

## Is Santa Cruz primed for another skateboarding boom?



Ralph Mendoza of Bill's Wheels maneuvers a front-side nosegrind in the store's parking lot. (Kelly Vaillancourt)

At a February concert at The Attic, Miho Hatori, the former better half of Cibo Matto, told the crowd it was her first visit to Santa Cruz. "This is very special to me," she said in her still-adorable Japanese accent. "Growing up in Tokyo, I was big in the skate culture, and this place is magic for that, yes?" She seemed puzzled when there wasn't a big hoot from the crowd. She tried again with surfing, and got a better response. While I realize experimental Japanese-Brazilian art pop isn't exactly known as skater music, I still had to wonder: What happened to Santa Cruz?

A story like this requires an unveiling of cred, so I might as well confess I don't have much. During my torrid but brief love affair with skateboarding as a 10-year-old growing up in the suburbs of Denver, I became enamored with California culture. On the old Nintendo Epyx cartridge "California Games" I always chose the Santa Cruz team when it came time to 8-bit ollie. I read issues of Thrasher cover to cover. I sat on the sidewalk and tapped my oversized Vision board over and over against the curb to give it the right amount of chipping around the rim. And although the rest of the skating world was moving on by that point in the late '80s, my friends and I were still dedicated to the craft of freestyle, practicing butterflips and daffywalks and sick smoothees all day long in the cul-de-sac. Then snowboarding was invented, and it was all over.

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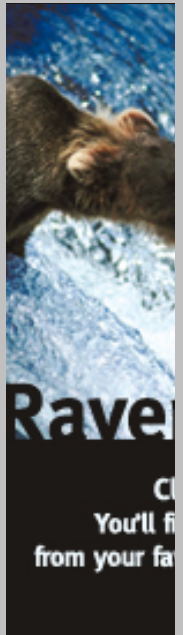
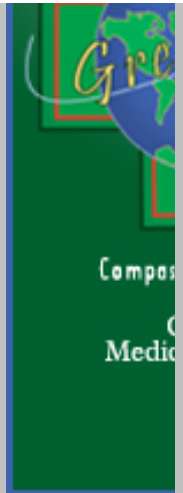
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A skater sweeps his board out over the lip past photographers. (Nick Borelli)

Finally moving out here, I expected to see at least as many street rats as I did on the main drag in Denver, scuffing up concrete benches and pulling off rail slides two inches from an unsuspecting pedestrian's feet. Surprisingly, the vaunted Santa Cruz skateboarding culture turns out to be somewhat invisible.

"The scene comes and goes and cycles around," says Bill Ackerman, owner of Bill's Wheels. "It's on about a 10-year cycle, and we're coming back up right now. It will probably still be a few years before we see it booming like it once was, if it follows that pattern."

Emmanuel Guzman, who skates for Bill's Wheels and recently turned pro, is one of the up-and-coming members of the scene as it possibly enters this boom. While he's still firmly based in Santa Cruz—"this is my home, for sure"—he has been spending a lot of time abroad, and his participation in different scenes around the world has given him perspective on what, perhaps, is lacking locally.

"I spent two years in Barcelona," he says, "and it's become a skateboarding hotspot over the last five or six years. A lot of pros are moving there, and a lot of companies are sending riders there to make videos." He says the architecture there is skateboard-friendly, and legal, which is key. He also cites Australia as another skater-friendly country that's reaping the benefits. "They have 'skateboarding okay' signs on their public monuments in

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Sydney," he says. "There's never a concern about getting kicked out of a spot. And lots of really good old raw skate parks are out in these crazy places in the bush."



Onlookers wait for the park's grand opening. (Nick Borelli)

Aside from being a boon to the locals, Guzman says these cities have created mini-tourism industries similar to the one Santa Cruz enjoys with surfers. "People all over the world are looking for a scene like that. The boarders themselves have a different attitude about it—I'm sure it's a culture shock coming here with it banned and outcast."

The 'banned' is in reference to Santa Cruz Municipal ordinance 10.36.041, enacted in 1979 and last amended in 1986, which prohibits skateboarding on Pacific Avenue, the Wharf, business districts and city parks unless otherwise posted.

