

Surfing On Concrete

Longboarding's best return to Britannia



What looks like a skateboard, rides like a surfboard and carves like a snowboard? Introduce yourself to the longboarding craze, which will be taking centre stage this weekend with a contest on the steep asphalt at Britannia Beach.

Longboarding is essentially skateboarding on a wider and longer board up to a metre in length, giving riders more stability for a commute to work as well as the ability to rip down a hill at over 100 kilometres an hour. The tricks of their shorter predecessors are traded in for a more fluid ride and momentum that allow the longboarder to race downhill or to cruise urban streets with an environmentally-friendly and inexpensive form of transport dubbed 'traffic surfing'.

Rumours have it that this sport was dreamt up by some happy-go-lucky skateboarders/surfers back in the 1950s either in Hawaii or California – it's still in dispute which place was first. It's easy to imagine the Cali players ripping it up on their rolling hills, but

the surf style of Hawaii also makes it a plausible birthplace.

Known initially as "sidewalk surfing" it's a concrete alternative when the surf's not up, or the snow has melted. The carving motion mirrors those you would make on a snowboard or surfboard, making it a relatively easy transition for people who have done those sports before. It is also more accessible for the novice, the stability of it allowing for a faster progression.

In urban areas the use of Longboards as a form of transport is growing, although at times this progress clashes with less inclined members of the community. Recently in Kelowna one of the town councillors stood up for skaters in general claiming that the prejudice was unfounded and troubling and that people's attitudes needed to change. Denis Walsh told B.C. local news reporters that he believes skateboarding and longboarding are no different than rollerblading or bicycling and argued they are a great alternative mode of transportation – too right!

Even though longboarding was a U.S. baby it's certainly well travelled. A quick look on the major longboarding sites reveals a wide range of different languages on the chat pages as well as event postings all around the world. Jean-Philippe, co-organizer for the 2010 Gold Rush Challenge held at Britannia Beach, said that competitors are coming from Brazil, the Philippines, Australia, Sweden, Peru, New Zealand, the U.K. and Chile, just to name a few.

"World Champions and internationally recognized racers will flock to Britannia Beach to experience the ultimate Canadian rush," says Lee Cation co-organizer of the Gold Rush Challenge. "If you enjoyed watching skier and boarder cross during the Vancouver 2010 Winter Olympic Games, then prepare for the thrill of four downhill longboarders racing (head-to-head in each heat) and pushing speeds of 100km/hr."

\$2,000 will be up for grabs with 196 competitors fighting it out for the Gold Rush Challenge, which takes place May 29-30. This is the second year that Britannia has hosted the event, and the course has already gained a reputation as being one of the most extreme and toughest in the world.

I asked co-organisers Jean-Philippe and Lee Cation how they choose their locations and prepare the course for the race:

"Riders and spectators safety is first," he said. "The course needs to be technical and challenging, but also safe to ride on. The road needs to be nice and even with no debris or potholes – imagine hitting a little rock bombing down at 100 km/h! The rider's focus on their race, we focus on everything around them.

"The course design is basically the choice of the right road at the right location. Britannia Beach's Copper Drive section that we are using is great because there is only one house on it, so we do not really disturb residents and traffic. We are inspecting the course prior to set-up to ensure that everything is ready to go and safe. The road is swept with big road sweeper machine and then we install hay bale walls at every corner to protect the riders if crash occurs. For this event, more than 600 hay bales will be used."

Canada has a lot to be proud of in the sport of longboarding, especially B.C. where our geography and our love of downhill/gravity sports stand us in good stead. With the current World Champion being a Canadian we have a

few names to watch for the 2010 season:

- Kevin Reimer of Vancouver
- Zak Maytum of Colorado
- James Kelly of California
- Nate Lang of Squamish is also internationally recognized and finished 4th in Colorado last week!
- Scott "Scoot" Smith of Garden Bay, BC

I was tempted to call longboarding an, 'emerging' sport but I soon found out that with over 20 million (and rising) participants this is hardly the case. One of the best sites out there for information on the sport is www.silverfishlongboarding.com, which states that the rise in popularity has been overwhelming. In early 2006 they had 5,000 members and they are now hitting around 40,000 with 90 million page hits per month. Jean-Philippe has also witnessed how the sport is exploding, and claims one million riders in North America alone.

"What was once a small subculture of skaters on longboards has now become a full-blown revolution," he said. "Slalom skating, sliding and DH racing have found a new home among the carvers, cruiser and board-builders at Silverfish Longboarding. Our members stoke each other into trying new disciplines after reading each other's reports and commentary, and we're proud to tend the flame."

The typical age group is the 16 to 30 year crowd that enjoy the adrenaline rush, adventure sports and travel. Women are also getting into it with a few female athletes out there to keep an eye on.

Living in Whistler I have an appreciation for what people call 'flow,' that feeling you get when you hit that moment of complete freedom – that wind-in-the-face, on-top-of-the-world, woo-hoo moment. Longboarders keep the flow by imitating that perfect wave or powder day, skimming their hands across the ground, carving quickly, changing their position on the board and building momentum.

