

# SK8ING: "OUTSIDER" SPORTS, AT-RISK YOUTH, AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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He dropped in smooth-like off the slanting concrete, took a quick last puff, then tossed his Marlboro aside and went for the grind. They were skating on the concrete abutment to the library building at the state university. It was 2 a.m., a Wednesday morning, and the pinkish orange halogen lights reflected dully off their faces. A light drizzle fell. The air was thick and wet. He could see the fading lights of the two bicycling campus rent-a-cops as they left for the other side of the school. They had about a half an hour between the cops' rounds.

Three others--Sandy, Josh, and that blonde girl Corky--watched him. The tossing of his smoke was deliberate, and the timing was essential: too early, and he looked like a dweeb; too late, he'd miss the trick. Same with the Ollie: to get good air, to ascend magically up to the slight rise of the coping, he timed the heel and toe pops just right, carrying the board, no hands, up with his jumping body.

He'd rented *Rebel Without a Cause* seven times, and he loved James Dean. Loved his in-your-face, "fuck you" style. And loved his timing.

Timing, and style--in lots of ways, they were everything. His friends understood this, but his mom and dad didn't. Usually, non-skaters didn't, either. His teachers definitely didn't. Claimed that he would never amount to anything...blah blah blah...same old story. James Dean, and Marlon Brando in *Streetcar*, got that spiel, too.

He hit the steel handrail about mid-board on the deck, balanced easily, careful to let the backside up. He balanced, front and back, then dropped down the coping for the three foot slide, deftly popping the board off in a heel flip, and settled down on the smooth concrete, continuing down the three-foot wide concrete ridge. They called it "black ice," it was so slick and welcoming. He'd practiced this move thousands of times on quite a few sets of copings. But this pipe was what he considered "home," so what looked difficult was not.

He continued on for a few feet, then drove himself up what they used as a half-pipe: a gentle arc of concrete rolling up into a platform with a sculpture of some guy pointing in the distance. He ran the half-pipe, pushed his right hand down at the crest, and did a nice invert, holding the handstand pose just a second, then came back down the pipe and smoothed out, finally dropping over the edge of the concrete ridge to the pavement below. He'd hit both major tricks perfectly. It felt good. Clean and good, like a good high.

He didn't smoke dope anymore. Stopped cold on his sixteenth birthday. Learned that the hard way when he tried to attract a major: two corporate execs

checked him out and found he was a major dooper. Asked him about the extent of it, and he had said, semi-truthfully, "A couple joints a day." Figured everybody knew, why lie? They never called him back.

Now, he just tried to perfect tricks. Short tricks, build them up into long extended bunches. Failing to make was more fun than making. He wasn't self-taught, though. He listened to what the others saw in his stunts, tried to repeat the good and dump the bad; he watched guys like Tony Hawk and Steve Cabellero, and saw what they could do, imagined himself doing it. Then tried it. Over and over again. Listened. Watched. Practiced.

Corky, he thought, looked at him admiringly. She was young, about fifteen only, but she had what it took. She held herself proudly, and tried tricks that Sandy wouldn't always try. He liked it when she concentrated, the tip of her tongue protruding, her brow concentrate and set. She acted as if mistakes, or blemishes, or whatever, were other people's problem. He liked that she saw herself a bit defiant and that she didn't live and die by what others thought of her.

"Cool, Bennie," said Josh. "You held it longer that time." Josh, like Corky, glanced at him genuinely as he talked. But, with Josh, there already was the beginning of a challenge. Bennie sensed that Josh was appraising him, looking for weakness.

Josh meant that he had held the trick, not the smoke, longer. Holding the smoke was a bit of style; no one would consciously point that out. But riding the pipe farther down: that was skill. And Bennie usually listened to Josh; Josh knew tricks. Josh was only thirteen; his brother Sandy was, like Bennie, seventeen. Josh went to Middle School, and had hung out with them for years. When Bennie and Sandy began skateboarding, Josh wanted to try it, too. So he did. And he was good at it. Josh would probably be the one to go up through skateboarding, if anyone from here could. From an early age, he lived the life. The others merely chose the life.