According to Lt. Rick Martinez of the Santa Cruz Police Department, "Skateboarding citations are not something we actively pursue. We only give them out in response to a

complaint by a resident or business owner, usually for either noise or destruction of sidewalk property. But it's not one of our higher priorities."



Locals and press in the grand opening tent, hiding from the rain. (Nick Borelli)

## Opening the Valve

Last week, the city took a big step toward reinvigorating local skateboard culture with the opening of the Santa Cruz Skate Park, a project 17 years in the making. Located at Mike Fox Park on the site of some former tennis courts, the 15,000 square foot plaza has expansive street terrain and three different pools, and is the first new permanent skate park in the city since Derby Park was built in 1975 by Ken Wormhoudt. The park was designed by Zach Wormhoudt, the son of Ken and current county supervisor Mardi, and an internationally-acclaimed surfer whose company has 70 parks built around the world, with another few dozen in the pipeline, including one in Israel.

He took me on a tour the day before opening, as workers hurried to patch up the remaining sections of fence and other last-minute details were fussed over. Wormhoudt

was busy taking pictures of the park in its pristine state, capturing images in particular of the full pipe—the only such structure in Northern California, and the park's most distinguishing feature, evoking the tube of a big wave. "There's a lot of pressure to get this right," he says, because it's his hometown. "You ask 10 skaters what they want in a park, and you get 20 non-negotiable answers. That's the challenge. Skating is so up to the individual that it's hard to satisfy people."

Wormhoudt says the city's approaching to building the new skate park sets it up for success. "A lot of the people who worked on the construction and detailing of this park are actual skaters in the scene," he says. "You can bet those guys aren't going to throw empty soda cans on the ground. There's going to be a sense of ownership in this community that will go a long way to keeping trash and tagging and all that away."



Skatepark designer Zach Wormhoudt. (Kelly Vaillancourt)

Even more importantly, it's the city's attitude that makes or breaks a good park. "Some cities build a park as a band-aid, with people saying, 'We've got to build a park so we can ticket these kids without feeling guilty.' And the park ends up behind the airport or by the landfill. In out-of-the-way places, there are more problems, because people go there to do things that aren't associated with skating."

"On the other hand," he continues, "when parks are embraced like here, then the park is put in a nice, high-profile spot where it can be a benefit not only to the skaters, but to the community at large."

Wormhoudt says that while there was some initial concern from the neighbors across Riverfront Drive, once they saw the park go up—and how the increased visibility and attention to the area chased the drug use and littering away—they've been coming over to congratulate him.

As for reversing the perception of national and international skaters that the activity is, as Guzman says, 'banned and outcast' here, Wormhoudt thinks it's a start. "There's a pile of skateboarding industry here. The irony is, because of that, people have been flying into Santa Cruz from all over the world assuming that there would be a great place to skate, but they get here and ask where the park is. Until now, there's been nothing like a mecca park here."

While the scene might not be obvious to tourists, it's been incubating quite nicely, according to most local participants. "It's way more laid back and chill than skate in Southern California, where it's more aggressive as a sport, more media focused," says Ralph Mendoza, who has lived in both halves of California, but has been in Santa Cruz for five years. "Down there's more like little soccer leagues and little baseball leagues. Parents bring them in super young and keep pushing them."

Tommy Werner, a 15-year-old from Aptos, agrees that the scene here is much more mellow, but he says, "We don't have the greatest spots around here, so I usually go to San Jose." What keeps him rooted in Santa Cruz is the presence of so many mentors. "I'm definitely down with all the older guys. They teach me different things, and I relate to all them because they have a good outlook on skating. Nobody's worried about who's doing all the newest tricks."

While it's still a drive from mid-county, he's psyched about the possibilities at the new park. "When I look back on when Scotts Valley opened, a bunch of kids who never skated before started up, and now they're suddenly really, really good." He says the Scotts Valley park proves that "a new park, in two years, will double the scene here at least."



