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Ollies at the Olympics: why having skateboarding at Tokyo 2020 is a winning move

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It's official: skateboarding is going to become an Olympic sport. At Tokyo 2020, the world of ledge-grinding, ollie-jumping, kick-flipping and bowl-riding will be showcased alongside several other new sports, as well as the usual Olympic fare.

On the face of it, this decision seems surprising – some might question whether the largely street-based activity of skateboarding is even a proper sport. Yet given that the Olympics' governing body is seeking to attract younger audiences to bolster their ageing demographic, it's also a sensible move.

Still, it's difficult to imagine how this will work in practice. Surely, the implicitly anti-capitalist, subcultural and "alternative" nature of skateboarding – where skaters appropriate urban streets, buildings and plazas for unregulated pleasures – is completely at odds with the training-intensive, performance-measured and medal-obsessed Olympic Games?

Certainly, many skateboarders believe that it's best kept away from the Olympics because of worries about a dilution of skateboarding's "core" values of independence, non-commercialism and unregulation.

They're also concerned about corporate co-option; about the impossibility of accurate judging; and about unwanted global attention to their lifestyle choices. And the prevalence of cannabis-smoking among many (although by no means all) skaters may also present problems with meeting Olympics regulations.

For all these reasons, many skateboarders conclude that the Olympic Games need skateboarding far more than skaters need the Olympics, and that this unholy alliance should never be made.

Making millions

Yet, as always, things are rather more complicated than they seem. Notably, skateboarding has always had formal competitions. As early as 1965, ABC televised skateboarding championships in Anaheim, California,

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where Mexican, Japanese and American skaters battled for US\$1,000 prizes. The cable-television extravaganza, the X Games, launched in 1995 and today there continue to be global skateboarding events organised by the likes of Vans and Street League Skateboarding.

These are highly commercial initiatives, which make profits for their sponsors and organisers both directly through ticket sales and indirectly through enhanced brand associations. But they are also far more relaxed affairs than most sports events; skateboarders regularly support and applaud their peers, and even lend equipment when required. The whole atmosphere is more about mutual appreciation than direct rivalry.

Photographs, films, magazines, DVDs and social media have also helped to promote skateboarding globally, from early shorts like the Hobie-promo America's Newest Sport (1964) and appearances in Hollywood films like Back to the Future (1985), to the highly-acclaimed documentary Dogtown and Z-Boys and recent high-budget videos like Propeller (Vans, 2015), Away Days (Adidas, 2016) and Holy Stokes! (Volcom, 2016).



, Author provided

DOGTOWN AND Z-BOYS - TRAILER



Alongside their Instagram, Twitter and other social media accounts, thousands of professionals rely on these appearances for global exposure. The likes of Tony Hawk, Nyjah Huston, Ryan Sheckler, Rob Dyrdek and others have earned tens of millions of dollars in this way. Hawk is still the highest-earning skater in the world: his Pro Skater video game franchise has earned US\$1.2bn since its launch in 1999.

Brands have also cashed in on skateboarding's association with street-authenticity and general cool: from famous brands in skateboarding culture such as Antihero, Girl, Chocolate, Krooked and Thrasher, to outsiders such as Nike and Adidas, and fashion-oriented brands such as Vans, Supreme and Palace. This can be big business – the shoe and clothes brand Vans, owned by VF Corporation, currently has an annual turnover in excess of US\$2 billion.

The social sport

Skateboarding is increasingly being associated with wider social benefits. It's often argued that the independent, risk-taking and even entrepreneurial characteristics of skateboarding are exactly those which modern society wishes to promote. And as a relatively accessible activity (even a top-line skateboard costs under £150), skateboarding can be readily practised to an extent that regimented team sports or more costly leisure sports (snowboarding and skiing, for example) can only dream of.

Right around the globe – from Skateistan, which aims to empower young people and strengthen communities in Afghanistan, to other social enterprises in Ethiopia, Cambodia, native American reservations and even under-privileged regions in the UK – skateboarding is also being deployed to address social issues. The sport can be used to engage with disadvantaged young people, promote intergenerational interaction, enrich cultural diversity, enhance physical and mental health in middle-aged people and even support those with serious disabilities.

So where does this leave skateboarding and the Olympics? It seems that after decades of lurking around like a misunderstood teenager, skateboarding is in fact now established, mainstream and varied enough to survive anything that a spectacular Olympics presentation could throw at it.



Strong game. Iain Borden, Author provided

The history of skateboarding shows that, far from being straightforwardly opposed to commercial, media and governmental concerns, skateboarding has always had a complex engagement with such affairs. Certainly, one more big competition won't stop street skaters from riding urban terrains, while the presence of skateboarding in the Olympics will attract new skaters (including women), encourage new skateparks, and bolster skate-related social enterprises, media, manufacturers and professionals.

What's more, skateboarding might just help to rescue the Olympics from its over reliance on "established" sports, international rivalries and high-level performance measuring. Skateboarding suggests that other attitudes toward competition can exist, in which personal achievement is undoubtedly celebrated, but always within a more pervasive culture of idiosyncratic innovation, shared engagement and general lifestyle.

Skateboarding is one of those sports-like activities (such as cycling and running, to name but two others) which can benefit both individuals and communities, being both easy to start, and easy to continue. So it's not just skateboarding or the Olympics that would benefit from their unlikely marriage, but communities as a whole – and that's an opportunity not to be missed.

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