But Bennie had worked to get a sponsor for his skating. First, he watched older skaters. Then, he bought a couple of magazines--*Thrasher*, *Big Brother* -- and read 'em, cover to cover. Sometimes there was advice on how to turn pro. He didn't want to owe anybody anything, but he realized that getting a sponsor would mean he could work a couple of tournaments, get paid, and live easy. So he popped off a couple of emails to potential sponsors.

They were interested, but wouldn't commit to an unknown. He got a friend to videotape him, and sent the tape in to twelve companies: two T-shirt manufacturers, three "truck" companies, three board makers, and five snack companies. Two bit, and offered him \$750 each. He thought it was a king's ransom. He was fifteen.

In the ensuing two years, Bennie discovered that the money he could get from sponsorships let him buy things he wanted. But, somehow, skating was not as much fun.

An executive-type from ESPN showed up, asked him if he'd like to get involved with this idea they had for an Olympic-type alternative sports carnival. Called it the eXtreme Games.

"Nah," said Bennie. "Skating ain't a sport. It's a lifestyle. It's an art form. You guys'll take it over."

Corky broke his thoughts. "Listen, guys. It's late. I'm heading home. I'm tired."

They drifted to the street, talking. The rent-a-cops waved to them; they waved back. Corky said, ". . . and I'm all, 'You can't take my paper! I wrote that!' And she's all, 'When you figure out which one of you was cheating. . .'" Bennie smiled and took a last drag of his smoke and tossed it down, deftly rolling over it. He was tired too, but these were his friends.

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*"You're late, Chambers! Sit on your numbers, people! Come on, now, hustle up there.. So, we got a non-suit here, huh, Mr. Chambers?"*

"Uh, yeah. You got it."

Walking to his spot, head down. Walking round Neuffer's spot, Neuffer commanding the space, head down avoiding. . . .

"Fag."

"Asshole."

"Nice shirt, fag." Whispered. "Nice fucking shoes." Pause. "Fag."

"Fuck you, asshole." Looking up, braving the stare. Neuffer is big. "Still on 'roids, asshole?"

"Still skating, pussy?"

*"Awright, girls. Who's gonna lead? Neuffer, your turn?"* Assumptions, prior assumptions. Head down, taking roll, walking the numbers, head down. Flashback to third grade, when Neuffer was still big, but Bennie was fearless.

"Jumping jacks! Ready, set: one, two, three, *one!* one, two, three, *two!*"

Neuffer was teasing Kelly Stokes, running with her backpack, opening it and reading her notes to Bennie. Things were spilling out all over the playground. At first Kelly tried to get it all back but then, frustrated, she sat down plopping on the asphalt and just cried. Pulled at her socks. That's what Bennie remembered. He could still feel her resentment and anger and frustration. Could still feel the choke hold he put on Neuffer.

"Get it going, Chambers!" Just like Neuffer to point out that Bennie wasn't exercising.

*"Chambers? You want to sit this dance out? Let's get it movin' and shakin', girls."* The coach liked to call the p.e. classes "girls."

As he began shuffling his arms and legs, Bennie hawked up a big loogie. Still handy enough to project accurately, but he could tell it was dense and foul. When Neuffer bent to tie his shoe, Bennie shot it out.

The ball of phlegm was a thing of beauty. It softly arced toward its target, hard and fast and aerodynamically perfect. Bennie watched its flight as if he were watching a football in slow motion, perfect spiral winding down. Time slowed. And then, suddenly, decisively, it hit Neuffer on his left exposed arm, and normal time returned.

"You fuck!" For Neuffer, there was no mistaking who had done it: everyone around Bennie laughed and pointed as the wet phlegm slowly made its way down his arm. Neuffer started to wipe it off with his other hand, but then reconsidered. He leapt toward Bennie, and slammed his arm across the red glistening tongue on Bennie's Rolling Stones' t-shirt. The sudden forearm shiver slammed the breath from Bennie, and he fell with the force of the blow. "Don't you ever," Neuffer hissed, "fuck with me again!"