Scott Williams (left) and Emmanuel Guzman orchestrate a double's run into a bluntside stalefish air at Santa Cruz's Derby Skatepark. (Nick Borelli)

## Ramping it Up

One park begets another. Wormhoudt, Inc. also designed the San Lorenzo Valley bowl at Highlands Park, which was built in 2003, and the Scotts Valley Skate Park in 2004. The latter, which is very pool-oriented with less street terrain than the new Santa Cruz park, but slightly bigger at 20,000 square feet, has been a success with both skaters and the city since it opened.

"Like every skate park, you open them up and they're full," says Conrad Sudduth of Scotts Valley Parks and Recreation. "Unless it's raining, there's people out there skating." The park does have a troubled history already, in that Eric Costello died of a head injury while not wearing a helmet in October 2005. "Our big challenge has been keeping people in their safety gear," says Sudduth. "Sad as it is, the death has helped enforce it, so people in the community self-enforce."

Asked what Scotts Valley has learned can be done to ensure safety, Sudduth says, "There will be broken arms and ankles, that's just part of the sport, but hopefully nothing serious. It's really the adolescent males who are the most difficult. The older guys wear their gear."

The Capitola City Council is currently trying to figure out where it can construct a skate park for mid-county. At a meeting on Feb. 22, coincidentally the same night that Santa Cruz Skate Park opened, the council showed enthusiasm for the packed house: every chair was filled in the city chambers with several young skaters lining the walls. After sitting dutifully through an hour of various long-winded presentations, the skaters and their parents were invited to the podium to speak by Mayor Michael Termini, who was clearly relishing his role, and did the best job of any councilmember interacting with the children without patronizing.





Dan Robinson grabbing air above the pool section of the new skatepark in Santa Cruz.  
(Nick Borelli)

The meeting was to decide which of three potential sites could become home to a Capitola Skate Park: a drainage gulch at 38th & Brommer, next to New Brighton Middle School in Upper Noble Gulch, or the shuttle bus parking lot on McGregor Drive. Nearly 50 adults and kids stepped up to the mic, with the overwhelming recommendation being McGregor Drive.

The 38th & Brommer location was doomed from the start by being on the outskirts of town, in active use, and partially controlled by the county. Most of the debate surrounded Noble Gulch, which seemed a natural due to its proximity to schools and central location, but raised the hackles of several nearby residents. The area was cited as lacking parking, environmentally sensitive, too small, in heavy use by dog walkers, and noisy. Meanwhile, the only negative word dredged up for McGregor was its situation on a busy street with no sidewalk, which was mitigated by possible access from the nearby State Park via trails.

Zach Wormhoudt's words about successful parks being embraced by the community as opposed to shoved to the side echoed in my head as not a single speaker refuted the need for a park, and even the youngest speakers advocated McGregor for being a good blend of accessible without being disturbing to any neighbors. Former mayor Dennis Norton closed the public comment with a passionate plea to get the park built, and his support for McGregor Drive.

After the comment, councilmembers Sam Storey and Ronald Graves advocated McGregor Drive in what was building to be a no-brainer resolution. Kirby Nicol was the first to advocate Noble Gulch, saying that McGregor was too far, had safety issues, and "could have more economic potential." This was in reference to a proposed hotel on the site. Bob Begun echoed his sentiment, leaving Mayor Termini as the swing vote.

Very quickly, he outlined his support for Noble Gulch, and Nicol motioned to proceed in that direction. When Storey attempted to amend the resolution to also include McGregor Drive, Termini declared the amendment unfriendly, a vote was taken, and the city council decided to pursue Noble Gulch by a vote of 3 to 2.

For skaters, this means that a flat one-acre site far from complaining neighbors was turned down in favor of a site that can accommodate, at maximum, a 5,000-square-foot, one-bowl park.



A skater tests the limits going past vertical inside the full pipe. (Nick Borelli)

## Ribbon Shredding

At the Santa Cruz Skate Park opening ceremony earlier that day, the pro and amateur demo riders carved the new bowls with urgency in the minutes leading up to the appointed 3 p.m. start time, showboating for photographers as much as possible before the threatening clouds above could begin to spit. Sure enough, as is law for any long-delayed project, a brief but viciously torrential downpour began right as the ceremony began, and the 200 or so attendees had to huddle beneath the large white tent at the entryway to hear the speeches.

