

Dream Big

Like the scooter kids that are already there, I get a drive to the skatepark. Only instead of parents, my source of transportation is my wife. She tells me to have fun and be safe and she'll be back in a few hours - sooner if need be. It's overcast and I have hopes to beat the rain.

I am new to this concrete playland in Truro, and far from home. There are only four other people using the concrete park, all on scooters. I'm thinking lower junior high age group. There is a gazebo along the middle of the skatepark (I call it a skatepark out of nostalgia, bicycles and scooters are equally represented nowadays in these "all-wheel parks"). I put my board down and push myself along to it.

I'm the first to admit, regaining my balance on the skateboard is a work in progress. That said, the hollow echo of the wheels on the concrete and minute vibrations of the board as it navigates over its terrain always take me back.

Two men are sitting at one of three picnic tables, parents of some of the younger kids I presume. They barely acknowledge me as they continue their discussion of whatever it is they're talking about. I put my board on a picnic table and don my knee pads and elbow pads, then my helmet. Last are my wrist guards.

Thirty - five years ago, we had pads but rarely used them. We especially didn't use wrist guards. They weren't cool. As one gets older, we realize what cool really is. It's being able to go back to work Monday and not be out on an injury.

The park is virtually empty, so I leave my phone on one of the tables in case the rain starts.

This park is known as being aggressive, or “hesh”. That with its steep transitions, and sprawled out format, it is more designed for bicycles. Due to its age, cracks have started to form in the concrete.

The scooter kids are good. Fearless. They wear only helmets. They pump each other up and go into and out of the transitions without fear.

One of the kids positions himself on an extension not far from where I am and is standing on his scooter at the top of a seven-foot ramp. The very top of the transition is near vertical, and I am genuinely concerned about the safety of his entry. Much of the park is five feet high, and the added two feet he is attempting means the difference between a potentially serious injury and a guaranteed blunt force trauma.

I look again at the fathers, and they barely give the kid more than a glance. One of the men passed the threshold of morbid obesity forty pounds ago and speaks with a level of confidence that is irritatingly close to arrogance. He is so far removed from ever being able to come close to what these kids are doing, he and seemingly his friend have completely tuned out the displays of athleticism.

By now, the kid’s friends are watching him, and he has a suitable audience. In the blink of an eye, he commits. In two seconds, he has dropped into the transition and is already rolling away on the flat ground at an impressive speed. Commitment is seventy percent of success in this racket.

Suited up, I go to the bowl. It’s near the gazebo and larger than anything I’ve skated in thirty - five years.

One of the scooter kids comes up to me as I'm looking down the transition. His shirt is dirty, and he needs a haircut. He could have been me a lifetime ago. "This is pretty big," I point out.

He follows my gaze and nods. "There's a smaller one over here that's slower. I'll show you."

I follow him over to a smaller, shallower transitioned ramp, and I drop in with my skateboard on it a few times before he takes me to another ramp to try, as I build up my confidence.

"You guys are pretty good," I tell him.

"Thanks." He can't be more than twelve or thirteen.

I see another part of the park, where there is a curved roll-in feature that's also about five feet high. Halfway up it, someone has spray painted in blue uneven printing, the words "Dream Big".

"You guys ever go down that?" I ask.

"Yep," he answers, and I tell him I may go try it. We part ways, and I make my way over to it. I walk up the dirt and grass beside it and observe the cracks in it as I scuff off my shoes at the top. The wheels on a skateboard are smaller than those of a scooter, and much smaller than those of a bike, but I think the cracks are manageable.

As I put my board down, a different kid that has just arrived on a bicycle comes up to me. He sees my hesitation. "You gonna try it?" he asks.

“I think so.”

He shakes his head. “Sketchy.” And meanders a bit to the side. By now, the first kid that had helped me is back over with us. I’m closer to fifty than forty, and they’re closer to ten than twenty, but at this moment in this park, we are equals.

Regardless of one’s ability in parks like this, people are always running ten or fifteen percent over their comfort level. From first learning how to balance on a skateboard (or anything else with wheels) to launching down a flight of stairs, people are in a continuous state of mental and physical discomfort as we push our limits. Advancing ourselves past our comfort zone bit by bit. It’s how we grow. Even the least skilled person in a park will be respected if they are challenging themselves.