*"Knock it off, ladies," warned the coach. "Dancing class is next period."*

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Soft velour, retro-sixties material, the bean bag chair set jauntily in front of the television. Volume turned down. Motion on the screen: mountain bikers careening down a steep dirt path, dodging trees and limbs and rocks and rivulets of water and each other, the motion fast, faster than real, as if the camera were speeded up. Finally, all five bikers coming to sudden stops at a precipice overlooking a magnificent canyon. Pulling out cans of Mountain Dew. "Do the Dew!" reads the screen, as each biker mouths words, one imitating with his hand the sliding motion of a surfboard over water. Dissolve to one biker, head thrown back, riding his bike down deep into the canyon, sucking greedily from a can of Mountain Dew.

Bennie barely raises his head. These commercials are exactly what's wrong with this eXtreme Games, in fact with ESPN and most commercial television. Yet he watches for two reasons: to see if skateboarding is treated fairly and honestly, and to see if he can learn anything. After the first day of this thing, he stopped being critical and just enjoyed the show.

Corky had seen him in school the next day, and he'd enjoyed recounting some of the tricks they'd both seen. So he continued to watch it.

"Bennie?" his mom called.

"Down here, mom."

The heavy, tired tread of her white nursing shoes coming down the three steps to the rec room; the mixed aroma of sweat and grease and hairspray and old makeup and an almost sickening smell of her perfume, something called Sunflower, meant to ward off the other human smells. The quick tiredness in her eyes, the long-gone anger at his father for abandoning them, the crow's feet imploding her face like a scrunched up ball of paper.

"What're you watching?"

"Nothing," he says. His eyes follow her as she drops into a reclining chair, scoots the legs up, pushes the head back. He knows the answer "nothing" irritates her, but doesn't care. He's bored, waiting and saving his energy for tonight's skating.

"Oh, ESPN? Is this that X Generation thing?"

"Gen X, mom. Yeah."

"Is it good? Any skaters?" She's tried to feign an interest in his passion. Took him to AYSO soccer practices, baked brownies for the bake sale, and worked out ride-sharing for him when he took drum lessons. But she's also, he knows, worked full time, and not gotten any support from his dad after the first year.

"Yeah, the skating's usually at night, though. Not in the afternoon. They tape it, and put it together for the night audience." He's been on TV at some events, and knows how they can change what it is you did. Some of the best tricks are lost because they're following the stars.

"Oh." This is the most he's said to her in three days. Apparently, his snit is over. She wonders if she should bring it back up. Decides to. "Bennie?"

"Yeah?" Something, the tone of her voice, the way she lilts the last syllable of his name falsely, rings a warning bell: he is instantly wary.

"You think we can talk about the late nights now? And that girl? And your English assignments?"

"Jesus, mom!" He is alert now, fighting. "You know I've got to practice. And Corky's just a skater. Nothing going on." He pauses, reflecting. "And Mr. Olson is stupid, and those assignments are asinine." He falls back on the bean bag chair, satisfied. He usually tries to be sensible, or to avoid conflict with her.

"Honey. Bennie? Please don't talk to me that way. And don't do your Mowgli face. I got a call today. At work."

"Yeah?" Acting disinterested, but highly wary.

"The counselor--Mrs. Apanishaud?--called. Said they've identified you as an 'at risk' student? Could you tell me what that means?"

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"You know, Mrs. Chambers, this at-risk classification is reversible, of course. We've found that we can take kids on adventure--um, well, like Outward Bound? That research has shown," Mrs. Apanishaud takes her tortoiseshell eyeglasses off, carefully striking a scholarly pose, "that, um, kids who participate in Outward Bound return to school more self-confident, self-possessed, and ready to continue with their studies--more motivated, I guess you could say?--than, um, before?"

"Yes, that makes sense."

"So we've got this 'ropes course' for our physical education classes that we're experimenting with? And it seems to get similar results to the Outward Bound program. So, having identified Benjamin--"

"Bennie. He goes by 'Bennie.'"

"Bennie, then. Having identified him as at-risk, it naturally follows that he would be a prime candidate for this 'ropes course.'" She smiles placidly; it is as if she has asked a question, though of course she has not.

