

A glimpse into America's grassroots downhill scene

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Walk through interviews with a few key members of America's downhill longboarding scene. The interview questions both pro skaters & professional skateboard manufacturers about the legality of the sport & dive into why they believe skateboarding is received by the public the way it is. From their personal experiences with police to their impressions that the law has on the community.

Keywords: *Downhill Longboarding, Skateboarding, Wicked Sends, Dope Saves*

Introduction

Deep in the Blue Ridge mountains there is a tight-knit community of skateboarders that live on the edge. You can find them on some of the world's steepest, windiest, and skinniest roads; moving faster than the cars that follow. The public has not yet been exposed to this sport that many consider to be "more extreme than skydiving." With this novelty comes a plethora of reactions. Interviewing a few deeply connected members of this community sheds light on the risks taken beyond the board and insight to the experiences dealing with the general public as well as the police that are called upon. The understanding of the law regarding skating down these hills, sometimes at breakneck speeds (often 45 mph and above), is blurry at best. However, what may be even more important is the attitude of those who participate and those who happen to stumble upon America's grassroots downhill community and how, or even if, the law has any impact on their beliefs.

Literature Review

Regarding the traffic laws, specifically in North Carolina where most Downhill skaters reside nowadays, it is often upheld in the community that you are participating in an activity that can be considered akin to riding a bicycle and therefore, many believe that if it is legal for a bicycle to ride on said road it is also legal to skateboard. This is often thought of as skateboarding can just be considered as an exercise and transportation device similar to a bicycle. Since both activities require helmets, take up the same approximate space and are a clean alternative to traveling with a car, it is easy to understand the comparison. However, a key difference that should be considered is that downhill skateboarding is typically not for the primary reason of transportation and is often, pushed to its limits.

Methods

In order to gain an in-depth perspective of what it is really like to be a hardline downhiller, I interviewed two professional, sponsored skaters and one owner of a board company. I asked 11 questions revolving around the legality of skateboarding and put an emphasis on the moral beliefs of the skaters and their ideas on how the community feels regarding the legal status. i.e., the impact that legality has on the community and the ideas of those they interact with as a response.

Participants

The first interviewee is Jesse Fabrizio, a professional skateboarder outside of Asheville, NC with multiple different sponsors. Jesse has been skating for over a decade in many different states and along the way has developed a network of other professional downhillers and has a deep connection to the sport.

Second, we have “Kactus” Kevin, another sponsored skater that provides a unique look into the outer fringes of the sport. Hailing from the mountains of Virginia and settling in Kingsport, Tennessee, Kevin has skated on the edge of downhill for quite some time, often dealing with backcountry folk and rustic police officers, accruing a deep history of dealing directly with the legality of downhill.

Lastly, “Daddy” Dave Bangson is a longboard manufacturer out of Delaware and has recently put on the “Broadstreet Bomb” in Philadelphia, PA. As both a well-respected owner of a board company and organizer of one of the US’s biggest push races, Daddy Dave offers a behind the scenes look at the east coast community.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted via text/email in order to give the participants ample time to read and process the questions and develop a thoughtful response. I decided to refrain from doing a recorded interview in person/ over the phone due to complicated schedules as well as the ability to think of a response and collect relevant past experiences before attempting to answer for the specific reason that I believed it would result in more precise and relevant answers. Especially, to reduce tangents and non-relevant

information, given conversations with each participant, on average, can last upwards of an hour & often contains colorful language.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the conversations and organizing based on question I decided to code responses based on relevance. With each participant, some responses were well thought out or gave unique perspectives, while others barely scratched the surface of the question or did not answer it at all. Many questions contained useful information, however, mostly consisted of anecdotal “fat”, another reason for refraining for a recorded interview format.

Results

Each participant stated that they did not know the official legal status of skating down an open road in the state they live in but felt that an ordinance against skateboarding down a road is unjust. Each participant has had ample experiences with the police as well as what they dub “Karens” with the vast majority of police encounters ending positively and most “Karen” encounters ending negatively. Each participant has stated that most of their encounters with the public are positive and end up getting compliments and encouragement. Both Jesse and “Daddy” Dave has heard of arrests for skating, they each feel that participating in skateboarding down an open road is as morally appropriate, just as riding a bicycle. While “Kactus” Kevin states that he himself has been arrested, however, it is important to note he was arrested for skating in a skate park that he had shown up at minutes earlier and did not know it was illegal for him to skate at, since it was a designated “skate area” i.e., a skate park.

Jesse Fabrizio states that there is a stigma in North Carolina, his state of residence, due to the generational makeup of the population, he believes that due to the high volumes of elderly that reside in NC and since they grew up without a major presence of skateboarders which has changed drastically in recent years, that there has been a strong reaction to the new arrival of America’s largest downhill community. “Daddy” Dave states that he believes it has to do with the residual attitudes from the 90’s in which skaters were deemed “no good heathens” due to their “anti-establishment, in your face” attitudes that many participants took up.