It’s really no different than life in general. Only here, you can wear knee pads and a helmet to help with the sting of defeat.

In the distance, a lawnmower starts. Perhaps by an adult that has learned contentment in a grownup world where excitement is now considered a bicycle ride along a gravel trail. A small breeze picks up, reaffirming the likelihood of rain.

By now, a grandmother is approaching us, leading her granddaughter on a bicycle with training wheels. Out of the ends of the handlebars, streamers flow in a vibrant display of gold and silver and are a testament to the pride of the young cyclist. They move about on the lower parts of the park, and I give them a moment to pass.

I catch the dads at the picnic table throw a quick glance at our direction.

“Here goes nothing,” I say, and commit to the roll in. In an instant I am at the bottom, rolling off to another obstacle. I can hear the two kids cheer me on and celebrate my small victory. I’m proud to be accepted into their fold.

I make my way back over to the bowl where I first started. Beginning from the bottom, I push and pump my way up the transition to get the feel of it. Easy peasy. At this point I see my wife has returned and is walking towards me. I meet her at the gazebo.

“I just want to try dropping in here before we go,” I tell her. She nods and tells me to take my time, but as she walks over to the bowl’s edge with me, she looks down and a frown comes over her face.

“You’re not dropping in on that, I hope.”

Now I’ve got to.

“Oh, yeah, I can handle it,” I promise her. My wife nods, and walks away, striking up a conversation with the grandmother and young girl that are now over to the side.

I drop in.

With intense satisfaction I make it to the bottom, then instantly roll up the other side. Higher and faster than I had been expecting. I attempt a turn but undershoot it. At this height and speed, I need to quickly readjust to point downward, and my next movements result in overshooting my intended turn. Not unlike a car swerving away from the shoulder of a road and ending up in the opposite ditch.

As I had said, commitment may be seventy percent of the sport; but the importance of the remaining thirty percent, skill, should not be undervalued.

I feel myself losing control, and rather than fall backwards, I rotate my body to face the fall and attempt to roll out. I slam hard and realize maybe I shouldn't have done this.

By the time I come to a stop at the bottom, I feel pain. My right triceps feels stretched, my right knee has an ugly scrape where my pad has slipped down, and my right ankle is tweaked.

The first thought in my head is that I bet the dads at the picnic table didn't miss that one.

My wife is nervous for my wellbeing but is happy to see me get up. She assures the girl with the training wheels that I'm ok, that I didn't get hurt. Her grandmother knows better.

I ask my wife to get my phone that I had left at the picnic table, and I limp back to the truck with her. A few sprinkles of precipitation start to fall. I don't look back at the scooter and bike kids, because on this day, though I may have beaten the rain, I've lost to the skatepark.

Two hours later we get home, and I go to the hospital that night. I have a badly sprained ankle, get a tetanus shot for my knee, and have a pulled triceps which involves an ugly purple bruise from my elbow to my shoulder.

This all translates to a week off from work, and an ankle that will be periodically sore for the next two years.

A nurse that looks near retirement walks me out of the hospital (it was during this injury I finally asked one of my daughters buy me a pair of crutches, as I seem to need them on an ongoing basis). The nurse asks me what I did to myself.

“Skating,” I tell her, knowing that she will likely think it occurred on the ice, in a rink - a very common and respectable injury. I don’t elaborate, as I worry about her judging me for being on a skateboard in a five - foot concrete bowl at my age.

She smiles and looks at me. “You know, I think it’s wonderful that people make it a point keep themselves young. That’s so important to keep true to who we are.”

It’s only as I write this, three years later, that I think with a grin maybe she did take the term skating the way I meant it and knew for herself what it was like to roll and carve on transition with a skateboard.

I don’t regret the injuries. Nor do I regret the others that will undoubtedly come. At what point in our lives do we forget how exhilarating it is to ride the proverbial dragon, whatever personalized versions they may be. None of us ever want to get seriously hurt,

but as we get older, we need to remember to talk to our younger selves, so that they can tell us to put some caution to the side. And remind us of what living, truly is.

To Dream Big.