

# The New York Times

ON THE WEB

## TRAVEL Section

### ADVENTURER; Rubber Hits The Trail

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#### Correction Appended

GIRDED like a gladiator in a dusty helmet and chest protector, Don Baker hopped onto his board and hurtled down a rocky slope. He sailed over a jump at a speed not recommended for a man far removed from adolescence but not so far from middle age. When he landed, his board slid out from under him, and he skidded along the ground. It looked like a painful way to start a Saturday.

His younger buddies winced.

"I'm O.K, I'm fine," Mr. Baker insisted. He grinned and pointed to pads on his backside.

In the wide, wild world of extreme sports, Mr. Baker has found his niche. He is a commercial roof inspector by profession, an adrenaline fiend by disposition and a mountainboarder any chance he has.

Most weekend mornings, Mr. Baker, 38, takes to the hills near his home in San Jose, Calif., riding what looks like a skateboard mated with a jeep.

Bindings keep his feet strapped to the board. Inflatable wheels give him access to terrain where skateboarders dare not tread.

"Basically," Mr. Baker said, "this is for guys who like to play in the dirt."

Like many other outdoor adventure sports, mountainboarding was born of inspiration and desperation. Specifically, it was invented in the early 1990's by snowboarders suffering from summertime withdrawal.

But unlike many other so-called extreme sports, mountainboarding hasn't drifted from the margins to the mainstream. It lacks big corporate backing and starring roles on televised spectacles like the Gravity Games.

Mountainboarders remain rare enough to draw double takes from other extreme athletes, a breed largely resistant to showing surprise. As for mountainboard sites, they are rarer still. Practitioners mainly use BMX tracks and mountain bike trails -- and make stealthy incursions onto land where they are not allowed.

"Some of the best places, I shouldn't even talk about," Mr. Baker said.

In recent years, though, mountainboarding has shown signs of coming of age. Major competitions, like the US Open Mountainboarding Championships, are now held annually. Prize money is offered, even if it hardly covers the cost of travel to the event. Mountainboard equipment companies have emerged, and a few ski resorts, like Snowmass in Colorado, which will stage the US Open for the third time in August, have set aside trails for mountainboarding.

Only a handful of athletes make a living at it. But mountainboarding has given rise to an estimated \$5 million industry, with more than 100,000 riders worldwide.

"Eventually, we see it hitting a critical mass," said Jason Lee, creative director of MBS Mountainboards in Colorado Springs, the major manufacturer of mountainboards. "It's critical that more mountainboard parks be built near big cities, and that the sport be included in major events like the X Games and the Gravity Games. Once that happens, we can see it really taking off."

Mr. Lee, 36, a seven-time national mountainboarding champion, is sometimes called the godfather of the sport. He is also credited with inventing it. In 1993, he and a snowboarding pal were riding a chairlift when they slipped into the sort of existential introspection for which snowboarders are not well known.

"Dude," the question went, more or less. "What are we going to do when the snow is gone?"

Early mountainboards were makeshift contraptions, fashioned from plywood and wheels borrowed from wheelchairs and dollies. As the market improved, the technology did, too. Today, top-shelf mountainboards, composed of wood, fiberglass and sturdy pneumatic wheels, sell for around \$400.

Despite its name, most mountainboarding doesn't take place on mountains. Popular spots include the Holler, a privately owned park in Fletcher, N.C., and a swath of public property near Los Angeles known as the Dust Bumps, a kind of mountainboarding badlands.

Mountainboarders compete in boardercross (a four-person slalom race) and big air (a freestyle jumping contest). Many competitions display a spirit of fraternity, with bonfires and kegs. A recent event in Kansas was highlighted by a greased-pig wrestling contest.

"I took second place in that," Mr. Baker said. "But that's because the other team brought in a ringer."

It was now nearing noon, and Mr. Baker stood in the hills of Belmont, Calif., a half hour south of San Francisco. He'd been joined by three other mountainboarders: Erik Carlsen, 18, of Point Reyes, Calif.; Garret Troop, 22, of San Miguel; and Ben Livingston, of Inverness, the current 18-and-under all-round national champion. Like many in the sport, Mr. Livingston and Mr. Carlsen crossed over to it from skateboarding and snowboarding. When Mr. Troop picked up mountainboarding five years ago, he had had no relevant experience. But he compensated with

his commitment, which is so complete that he lives with his parents to save money, having forsaken the quest for a conventional career to pursue his mountainboarding dreams.

"They're not entirely pleased with it," Mr. Troop said. "But I realized from that first moment that this was my calling, and it's been downhill ever since."

As the morning wore on, Mr. Livingston and Mr. Carlsen soared over jumps with impressive litheness. Mr. Baker, meanwhile, displayed the fearlessness and durability that have made him a cult hero in the sport.

Four years ago, at an event at the Donner Ski Ranch near Lake Tahoe in California, Mr. Baker found himself trailing badly in a race. To entertain the crowd, he sped over a jump that wasn't part of the course, crashed and knocked himself unconscious. When he woke up, he staggered unassisted down the slope. Every year since, the Don Baker Award has been given to the mountainboarder who has the most spectacular fall.

"One of them got a compound fracture in their leg, another broke some ribs and both wrists," Mr. Baker said of the other award recipients. "And another broke their neck a little bit." By "a little bit," he meant that the tingling the injury caused was only temporary.

Mr. Baker is close to ancient by mountainboarding standards, and he concedes that age has forced him to adapt. He has no plans to quit his day job, but he has founded Dirtheads, which makes mountainboard apparel. And he has changed his approach on the trail.

"I don't have anything more to prove," he said. "I'm in it for the longevity now."

When he was younger, Mr. Baker often rode the hills at night, wearing a headlamp that didn't help him see but "looked cool for people watching." Now he sticks to daytime rides, outfitted in near-full body armor.

Mr. Baker watched as Mr. Carlsen bombed downhill, wearing a helmet but no other padding, breezed over a jump and did a one-and-a-half-turn pirouette.

"He's young," Mr. Baker said. "He doesn't need the elbow pads, the ankle braces."

Mr. Baker smiled and shook his head. Then he grabbed his board and made his way uphill.

**Correction:** May 27, 2005, Friday

A picture caption last Friday with an article about the new sport of mountainboarding misspelled the given name of a participant. He is Garret Troop, as shown in the article, not Garrett.