Theme 1

When the participants were asked of the legality of the sport, both Jesse and “Daddy” Dave stated that it does not change their outlook on participation at all, however, they wish that people accepted them more and made them feel more welcome when they are skating. Mr. Kactus stated that it makes him nervous to get in trouble for skating, but it would not change his willingness to participate.

Theme 2

When asked about the impact that legal status has on the community as a whole and the impact it has on the public's view towards the sport, "Kactus" Kevin states that if it were completely legal, then it would potentially increase the number of people interested in taking it up as a hobby. Jesse says that legal or illegal does not change the fact that there is a community that loves the sport and fighting against that community is pointless. He believes that making the sport legal would bring more peace of mind to skaters knowing that they can "freely practice their passion unbothered." "Daddy" Dave has beliefs similar to "Kactus" Kevin, stating that legal protection would increase willingness to enter the scene, but reiterates points similar to Jesse, saying "skaters gonna skate... we DO still have that anti-establishment mentality in our blood, but I think these days the mentality is driven by the desire to live free as one pleases, without hurting anybody else, or damaging property."

Discussion

An important belief that many downhillers share is the relation to bicyclists. It is important to note that on almost all roads being skated down, there are bikers biking down it as well. However, bicyclists do not receive the same kind of backlash from the public. One potential reason is safety. It is easy to believe upon first inspection that not only is downhill skating not as safe as a bike, but that it is not safe in any sense of the word. However, this is only at first glance, to an experienced skater, the road is wide and turning is your friend. Due to the physics of sliding a longboard, the primary way a downhiller brakes, you can slow yourself while you turn, in fact it is more efficient this way than in a straight line. Which is distinctly opposite to how a car or bike braking mechanism works. A skateboarder can slow themselves rather quickly from very high speeds merely using sliding friction.

Another important thing to note is the locations in which there is a high volume of skating. It is highly uncommon for skateboarders to be skating down a busy highway. This is the exact attraction to the hills of western North Carolina. In the Appalachian Mountains, it is quite rustic and often isolated, with maybe one or two cars the entire session. Therefore, it is reasonable to skate these roads with caution and come out untouched nearly every single time.

However, attitudes, beliefs and morals are blurry, law is not. Based upon research found in law code books for North Carolina, it is stated that skateboarding in "public vehicular areas" is prohibited, however, it is important to note that there are separate laws for skateboarding, roller skates, and roller blades as bicycles. Which begs the question on where the line is drawn? Is it a matter of speed, safety, space, or attitude towards it from the public and more importantly, law makers.

Future Work

An important study could be to investigate volume of injuries per capita and compared to other, more mainstream, sports. One that comes to mind is sports such as football and/or mixed martial arts. Sports

in which full contact is vital and one of the main reasons for popularity. It often seems contradictory and even hypocritical of many “Karens” who hate on the sport, call the cops on skaters and film us (for some reason) when they themselves are on their way home to watch the Sunday football game or fight in which athletes quite literally injure each other on purpose.

I believe that the testimonies of these individuals are important to note due to their deep connection to the sport. Jesse Fabrizio is one of downhill's greatest skaters to date and is still on his way up. “Daddy” Dave is one of the hottest board makers on the east coast and his company “Based Boards” are works of art. While “Kactus” Kevin is a favorite among the community and offers one of the most unique perspectives you can find when it comes to downhill.

Due to the novelty of the sport, it is well known that there are not many fighting for the future of Downhill in the courts, however, it would be vital if there was a voice for skateboarding as a whole that can represent the sport and fight for the future of downhill.

References

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Appendix A: Recruitment Script

What is your name, current state of residence & connection to skateboarding?

To your current knowledge, is it illegal to skateboard down an open road?

Have you ever had to deal with police or even members of the public claiming it is illegal? What was the result?

Do you believe skateboarding down an open road, regardless of legal status, is morally appropriate?

Do you know if anybody has been arrested for this?

Do you believe that skating down an open road is objectively safe?

What is the typical response from the public?

Do you have an idea as to why there is a stigma against skateboarding in this country/state?

What if I told you, based on my research for this project, that skateboarding is illegal on any road not specifically in a “designated area”?

Does the legal status have any effect on your intention to continue to skate?

Do you believe that the legal status has any effect on the community as a whole? Do you think if it were legal or illegal that it would change the public’s attitude towards the sport?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Do you _____ consent to have any and all answers to the following questions used in an academic setting. The interviewer _____ is hereby stating that any and all answers will not be used for any other purpose than an academic paper. Please sign below.

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

I am attempting to receive the interviewee’s purest responses to my questions without influencing them at all with my bias. Specifically, I have already done some research and it has therefore affected my understanding of the legal status of skateboarding, however, I want to hear their beliefs, separate from my own. This is one reason I chose to do the interview over text/email instead of in person.

Appendix D: Interview Transcripts

J: Jessie, current state of residence is western North Carolina, I’m a professional.