After Parks and Recreation director Dannettee Shoemaker and mayor Emily Reilly were finished thanking everyone necessary—and Shoemaker challenged the attending skaters to protect their new \$1.3 million home—the ribbon was cut to some scoffing half-ironic, half-silly adolescent laughter (“dude, look, big scissors”) and the rain made its final, punishing assault. Shoemaker announced that the park would open the next day for skating, saying, “Safety must come first.” To a chorus of groans, politicians and dignitaries made their way

into the park for a guided tour, and the skaters mostly drifted to a tent on the opposite side of the parking lot for free hot dogs.

To hammer home her capriciousness, Mother Nature brought the sun back out in full force by 3:30, giving the city council members in attendance a nice rainbow backdrop for the obligatory photo op. Outside the fence, some teenaged skaters approached in awe.

“Is that it?”

“That’s got to be it.”

“Man,” said the first, pointing at the beginner bowl, “that thing is going to get so shredded.”

“Can we skate it now?”

And older guy, standing at the fence with his board in hand and looking wistful, said, “No, the politicians have to have their look first.”

“Those are politicians?”

The kids wandered to the other side of the hill to get a better look at the full pipe. The only apparent deficiency of the park at the opening—aside from the weather—was the yet-unfinished landscaping. Anyone wanting to watch has to crane necks from the riverside bike trail or make out what they can from the sidewalk. While the full pipe majestically evokes a pretty curl at Steamer Lane, the Santa Cruz Skate Park lacks the theatrical observation platforms that Lighthouse Point provides. If Parks and Rec is smart, the problem won’t be compounded by view-blocking shrubs and trees. As Steamer proves, a healthy amount of spectatorship can only give more juice to the location.

Meanwhile, the drainage systems in the pools worked perfectly, and the sun did its best to bake the slickness off the baby-smooth, tawny-colored concrete. Organizers began to raffle off prizes, but many skaters remained standing at the fences, gazing at the terrain. By 4 p.m., the sun and some frenzied squeegees had done the trick, even if the wind had started to blow cold, and the demo riders were allowed back into the park.

From one of the better vantage points on the riverside trail, the Harbor High School BMX team pulled up. As the kids watched the skateboarders riding the new park, Jesse Nickell—team coach and Barry Swenson Builder VP—chased down Mayor Reilly for a chat. The kids discussed his purpose, which was to persuade the city council to let BMX riders use the Fun Spot, a temporary skate park located near the Wharf, which is slated to be the site of the new Monterey Bay Visitor Center. After 10 minutes, he came back. “Fun Spot’s ours,” he said.

The kids were astonished. "We don't know for how long," he explained. "Might be two weeks or two years, but the mayor said we could have it."

"When?" his son asked.

"Right now. Let's go." And they rode off, stoked.

Meanwhile, pro rider Jesse Gullings scampered up the full pipe and stood atop it like a colossus in tattoos, board held by the trucks. He studied the outer lip. Slowly, the observers realized what he was thinking. "He's going to grind that," someone said. And indeed, Gullings was lining up the outer rim of the full pipe like a golfer studying a putt. He crouched and squinted and did a lot of head shaking, but the crowd started to build.

After words from the skate park entrance, he calmly took one more look at the rail, then scooted his board over the edge, to watch the severity of the drop. What he saw made him raise an eyebrow and whistle. He slid back down and, after a friendly word with a park monitor, came over to the corner fence to retrieve his board.

"Are you going to do it?" a friend asked.

Perhaps because the crowds were too much—it was 4:30, and the free skate had started—or perhaps because he knew a compound fracture would ruin the festivities, he shook his head. "If I go back up there, they'll kick me out."

"So you're not going to do it?"

Gullings smiled, the smile containing enough mischief to contain the whole legacy of Santa Cruz skate culture. "Not today ..."

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Skate expectations.

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