

# Five Things Every Whippersnapper Should Know: A Snowboarding Education

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Snowboarding has changed a little since I first strapped into a Blacksnow wearing moonboots in 1988. A few decades later, I know I am not the only one who laments much of what snowboarding has become. Yet it is a fool who thinks he is promised a world that needs his permission to alter itself. In the midst of so many changes, the past can easily be dismissed as little more than a footnote to today's events. This is especially true for today's whippersnappers, who have never had the privilege of plastering their bedroom walls with posters of Craig Kelly pulling methods in the Soviet Union, Damian Sanders riding pipe in hard boots, and Bert LaMar boning out some strange grab on an equally strange-shaped Look Trick Stick. I do not claim to be a gatekeeper responsible for defining what snowboarding is or demanding what it should be, but it may be time for the young punks of today to take a ride in the Delorean in order to learn a few things about the past.

## **I. Snowboarders Were Once a Family**

Once upon a time, a snowboard was a rare thing. If you spotted a board on a roof rack across a parking lot, you were compelled to go on a pilgrimage to meet its owner and swap stories. A t-shirt bearing a Sims, Barfoot, or Kemper logo served as a scarlet letter announcing the wearer's sin and salvation. You may have waited patiently at the bottom of a lift hoping to ride up with a handful of snowboarders you had spotted during your last run. When they reached the bottom, they undoubtedly were stoked to share a chair. I missed the birth of snowboarding by a number of years, but even when I first began riding as a young pup, old dogs looked out for me. Whether it was where to buy a deck in Iowa, discussing which natural features afforded the most air on an icy hill, or ranting about the animosity we perceived ski patrollers had toward us, conversations with strangers en route to becoming friends unfolded as naturally as a good line on a powder day.

## **II. Equipment Failure Was Commonplace**

Broken straps, iced ratchets, delaminated decks, and blown seams on boots were once an everyday occurrence. In Iowa, a broken binding not only ruined your day on the hill, but may have put the next few weeks in limbo. After leaving the hill heartbroken, you might have swung by the local ski shop where diehard ski racers either offered a makeshift substitute or attempted to order replacement parts. I owe many a comeback to my dad, who redrilled ratchets and engineered never-before-seen parts composed of epoxy, fiberglass resin, and duct tape. Broken equipment was as much a part of your day as looking for features to hit on each icy run. If your gear miraculously remained intact for a day, your runs were still riddled with pain. Whether it was your boots, your bindings, or your soaked and ice-caked pants, you were always acutely aware of the interface between your body and the snow. I thought I was hot stuff with my first pair of snowboard boots—a pair of purple and black Kaniks with faux sheepskin liners. Even though I had duct taped the liners to better cradle my feet and provide more support, they frequently popped out on toeside turns. Reinserting a liner into a boot frozen and sealed shut with a double knot was a trying task for my young fingers, especially on the subzero evenings that accompanied night riding in the Midwest. Even when not strapped in, I could tell you exactly where the heelcup and highback of my binding aligned with my foot. It was easy—all I had to do was point to the tender, discolored flesh that bore their imprint. Each year, however, brought hope that things would get better.

### **III. There Are Heroes Whose Names You May Never Know**

Whether it's how we view the mountain, what constitutes a stylish method, or the gear we ride, we will always be in debt to our predecessors. Even if you don't know their names, you feel the legacy of legends and unsung locals alike. Craig Kelly and Terry Kidwell taught us about passion. Tom Burt and Jim Zellers helped us better understand just how far and how steep we could ride. Riders like Tina Basich and Bonnie Zellers reminded us that it was not just men who were pushing snowboarding. Andy Hetzel taught us about style and reminded us that at its core, snowboarding was nothing more than the pursuit of a smile and laugh. People like Mike Olson shaped the technology under our feet. Yet in the shadows of these legends lurk others who also pushed snowboarding forward. Each mountain has its own cast of thankless heroes, be they the local rippers, contest organizers, shopkeepers, supportive parents, or cat operators who weren't afraid to learn how to build park features through trial and error. In the Midwest, it wasn't uncommon for the cat operator shaping booters or cutting a pipe with makeshift technology to be a farmer seeking a little supplemental income. For many Midwestern kids, their riding experience was shaped more by a seventy year old farmer in shit-stained Carhartts than the neon-clad Kemper Extreminators pro team.