Longboarding, The Movie

People are very passionate about this sport and there are many websites,

blogs and forums you can visit to ask questions, get reviews and event news. You can also find some amazing longboarding videos out there – special mention to "Drop: My Life Downhill" which recently played in Vancouver to a sold out crowd. Featuring some of the worlds top longboard riders this film showcases the sport the film was artfully presented by director Marc McCrudden. His comments on City TV's breakfast show:

"It is an amazingly cinematic sport, a beautiful sport, (and) it's a little bit of an underdog," he said. "I connected through doing it myself and fell in love with skating again through longboarding."

It certainly gets you pumped and is a must see for any budding enthusiasts.

The Gear

Just like with most sports your equipment is important. Comprising of a board, helmet (or lid) and flat shoes the simplicity of this sport is what most people find appealing. Protective gear is also advisable and mandatory for most race events.

Some people have been putting boards together themselves for years, experimenting with different shapes and sizes. However there are a lot of companies making boards these days, and Concrete Wave publishes an annual Buyer's Guide where dozens of different board, truck and wheel manufacturers are reviewed.

Obviously for the more aggressive downhill events there are some additional equipment needs, such as full body armour, full-face helmets and sturdy gloves. Czech-born, Canadian athlete Mischo Erban comments that one pair of gloves only last him about three runs – ouch!

The 'deck' of a board comes in a variety of shapes and sizes depending on what the rider wants to achieve, ranging from 25 to 60 inches in length. Softer, grippy wheels will give you the ability to 'slalom' whether it's in a race or around the person ahead of you on the Valley Trail. You can also get flexible or stiff boards, the latter being the faster option. "Speedboards" are used for downhill longboarding and average 38 to 46 inches in length, while their stiffness gives them the stability they need to carve round the corners in breathtaking races.

The Style

Being a bit bigger than your average skateboard this allows for more expressive skate art. At the Telus Ski and Snowboard Festival this year in April we saw an influx of skate-based art at the State of the Art Show, the Pro Photography Showdown and also at the Blake Jorgenson Gallery with the "Assymbol" exhibition. They are crying out for this art form to be properly documented and respected in a wider sense, much like the recognition of the whole skate sport movement itself.

Ryan Rubin is the founder of website and gallery "Longboard Living" based out of Toronto. An avid longboarder himself he recognised a need for individuality and uniqueness in design for the boards and now works with over 40 artists to upkeep an ongoing collection of painted longboards. He calls them pieces of "functional art" and hopes that the growing popularity of the sport will mean that more board galleries will start to pop up all over the world and "spread the stoke."

"It hit me that there was a need for boards and as I was showing it off all the time I realized that they needed more than a plain colour and a racing stripe. As a rider in the city, coasting through town, you get to know the city well and see who is out showing their art, whether on Queen Street or at festivals. It became clear that Toronto has a surplus of emerging artists who could paint on a board. It was a simple process of reaching out to local artists, proposing a collaboration to design a Toronto-influenced design and set it up as a rideable longboard."

The future?

Growing at a similar speed as mountain biking and snowboarding did in recent decades, we will surely watch as longboarding takes a higher precedence. Dare I say that it may even make its way onto the Olympic stage (it's already been proposed), we can only hope that one day we will see these talented and rather daring athletes swinging some weighty medals.

As urban areas expand, fuel costs rise and people look for an alternative form of transportation, longboarding could also come to the rescue of the city dweller. With the equipment getting more advanced, race associations getting bigger, the sponsors pumping in more cash and the spectators rocking up to events this is one sport

that's going places and I am not afraid to say I wouldn't mind jumping on the band wagon.

If this article has tempted you please check out any of these websites that all work towards the advancement of this board sport:

www.sliverfishlongboarding.com

www.unkle.ca

www.coastlongboaring.com

www.longboardliving.com

"Skateboarding implies freedom. You're not working. You're not home. You're not waiting in line for a driver's license. You're out playing when you're on a board. You're cruising around seeing the sights, soaking up the sun, feeling the wind in your face, and hanging out with good buddies.

"You're not doing drugs, or getting drunk when you're riding. You're doing the opposite, which is getting exercise and sunshine. And there's always surprises. Lots of surprises. There are new skating opportunities around every corner. A new hill, a reservoir, a culvert, swimming pool, or some brand new hot

black asphalt curving down into a valley through the trees.'

Ken from Seattle - (
http://www.longboarddirectory.com/articles_why_ride_1.html)

The Gold Rush Challenge

As mentioned, the 2010 Gold Rush Challenge takes place on May 29-30 at Britannia Beach. Copper Drive is a steep and winding mountain road with over 1,000 metres of vertical over 3.5 km for the skaters.

There are three categories, Under 16, Open and Women. Depending on numbers there may also be a 30-plus Masters category.

Saturday is a freeride event and qualifier starting at 9 a.m., and there will be a slopestyle in the afternoon. Sunday will feature four-on-four racing, starting at 9 a.m. with the finals in the afternoon.

Spectators are welcome although the course will be closed to vehicles.

For more information visit www.goldrushchallenge.ca.