Bennie is there, sitting next to his mother. At seventeen, he is mildly humiliated by this treatment. The school seems to have no clue. But he simply doesn't care enough about their opinion of him. So he has found himself silently repeating "Whatever" to everything Mrs. Apanishaud says.

"How much does it cost?"

"Normally, Mrs. Chambers, the ropes courses are an extra forty-five dollars per student; but for this special group, this population, the school district has consented to forego any extra costs. It will be offered," she flips her wrist, "free."

"Why?" This is Bennie.

"Excuse me?"

"Why? What's in it for the district?"

"Why, the administration sees this as a potentially valuable tool for retaining students? Plus, of course, um, they will gain some useful information regarding at-risk students?"

Bennie's mother turns to him. "What do you think?"

Instead of answering her, he faces Mrs. Apanishaud. "Who's gonna teach it?"

"Well, Bennie. That's a decision for the administration to deal with? But, as of now, our current liaison with the ropes course--it's run by the park district?--is Mr. Cole, Coach Cole?"

"Just curious, Mrs. Apanishaud. Is this a part of Coach Cole's master's thesis?"

She blanches, but recovers quickly. "Why, yes, Bennie. Yes, it will be. He has subject consent forms for you and your mother to fill out? Right here?"

"What do you think, Bennie? Sounds kind of fun to me," says his mom, hopefully.

"Tell you what. Here's an idea: have me teach classes in skateboarding. Kids like it, I know it and can teach it. Let's see if that helps the 'at-risk' population."

"Bennie, you know the district can't do that. The liability is much too prohibitive," says Mrs. Apanishaud.

"Well, let me think about it," he says. He understands the game.

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You don't ask anybody for anything. You work your tricks, they're all that really matter anyway. Once, you remember, in fourth grade, you won the spelling bee, the school-wide spelling bee. You beat fifth and sixth graders. Your final word was "infantilize." And, you guessed at the second "i," choosing it over an "a," but you got it right.

But then, things started getting weird. Your dad wanted you to play Little League Baseball, and you'd never even hit a pitched ball. But you tried. Sat on the bench most of the time, but you were a proud member of the championship Winter League Cubs. Still have the trophy to show for it. And your mom started insisting you go to church, to Sunday School. When you said you didn't like it, she took it personally. When you told your dad you didn't like baseball, he looked at you. Stared right through you with his piercing grey eyes.

At first you thought their fighting--rumblings that woke you up at night, sometimes a sudden shout--was just arguing, that they still loved each other, that it didn't have anything to do with you. They both told you that. Insisted. But, one night, your dad threatened your mom. And you heard your dad say, "I don't want him in that goddamn Catholic school. You hear me?" You heard a soft, reasoning reply. A murmur, higher pitched, conciliatory. Then you heard muffled slaps and punches, and she gasped, then sobbed high and loud and clear. And you knew that, at least marginally, it *did* have something to do with you.

So you tried harder to please. To somehow keep them together. And, for a while, it worked. Your dad smiled at your attempts to throw a spiral deep; he said, "Way to go, man!" and the word "man" felt very right in your chest. Your mom stopped taking you to church, but she taught you the piano. The left hand was clumsy, but you could pick out tunes with the simple noted right hand. Life was calm, stable, good.

Then, you couldn't keep doing better and better. Everyone kept asking for more and more from you. You took swimming, and the first day you felt like you'd swallowed ten gallons of water. The chlorine burned your nose, your goggles kept fogging up, and the girl in front of you kicked you in the head three times. At the dinner table that night you cried, frustrated, and your mom and dad fought again.

"Why does he have to be such a--jock?" she asked.

"Men do sports," said your dad. "He wants to be a man--he'll do 'em, too. That music and cultural stuff is fine," you dad said, reaching to fork a potato, "but sports'll see him through. Right?" He looked at you, and the pressure broke you. You began crying again.

And ran from the table, from dinner, from your mom and dad, and that was the beginning of the end.

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And you O my soul where you stand,  
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
Carelessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect  
them. . .

--Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider"

## POST-PARTUM<sup>1</sup>

Many children in public schools in the United States (and in most western, postindustrial societies) are bored with school, with family, and with life. Searching for meaning in their own lives, they cast about for activities--including sport and physical activity--that may resonate with them. Typically, they haven't read Viktor Frankl's compelling work ([1984]1946), *Man's Search for Meaning*, which discusses Frankl's time in concentration camps during World War II. Frankl, after much reflection, came to the conclusion that hope was what sustained those who lived, and failure to hope was the harbinger for those who would die. His angst at having survived thus was no longer relevant; the seemingly arbitrariness of death in the death camps certainly still existed, but many of the survivors could find some small solace in the idea that hope might sustain life.

Many of these modern-day students--the ones who are unfamiliar with Auschwitz and Dachau except as Steven Spielberg may have immortalized them in *Schindler's List*--have not thought deliberately about the process of seeking higher purpose in life; often they little regard the gifts that are bestowed upon them. A documented, creeping sense of ennui (see, e.g., Carlson, 1995; Devereux, 1976; Kingwell, 1996; Lemert, 1997; Sanders & Graham, 1995)--a vague listlessness and boredom toward life--does not, however, adequately account for what they do with their so-called "idle" time.

As Fine and Mechling (1993) write, "there is no such thing as idle time; standing around a street corner, 'just talking,' is an important activity accomplishing important ends" (p. 131). So the documentation or classification of boredom may be mis-cataloguing the activity/idle time of youth. What appears to be idleness, or lack of achievement motivation (e.g., Roberts & Treasure, 1993) may be very important to people who are doing such activity. Roberts and Treasure (1993), citing Veroff's 1969 research, write:

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<sup>1</sup>In the previous section, I meant to dig more deeply into the "stories" of at-risk youth, particularly in terms of the physical/recreational, or "creational" activities they choose for themselves, and how those activities are dealt with (or, more accurately, denied institutionally) in the institutional setting of school and on the street. I am not trying to be descriptive (though description surely enters into it), nor am I looking to be prescriptive (the answers are complex, singular, and need deep thought). Rather, I am attempting, via fictional discourse (I follow Richardson, Denison), to show some of the problems facing at-risk youth, from society, from institutions, from traditions, from other concerned agents and agencies, and finally, from themselves. The stories were meant to be evocative, both sensually and intellectually.

Veroff argued that participation in games and sport is *the* domain in which young boys use social comparison processes in order to determine their standing among their peers (p. 123, emphasis in original).

There are at least three fallacies in citing this quarter-of-a-century-old research: one, social conditions in 1969 are not immediately translatable to the 1990's; two, it is unclear whether Veroff included informal games and sport or was merely discussing organized games and sport; three, "young boys" does not comprise a master set for all young people (nor did it then). To apply a 1969 model of social conditions to the mid-1990's seems naive, if not ludicrous. Fine and Mechling (1993) argue that the decline of so-called "superego models of leadership" has led to a dearth of role models for youth. However, the 1990's world, and its choices, is more complex than that (indeed, so was the world of the late sixties, but it was not studied as multilayered or multifaceted). Youth--not just the youth who can last in these milieus, but all youth--no longer take sole direction from sport coaches or leaders, or from scoutmasters, or from other superego oriented programs. The drop-out rate from these programs doesn't necessarily point to lowered standards, but perhaps to an individuation process for youth that may have positive aspects. Just because youth are not involved in institutionally-provided programs does not necessarily mean, even in the 1990s, that they are directionless. Or unmotivated.

Moreover, it is not necessarily what youth (or anyone) do, but rather their attitudes toward what they do. Frankl puts it this way:

The way in which a man [sic] accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity--even under the most difficult circumstances--to add a deeper meaning to his life (1946, p. 88).

This sense of hopefulness and of control over one's own "stuff" is what Virginia Woolf sought in her book *A Room of One's Own*. Walt Whitman, in many of his *Leaves of Grass* poems, sounds hopeful tones, but also accepts that people need to find their own pace and purpose. Adolescence still is a difficult time--a time of change brought on by forces outside of one's control, a time of adjustment to institutional controls, and a time of testing one's abilities and values. It surely is not "idle" time, but rather is terribly valuable time when one begins to recognize oneself for the rest of one's life.

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