

Skateboarding Glides Into New Phase

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Steve Dykes for The New York Times

Zak Maytum, 19, competing at the Festival of Speed this month, is a champion downhill and slalom skater on his longboard.

GOLDENDALE, Wash. — Here in the high desert east of the Cascades, where towering windmills quietly whirl overhead, skaters hurtle downhill along a ribbon of blacktop six at a time wearing helmets and motorcycle leathers, hay bales stacked along switchbacks for the inevitable wipeouts.

But in the garment district in Manhattan, it is a slightly tamer story. One day in the spring, Todd Brunengraber stepped from his office on West 39th Street. Hearing a distinct hum from newly repaved Seventh Avenue, he turned and watched a commuter on a supersize skateboard whiz by.

The board was similar to the type he built in woodshop while growing up, but with big, candy-colored wheels. Soon, Brunengraber, a 62-year-old grandfather who had not set foot on a board in more than 25 years, spent \$50 for a lesson and joined a growing legion of longboarders.

This summer, he has been pushing to and from Penn Station, and each night after work cruising a hill on his Bay Shore, N.Y., street.

“It’s a rush to get on it,” he said.

Whether on a hair-raising rural road in the Pacific Northwest or in teeming Midtown traffic, longboards have become the fastest-growing segment in an otherwise sluggish skateboard market. In recent years, they have lured new participants to a pastime traditionally dominated by teenage boys and young men performing perilous stunts.

“There’s a real neo-hippie, everybody-welcome kind of vibe to longboarding,” said Adam Goldstein, 43, who skates with his 10-year-old son around Manhattan.

Goldstein, who directs commercials, says he takes a longboard to commute while working in Los Angeles or Toronto. “You can just go anywhere,” he said.

With decks usually 34 inches or longer; trucks (axles) adapted for easier turning; and big, soft wheels, longboards provide a smoother skating experience than boards designed for performing tricks. Their size and stability make longboards well suited for cruising streets and college campuses. The price of a good longboard starts at about \$150.

“There’s no stigma,” said Larry Peterson, who made 2,500 boards in a dairy barn in Salem, Ore., last year under the brand Longboard Larry. “It’s one of the sports where someone who’s 40 can go skate with someone who’s 13 and nobody thinks it’s weird.”

With an inclusive, do-it-yourself ethic, longboarding has grown as a grass-roots movement mostly outside the established skateboard industry and spread from Southern California to places like Brooklyn and Bend, Ore.

Begun in a San Diego backyard in 1993 by a group of surfers, the longboard maker Sector 9 has led the way. In 2008, the surf apparel maker Billabong bought Sector 9. Sector 9 is part of an increasingly crowded market that 10 years ago was not much more than a scattered collection of small entrepreneurs.

While working at a skate shop in the 1990s, Brian Petrie began making longboards from broken snowboards out of his Brooklyn apartment. The result: Earthwing Skateboards. In 2002 a group of friends in Hagerstown, Md., began building longboards for themselves. By 2004, they moved to New York and settled in Brooklyn as Bustin Boards.

Zak Maytum, 19, a champion downhill and slalom skater on his longboard, began a business making wheels and bushings from his parents' garage in Boulder, Colo., three years ago. Today, his company, Venom, employs two salespeople. "Every year is bigger than the last year," he said.

A former professional street skater, Marcus Bandy is the team manager for Orangatang, a wheel company in Los Angeles that is popular with longboarders.

"It's really all new," Bandy, 37, said about the longboard culture. "It's like when punk rock or hip-hop first came out. It's a whole new thing, and the kids are loving it."

He added: "People are always going to create their own stuff and that's what's happening here. These guys are creating skateboarding and reinventing skateboarding."

According to ActionWatch, a survey of surf and skate shops across the United States, overall skateboard sales dropped 2 percent in the first few months of 2010 compared with the same period in 2009. But sales of longboards rose 43 percent.

In March, Jeff Gaites and Kristen Howard opened Uncle Funky's, a longboard shop in Manhattan's West Village that provides lessons for the city's growing scene.

Gaites, a skater since the 1970s, says he has seen changing attitudes toward longboards from the larger skateboard community. "The kids would see us when we would ride by and they would heckle," he said. "Now, teenagers are riding them."

Jeff Budro, the skateboard team manager for Sector 9, is a former professional skater. "If you couldn't kick-flip on your skateboard and you had your skateboard under your arm, you were a dork," he said about the sport's emphasis on performing tricks. "You couldn't even hang out with us. So kids kind of got pushed away."

"With longboarding, there really are not any expectations. Your mom can do it. Your dad can do it. Your sister can do it."

Women, a rare sight in a core skate shop, find longboarding welcoming, Gaites said.

"With longboarding with women, it's nice to learn and more inviting," he said. "People are more quickly willing to teach somebody."

Katie Neilson, 21, a downhill longboard enthusiast sponsored by Sector 9, discovered a sense of camaraderie. In March while taking a turn too fast on a mountain road, she skidded off her board into a ditch and broke her leg in three places. She spent two months recovering but remained steeped in the scene.

"I got involved in the community any way I could get involved in the community because I love them," she said. "If they needed rides up the hill, I would give it to them. I just followed them wherever they would go."

This month, downhill longboarding brought Neilson to Klickitat County, Wash., and Maryhill Loops Road, a 2.2-mile squiggle like a strand of wet spaghetti, with more twists and turns than the plot of a Dan Brown novel as it runs toward the Columbia River Gorge.

Permanently closed to vehicular traffic, the road hosted the annual Maryhill Festival of Speed, a prestigious downhill skateboard race that attracted 200 of the world's best racers. With helmets and leather suits for protection, competitors move at more than 45 miles per hour in packs reminiscent of short-track speedskating, leaving little margin for error.

"This is a very specialized extreme," Erik Basil, the managing editor of silverfishlongboarding.com, home to a leading longboard community forum, said about downhill racing.

Still, as longboarding grows in popularity, it feeds the ranks of racing.

At Maryhill, Maytum won the men's downhill handily, while Neilson placed second among the women. There was little more on the line than bragging rights. The total prize purse, including for street luge, was \$7,000.

The Broadway Bomb, which advertises itself as the most dangerous longboard skateboard race, pays the winner even less. In the event, which made its debut in 2002, participants gather through word of mouth to run a length of Broadway amid normal traffic. In October 2009, more than 200 competitors showed up to race from 110th Street to the financial district.

Michael Brooke, the editor and publisher of Concrete Wave, a skateboard magazine, acknowledged that most longboarders would never do anything so radical.

They, like Brunengraber, prefer avoiding cars. "You just push off and you go, and you can really make tracks," he said.

Still, his wife seemed skeptical. "Basically, I gave my wife an excuse," Brunengraber said. "I can go to Dunkin' Donuts for coffee."

For Brooke, that situation sums up the appeal of longboarding.

"It's not about rebellion," he said. "It's about having fun."