### **IV. Not Every Mountain Was Happy to Sell You a Lift Ticket**

Today we view the handful of resorts that don't allow snowboarding as quaint oddities. We laugh at mountains with names like Mad River Glen, Deer Valley, and Alta as though we were waiting for the rest of the world to let them in on the joke that is at their expense. Yet at one time it was common for resorts to ban snowboarding or reluctantly allow riders on a limited portion of the mountain. Stereotypes and rumors further fueled our treatment as second class citizens. I remember reading the words of a Summit County sheriff who claimed that many snowboarders were packing heat and advocated for their exclusion from the slopes that fell under his jurisdiction. Buried among dust bunnies in my parent's house, a bulletin board bears a poster that announces a meeting for S.S.A.S.: Save Snowboarding at Sundown. Like so many resorts in the late 80s and early 90s, Sundown Mountain in Iowa once considered banning snowboarders. Sundown had no shortage of ski areas to turn to for guidance in such matters. Many resorts that now actively seek the dollars of snowboarders—places like Keystone and Taos—provided a model of civility and decency by barring snowboarders from their slopes. Many riders feared that such an approach to snowboarding was en route to becoming the new standard.

### **V. Prior to Manicured Parks, Every Run Demanded Creativity**

It takes no special powers to read the terrain of today's parks and pipes. Stringing together a good park run has essentially been reduced to a five step program: 1.) Drop in 2.) Hit the takeoff 3.) Land on the transition 4.) Ride to the next feature 5.) Repeat steps 2-4 as necessary, adding rails for variety as needed. I won't lie—I find comfort in this routine and love a good park as much as the next kid. But something is lost when one exclusively rides manicured terrain.

In snowboarding's earlier days, each run was by necessity an exercise in creativity. We scoured every inch of Sundown's 475 feet of vertical drop for features to hit. When I first began riding, the hill claimed to have a halfpipe. The hits on this natural ditch never sent you back into the transition, but instead launched you onto the pipe's deck. With time, we discovered that when carved out properly a hit at the bottom of the pipe could shoot you over the chain link fence that bordered it and into the adjacent run. This discovery accompanied a fad of jumping over every fence in sight. I have a fond memory of encouraging a grade school friend to follow me as I jumped over a fence separating a kid's race course from the run that flanked it. The nose of my board slipped between the orange safety fence and the rope strung along its top. This led to an accidental and unsuccessful attempt at a front flip. I

am still amazed that that fence did not force me to trade my board for a wheelchair. Yet before jumping fences came of age, we began jumping the natural drops that accompanied the shifts in pitch of the main run, Turkey Ridge. We had each knoll memorized and spent school days dreaming of the feeling of floating off of each drop. When Midwestern expatriates like Nate Cole, Roan Rogers, and Dale Rehberg placed jibbing in the spotlight via Summit County, we followed suit in Iowa, searching for lift towers, snowmaking covers, and benches to hit.

We even had our own version of backcountry riding in Iowa. After snowstorms, we sometimes snuck around the snowmaking pond, riding over rocks and gravel in search of what we thought was extreme terrain. A seldom-traveled cat track would drop us in a junkyard below the pond that doubled as the storage area for snowmaking guns. Here we set up a private playground of culvert pipes, ladders, electrical spools, and discarded lumber. At times we got back to our roots on powder days, returning to the golf courses where some of us first learned to ride. I remember spending one snow day jumping limestone cliffs at the local golf course while children built snowmen and rode sleds just a few feet away. Still, this was Iowa extreme at its finest. To keep just a few hundred feet of vertical drop exciting, we had to approach each run with new eyes and a sense of adventure. A slight variation in the way a run was groomed combined with a spring thaw might yield the gap jump of the year. A snowmaking mound might provide hours of entertainment as we honed our backside 180s. The mountain was our canvas and there were no rules, no lines in which to color.

Whether it's in the hills of northeast Iowa, the chutes of Jackson, or the parks of Tahoe, this thing we love will move forward without us. Someday, perhaps, our grandchildren will find our antiquated boards tucked away in a musty corner of the garage. Once these youngsters are through laughing at our ancient gear, they may ask us to unearth a few stories about snowboarding back in the day. Perhaps these stories will date back to the Tahoe City Pipe or perhaps they are as recent as the chase to land double corks en route to Vancouver. Or maybe the tales will revolve around days spent rocking neon Quimbola Man one-pieces, taking a hacksaw to a new board to make it a twin, or laughing at guys riding rails in their sisters' jeans. Once we are done gumming out stories of the good old days for our grandkids, we will both be surprised, for despite the ceaseless changes surrounding how we slide down a hill on a plank of wood, we will realize that the freedom snowboarding evokes transcends time.