers known as ollies in skateboarding. And advances like flexible yet tightly insulated wetsuits have diminished the restrictions of climate.

The Ultimate Boarder organizer, Tim Hoover, a 38-year-old amateur surfer and onetime film industry worker, described the contest as his ticket to raising his family in this easygoing beach setting 97km north of Los Angeles.

"I really wanted to make this a grassroots, bootstrap, organic thing," he said. "I wanted to do something to inspire and create a format for the next generation of kids that grow up in this lifestyle."

As the second leg of the contest began on a Wednesday morning, spectators gathered beachside in baggy shorts, ball caps and sneakers painted to resemble graffiti. Gulls floated above the palm trees. Dogs wandered around. Vendors offered body wash, energy drinks and fish tacos.

As the surfing portion began, the field was wide open. Seven injuries had been reported in the snowboarding leg, held 241km east at Bear Mountain. Some of the competitors had dropped out; some had applied duct tape to the afflicted body parts and pressed on. One of the world's top snowboarders, Kurt Wastell of Salt Lake City, was leading the rankings.

The competitors rode in 20-minute heats. As the winds turned gusty, they voted to surf their second attempts the next day,

scheduled as a day of rest. Hoover bowed to their wishes, later estimating that the decision would cost him US\$10,000 in fees.

By the time the snowboarding and surfing legs were finished, the standings seemed predictable: the top five competitors specialized in those two sports. Of the top 10 competitors, only two identified their specialties as skateboarding, the last remaining event.

For the weekend finale, the competition moved to the county fairgrounds, where posted waivers and signs banning gang insignia contrasted with a face-painting booth and a reptile petting zoo. On the grounds, uniformed Army recruiters gave the young spectators free T-shirts.

Inside a hangar, organizers assembled a wooden halfpipe with offsets and escalators among a judging booth, bleachers and a stage for rock bands. Videographers ran along the lip of the ramp, capturing tight shots of the competitors' soaring wheels. A soundtrack of The Clash and Guns N' Roses, combined with the proliferation of flannel, gave the whole event an air of nostalgia, viewed by some of the older competitors as emblematic of a newfound respect for shared traditions.

"It's kind of breaking down that wall of division when it comes to hanging out with each other," said Christian Hosoi, 41, an accomplished professional skateboarder. "It's finally coming to that place where there's history to it."

Indeed, the youngest competitors seemed to hew most closely to the styles of the past. The teenage Florence brothers of Hawaii appeared to have stepped out of some dog-eared back issue of *Thrasher* magazine.

"You get to skate with pro skateboarders and snowboarders and meet different people," said John John Florence, 16, widely considered a surfing prodigy. "It's definitely a sick thing."

In keeping with the credo of the board-riding lifestyle, estimations of the bragging rights at stake simmered on low. "The vibe is more just to have fun," said Lyn-z Adams Hawkins, 19, the only female competitor. "But it's kind of a big deal to be good at all three events."

The US\$30,000 top prize was awarded to Chad Shetler, 32, a professional skateboarder who placed 28th in surfing and redeemed himself with high scores in the other two sports.

Around the halfpipe all afternoon, as the distinctive clack of urethane wheels mixed with the occasional collective gasp, energy drink vendors did a brisk business and a camera crew pulled the competitors aside for close-ups.

"Yeah, bro," the TV interviewer said, clasping one athlete's hand. "Good luck."

Ultimate champ mixes waves, ice and wheels

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