

Sliding with Giants: the Gravity Sessions

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Monday, 03 October 2005
Last Updated Thursday, 04 October 2007

I don't mean to sound immodest, but the Ninja Bomb Squad pretty much owns Del Mar Avenue, in the sleepy San Diego town of Ocean Beach. We cruise it, carve it, shred it and love it. But this is no "locals only" gig: the asphalt groundswell never wanes and we're eager to share it. This last Friday, we finally hooked up on "our hill" with the boys from Gravity. These self-styled downhill psycho/savants are masters of their craft and the core riders of the NBS not only got to watch some of the highest caliber riders of their sport, but to ride alongside them, learn from them, and share in the stoke of being one tribe, the tribe of longboarding.

I'd met Michael Bream before, at the sprawling Gravity skunk works and warehouse in Northern San Diego, and extended the offer to skate with his crew on Del Mar Ave. Of course, an "offer" to skate with these guys is more like asking for a date from someone that gets asked, all the time, so I wasn't sure what would come of it. In the course of preparing Silverfish Longboarding's sponsorship of Isabelle Caudle's "Downhill Divas", one of my cohorts had the opportunity to talk up "our hill" and our crew to Bream, who began looking for a time to get us all together. Excited Ninjas were twice frustrated by disparate schedules and my inability to wake before noon but I knew it was going to happen...someday. Like many good things, the Gravity Sessions came about when I least expected them: I got a call from "F". Recently recruited by Gravity, Fabrice is well-known for his accomplishments as a slider. Cliff Coleman speaks very highly of this man's skills on a skateboard, and his exploits at slide competitions are the kind of stoke that fuels the Ninja Bomb Squad. So, when F picked up the phone to set up a session on Del Mar Ave, we were on!

"On", like as in now I had to deliver up Ninjas. Making sure skaters, no less So Cal skaters, are somewhere at a given time is like herding cats on fire. Nonetheless, it was crucial that our core NBS members or "twin dragons" would be there, and I set about finding and contacting the crew, knowing that if I reached them the Gravity Sessions would draw them out. We had a day's notice, and I even woke up early on the day to hit the airwaves and rouse my brethren from their slumber. After getting my gear in order, I fired up the Jeep and headed over to the hill.

The venerable El Espinazo del Diablo, is a devil's-backbone known to mortals as Del Mar Ave. Often sessioned by surfers seeking that concrete carve when the waves have fallen flat, Del Mar Ave is a triple-stack of perfect, smooth asphalt, bounded by homes with skate-friendly residents and enough room for many people to session. Overlooking the blue Pacific, it falls straight to the ocean and is the premier skating location for NBS sessions. This particular morning, an onshore flow brought fog, a deep-rolling cloud rolled into Ocean Beach and snagged themselves on the seaside cliffs, obscuring the water from view. As I sat, sipping green tea, Fab called to inform me of some "truck problems" and a short delay in their arrival. With Bream on the phone, I secured their final directions just as the first of the Ninjas arrived. "CoolMike", is a seasoned slider who only wants to ride when it's slide du jour. He rolled in with his decks and a flat-spotted Sergio slider, swapped it out off one of my decks and then hit a few runs on the new Crail trucks the Longboard Consortium is checking out. The fog held with a death grip on the coast, stealing from view the vivid azure sea and white cap breakers, but I had not long to lament this minor issue.

The Gravity van rolled up with Bream at the wheel, hard to miss with their logo and some well-known silhouettes emblazoned on the sides. Sitting shotgun was the sliding master Sergio Yuppie, with Fabrice and a buddy of his in the back. As they piled out of the van, I was struck by the heavyweight cast of sliding surgeons we were about to session with. Bream, himself a rather adept rider, was sporting a broken ankle but was still stoked to hit the hill. Fab, my northern brother from Montréal, carries with him a spirit and drive not unusual to experience from Canadians but on a scale and with directness that leaves you truly honored to meet him. Yann, his friend was soft-spoken and with skills to be shown another example of honest congeniality and the good natured stoke that is well received by fellow tribe members. Then, there's Sergio "Buy My Wheels", Yuppie, a character all his own and with skills that wholly overshadow his small stature and totally easygoing, friendly, stoked nature.

With decks laid out and wheels checked, the boys rolled to the hill. Bream worked the skin off some new wheels, slapping the street with many competent stand up slides. Sturdy "thane peeling slides firmly rooted while yet still drifting in full control. It's killer to see someone living a life that enables them literally to live to skate. To travel and meet people in other countries and share the stoke. Money has got to be made, there is a bottom line and I can't think of a better formula for living than sharing stoke, promotion this level of skating and allowing people with tenacious heart, skill and drive to highlight the pinnacle of a growing discipline.

Of course, cameras were set up and I used mine to follow Fab walking up the hill after a run. The walk back up has always been my favorite part of Longboarding: secondary to the ride down but when stories, tales, tips and general nonsense are shared. It's the walk back up that stokes our sore muscles with mental impetus to hit the hill again. Fab is one of the most cheerful and outwardly stoked riders I have ever had the honor to session with. An almost jubilant manner of enjoyment is derived by him in this the style and art of proficient sliding. Sliding? Oh yeah, there was some of that! Fab throws down some of the sickest hands-down three-sixties I have ever seen! With fluid rotations, he just whips around with such serious momentum that it's a wonder he sticks with the board; momentum and power, fluid methodology that combines to fully blow the mind of the onlooker. One of the things that really caught me was his "stale fish toeside". A precarious slide that he assures me is within my reach --something I can work on while trying to approach even the foothills of his multiple 360 style.

