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Skateboarding slides into the mainstream, with a boost from Oregon

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Skateboarding has pulled off a maneuver more difficult than the “switch laser flip” Bobby Groves used Friday to win a spot in the world championships.

From its image as the pastime of hell-raisers on wheels and rowdy punks, skateboarding has quietly emerged as a mainstream sport with more participants than baseball, backpacking or fly-fishing.

And Oregon has been at the center of the sport’s resurgence.

“The skateboarding in Oregon overall is definitely the best we’ve seen yet,” said Jay Brundege, director of the sixth-annual “eS Footwear Game of SKATE,” an international competition held to identify the best amateur flat-ground skateboarder in the world. Sixty-five skateboarders showed up in Eugene on Friday to compete for one of 32 available expense-paid trips to the championships in California.

Similar to the basketball game of “HORSE,” “SKATE” involves two competitors attempting to match each other’s tricks. Fail to land a trick and you get a letter. First skater to five letters loses. Groves, 20, of Portland, eliminated three other finalists without getting a single letter himself.

The strong field in Eugene, which included boarders from as far away as Portland and Medford, “is probably because the number of skateparks that Oregon has proliferated around the state has made for better skateboarders in Oregon,” said Brundege.

Friday’s competition was held on the basketball courts under the Washington-Jefferson Street Bridge, where local skateboard enthusiasts hope to see Eugene’s first covered skatepark constructed.

On Sunday — national “Go Skateboarding Day” — dozens of skateboarders gathered at the Cal Young Skatepark in north Eugene for a competition featuring skateboarding’s other main discipline — “vertical” skating, which features ramps, jumps and sidewall maneuvers.

That event was a fundraiser for Skaters for Eugene Skateparks, a nonprofit organization attempting to raise \$250,000 to go toward construction of a skateboard play area beneath the Washington-Jefferson Street Bridge. The Downtown Rotary Club is also supporting the project, organizers say, and the city of Eugene has earmarked \$292,000 in its Capital Improvement Plan for it.

A concrete play area skateboarders fashioned under the Burnside Bridge in Portland in the mid-1990s is credited with launching the skatepark movement and, in the words of an Oregon Public Broadcasting report on the topic, making Oregon “the center of a skating universe. ... Oregon today is to skateboarding what Hawaii is to surfing.”

The number of skateboarders nearly doubled between 1995 and 2005, according to statistics from the Sporting Goods Manufacturing Association.

Skateboarding is no longer relegated to the recreational fringe. Evidence of the sport’s acceptance is everywhere.

While skaters in Eugene were warming up on Friday, skateboard icon Tony Hawk was riding his board down a hallway at the White House, where he’d been invited by President Obama for a Father’s Day celebration. A photo of Hawk on his board at the White House appeared Friday on ABC’s World News (naturally, skateboarders were all a -Twitter over that).

Also, Nike now has a line of skateboard gear (Nike SB), kids at some schools can skateboard for gym class, skateparks can be found in small Oregon towns such as Hines and Harrisburg, and a few homeowners have installed skateboard “pools” (concrete bowls with sloped sides ideal for skating) in their backyards.

Skateboarding — which traces its roots to the “sidewalk surfers” of the 1950s — is clearly the most popular of all board sports in the Eugene-Springfield area, according to Matt Patton, co-owner of Tactics, a Eugene board shop that also sells snowboards, surfboards and longboards (a larger version of the skateboard used mostly for transportation or slaloming down hills).

“Skateboarding is number one by far,” Patton said. “It’s clearly the most accessible financially. You don’t need a lift ticket. You don’t need parents shuttling you all over. You don’t need coaches. And you can get a skateboard that will last you for a long time for a hundred bucks.”

The sport tends to be dominated by young males. But it has plenty of elder statesmen — and some stateswomen.

The aforementioned Hawk, for example, is now 41 years old.

Closer to home, 42-year-old Eric Sutton, who began skateboarding in 1976 and who worked at an indoor skate ramp in Eugene in the mid-1980s, still rides his board “a couple times a week.” Sutton also bicycles and has a longboard.

The latter, he said, appeals to people “who aren’t necessarily turned on by tricks” but who buy a board for transportation or because they enjoy skating or carving turns.

“I think a lot of people think that (skateboarding) is just a kids’ sport and delinquents seem to do it,” said Sutton, who works at Tactics and serves as manager of the store’s

skateboard team. “But we’ve grown up. We have families. We own houses. We contribute to communities, and now our kids are learning to skateboard.”

Patton said he’s “seeing a lot more middle-aged guys who grew up skateboarding in the ’70s coming back and doing it again.”

Their return to the sport, he said, is probably spurred by the emergence of skateparks and other “legal spots” to skate. Portland, for example, once threatened boarders with stiff fines. Now the city closes a road in Mount Tabor Park so longboarders can swoop downhill.

The lack of publicly acceptable spots to skate is “one of the big reasons skateboarding was so stigmatized,” Patton said. “You get to a certain age, you’re not going to go out and skateboard where you’re not supposed to be doing it. ...

“But it’s such a good sport ... it teaches so many good skills, and it doesn’t take a lot of support.”

Erika Winters, 28, is the oldest of three women on the Tactics skateboard team. She took the sport up about four years ago.

“I needed a physical activity, and I found skateboarding and I quickly found I could do it,” said Winters, who says she’ll spend four hours boarding non-stop three times a week.

“I like halfpipes. And parks and bowls are my passion,” she said. The Barger skatepark is her favorite for “transitional” riding, Winter said, but she also likes the new skatepark in Harrisburg because “it has lights, so working skaters like me can skate after work.”

The proposed Washington-Jefferson skatepark would also be lighted.

“It’s such a good sport ... it teaches so many good skills.”

— MATT PATTON, CO-OWNER OF TACTICS BOARD SHOP IN EUGENE