K: Kevin Thomas Depriest, currently my canine Richie & I live in Sullivan County, Tennessee. I have been skateboarding as far back as I can remember, my brother Dale was a ripper in the early 90’s, anytime we were near one of those old concrete parks on vacation we would stop in & Dale would ride. I can remember butt boarding down into the bowl somewhere in Florida.

D: My name is Daddy Dave, I live in Delaware and my connection to skateboarding is, I’m a multi-disciplined average longboarder and I make Longboards in my free time

J: As far as I know it's legal to skate down open public roads unless ordinances put in place state otherwise.

K: I don't know if it is against the law in TN, if it is it should not be. I really enjoy it and I don't know anybody that has tried it and didn't like it. If there is a law, they're tripping, but I aint a voter so I guess I just got to live with it and try not to offend, scar, or get in anyone's way.

D: I have absolutely NO IDEA what the legality is of skating down open public roads in my state. If I had to guess, I'd say it's probably illegal.

I

J: I have found myself caught in many situations where I'm caught in places perfectly legal to skate and still get told to leave those areas. Sometimes I am told it's legal, by other officers and I am doing no harm, it really depends on the type of police or neighbors you're dealing with as well as the laws in the area.

Once I had neighbors on a road who thought skateboarding on their road was illegal because they owned a lot of the houses on the street, but it was not a private road.

K: I have been through it with the "pink devils", and I don't want to even go there or think about it, it has never been good. The police should be more focused on true crimes instead of bothering someone socializing with friends, teaching, trying to get exercise or taking a stroll.

D: I have had run ins with police, and Karens, but the overwhelming majority of interactions I've had with the public/the police are polite, peaceful and usually inquisitive.

I:

J: I believe regardless of legal status skateboarding is a freedom everybody has.

K: Yes, just like snow sledding & bicycling.

D: Morally? HELL YES I DO!

I:

J: Yes, however, I do not personally know anyone who has.

K: Yes, pretty sure it's too common.

D: People have been arrested for skating. But no one that I know personally or indirectly has been arrested for such

I:

J: It's only as safe as long as you know what you're doing, however, even then it can still be dangerous.

K: heading down the roads is as safe as you make it, but there are dangerous roads no doubt.

D: Objectively, yes skating down an open road is objectively safe when common sense is applied regarding risk mitigation.

I:

J: mainly "be careful!" or they're excited to see you and ask you to do tricks.

K: "Wow! You and your dog look so cool, he loves it!"

D: "WOW THATS SO FAST" I COULD NEVER DO THAT" "CAN YOU DO THAT AGAIN?"

I:

J: there is mainly a stigma against skating in North Carolina because this happens to be a place where lots of elderly people reside where they grew up & there wasn't much skateboarding and you're not used to seeing it and it throws them.

K: seen it first hand, I think if someone that didn't want skaters on their property or just wanted to confront somebody skating, if they were just nice & friendly to begin with that there may be an opportunity for change.

D: I think the stigma against skateboarders is remnant of a time when skaters were the anti-establishment in your face, raw, bloody, damaging property and injuring themselves street skaters of the 90s. People just assume you're a no good heathen and your presence will only result in a less than favorable interaction because that's the image that has been created over the last 20 or 30 years

I:

J: I would find it very hard to believe because I've been told by officers before that it is legal on public roads.

K: If you were to tell me that, based on your research, I would have to say this is not a skateboarder, but a law maker getting in the way.

D: I'd say that's whack. Fuck that. And the people from question 8 would be right about us law breaking sons of a guns.

I:

J: It doesn't change my drive at all, mainly because I've been doing it so long and accepted the risks.

K: Yes, I get nervous about getting in trouble for skating. That's weak, maybe I shouldn't think about that.

D: It does not change my outlook on the sport. There are many legal places to skate where the general population is supportive of such activities. And I will continue going to places where I am welcome to do so.

I:

J: If people know that there is not way to fight and say it's legal then it'll bring more peace of mind to the skaters knowing that it can freely practice their passion unbothered.

K: If folks knew that you couldn't get in trouble or cause a disturbance, folks would be more willing to try skating and it would be more normalized. Seems a lot of folks really like it and like seeing it happen.

D: The legal status of skating is definitely impactful to the community as a whole. If we had the legal right to be on roads like cyclists I think it would marginally add to peoples willingness to enter the scene. (those on the fence due to legality's sake). In general though. Skaters gonna skate. And that's part of what's appealing about being a skater. We DO still have that antiestablishment mentality in our blood, but I think these days the mentality is driven by the desire to live free as one pleases without hurting anybody else or damaging property.

The Legality of the sport will do the same for public opinion. Most people don't care either way.

And the ones that do care, arent going down without a fight. So. haters gonna hate.... And skaters gonna skate.

Appendix E: Codebook

J: Jessie, current state of residence is western North Carolina, I'm a professional.

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