Next, in rolled the "twin dragons" of the Ninja Bomb Squad, Mark and Graham. Along with them came the "psycho booter", cameraman "transMike". The bomber and slider acolyte rolled in bringing another layer to this session. Mark is a tech-minded bomber and Graham is a tried-and-true street warrior. Fab, Mike, Mark and Graham sessioned the hill, each bringing their own style and level of accomplishment to the slope. Long tendrils of "thane represented battles won. Bream set up to shoot footage with Sergio and Fab's buddy manning the cam at the bottom of the hill. Hitting the hill as hard as he could, Mike wailed on Del Mar setting down respectable dual 180's, taking spills and shaking them off. After sessions-end he will have donated much of his gluteal epidermis to the hill and committed to film one of the most insane bails I have ever "almost" witnessed (I saw the footage)!

On one run, Graham blasted by in a standing slide just as his wheel chose to vacate its axle. No worries, after the ejection he rectified the situation and the twisting combinations of the Ninja slides commenced. Graham has the ability to torque out of some of the most insane stances, bringing it around from beyond the edge of gravity. Mark throws sickeningly solid slides at speed pulling from his downhill obsession a comfort of speed and an understanding of momentum. Crafting some of the most stable one handed toesides I have ever seen. Not to be ignored, one of the most capable cameramen at speed and a sick asset as a follow-man, transMike killed Del Mar with speed. Chasing in line with any rider he was following, no matter the number of riders or style of ride, always tracking his prey and locking visual talons on the subject.

Sergio put down the camera, and his art commenced. A group of kids and their skate mom had amassed around the Gravity van and they had no idea what they were in for. Taking to the hill, Sergio blasted a series of his astonishing, mind-blowing and galactically devastating standing 360s --just blowing down the hill with the determination that gravitates attention and demands respect. Bream said, "Tricks get you applause, style gets you respect!" The conundrum with Sergio is where does one end and the next begin? Is it innate skill, is it talent driven by determination or is he just superhuman on a grandiose level manifested on a level us mortals can comprehend? Either way, his shows of talent and stoke made me look down at the camera and wonder if any shot I could capture of him would make worth the waste of not actually watching with my own eyes what I could bear witness just by watching him.

Yann was manning the base camera. I offered to man it, and with Fab and Sergio setting down synchronous slides I got a good look at what they had to offer Del Mar Ave in sense of style and capability. The first thing that struck me about this rider was his transitions: he would rotate from one hand to the other, laying out toeside slides and alternating hands and primary foot as he slid. A fully adept slider, he flew with all the style of his fellow riders. His direction control and edge control were evident as he threw down slide after slide that utilized his highly aware style.

Fab, Sergio and Yann threw down some triplicate slides with Bream hollering for them to start and then slide in unison for the perfect timing that will look so good on camera. After a few sets, their timing was impeccable and it was fully committed to film. With more sets riders tore through wheels, laid decks into the curb and sailed, ripped and flew down perfect hill. A few young local carvers from Imaginary Skateboards showed up. Some of the suntanned standards that these hills have to offer they watched in amazement as the trifecta from Gravity blasted Del Mar accompanied by the dragons of the Ninja Bomb Squad.

With the session slowing down and Bream needing to hit the road to evade Friday afternoon traffic, riders started coming back to the van. Before the mid-hill stationary camera was retrieved, Cool Hand Mike put down one last grab-rail Coleman that nearly turned into disaster. The deck chattered out of his control and, realizing he was going to take out the camera, Mike jerked the deck out from under his feet sending him into a vaulting flip. His head narrowly missed the pavement as he finished off a whole rotation and slapped the street, sliding into a crumpled pile at the foot of the hill. The session ended with the footage of his amazing dismount as a very solid punctuation. As always, he took the ride for all it was worth, shook it off the tumble and smiled like a trooper. The footage of him coming to a violent stop was insane.

With the riders collecting at the van we viewed footage and exchanged invitations for future sessions. We took some parting shots of the crew and then as suddenly as it had started, the Gravity camp rolled out. With a honk and some hollers they were sent off into the haze that was still gripping the lowlands of the coast. Nearly dazed, we grabbed decks and laid down some final lines. "Thane spirals of ours were again mingling on the asphalt with those of some of the most talented riders I had had the luck to witness and ride with. We hit the hill as the waning sunlight lit up the backlit

palm trees with sunset colors bleeding through the clouds.

It's killer to think, to imagine that even with their display of great skill and proficiency in no sense did our crew feel out of place. The Gravity crew were welcome and highly respected, not because they demanded it or carried themselves higher than others but because they share with us a love and an obsession with riding in whatever dynamic you enjoy. Having the ability to share what you love and promote not only the skills of riders and products of companies, but to be able to instill in others the sense of depth that one may have for the sport is a sublime blessing. In a sense, it seems to be the validity that proves the stoke true. You only love your discipline insomuch as you wish to share it with others. The offering of skills and styles seemed to appease the feisty gods inside Del Mar Ave and with the sun shining on top of the hill, I rolling back into the gloaming in the Jeep. To the NBS, I say "proud to call you my brothers". To Fab and Yann "merci beaucoup", To Sergio "obrigado" and Bream much respect. It was one of the most epic sessions Del Mar Ave has ever seen! Check out the Gravity Skateboards Website for their full lineup, support good stoke.

Take a look at the Gravity and NBS Session Gallery