

# **Forty Years of Transformations - Swedish Skateboarding Culture and Organisation**

**Bäckström, Åsa**

Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Sweden  
asa.backstrom@gih.se

## **Aim**

The aim of this presentation is to sum up findings from ethnographic and historic data collected for a period of twenty years in order to outline the transformations of skateboarding culture and organisation in Sweden from the 1970's to present day.

## **Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Skateboarding has a celebrated subversive past claiming heritage from Californian surfers sneaking into emptied backyard swimming pools during summer draught. The (hi)story has been commemorated through the classic movie Dogtown and the Z-boys. Ever since, social resistance has been part and parcel of skateboarding's cultural image (Borden, 2001). Although stemming from subcultural and underground practices, skateboarding has now reached worldwide audiences through X-games. In June this year, the sport's first international conference titled Pushing boarders was held in London. It gathered academic scholars, skateboarders and engaged people from the industry. Moreover, in 2020, skateboarding will be launched as a new sport in the Olympic Games. Skateboarders once opposing the sport industry and nine-five-jobs have transformed from core practitioners to consumers (Dinces, 2011; Dupont, 2014; Lombard, 2010). This depicts a transformation from subculture to a professionalised sport, at least for some and in some places. In Sweden, parallel to these trends, skateboarding contrastingly formed a national federation under the National Sports Confederation (RF) for the first time 2013.

## **Research Design and Data Analysis**

Through four ethnographic projects extending over two decades, and related historical material, this presentation draws from participant observation and multiple empirical materials. Ethnography has the potential to capture "inside" views of everyday life (Atkinson, 2014). The research participants are diverse in terms of age, gender and positions in the field etc. The data includes interviews, photographs and various media in both printed and digital form. It contains both commercial and non-commercial content and spans from the late 1970's until present day. The semi-structured interviews follow thematically structured guides and were conducted face-to-face with snowball samples. For this presentation Stamm and Lamprecht's (1998) model for describing the life cycle of trend sports is used as a starting point for a thematic content analysis over time. The model indicates the interrelation of technological innovation, marketing and socio-cultural factors.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Every stage in Stamm and Lamprecht's (1998) model is characterized by different degrees of commercialisation, as well as diverse types of organisation and various degrees of recognition. The trend sports are also pursued by different groups; in the early stages pioneers and further on by young people in subcultures, followed by athletes in the fourth stage to anybody in the final stage. Confrontation against the established sport organisations and glorification of a presumed authentic past is part of the third stage. This is followed by fashion in mainstream culture as part of the fourth stage.

It is argued that skateboarding in Sweden to some extent has followed this model. Numerous examples point to the fourth stage characterized by maturation and diffusion. For instance it is possible for practitioners to make a living from skateboarding in various ways; skateboarding is popular in mass media; goods are mass produced and skateboarding has been integrated in certain school forms. In short, processes of commercialisation and professionalization are present.

The straight forward processes proposed in the model are however complicated by skateboarding in Sweden since 2013 being formally organized through the National Sports Confederation. Through this organisation some skateboarders are now part and parcel of mainstream sports, however their subcultural ideas persist, not least when it comes to leadership and coaching. This is paradoxically partly challenging the National Sports Confederation in that funding systems are urged to be re-negotiated. Simultaneously, the Swedish skateboarding association opens up activities for inclusion and equality urged by the National Sports Confederation.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The presentation contributes with new empirical findings on the socio-cultural development of skateboarding in Sweden and beyond, which confirms but also complicates the straight forward model of the life cycle of trend sports. Skateboarding has gone from innovative physical activity recognised by few, to highly commercialised and familiar, but it is also a national association with no commercial profit promoting democratic values.

### **References**

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