

young at

heart



BY MARCUS WOOLF

SNOWBOARDING IS LIKE ROCK AND ROLL—IT MAY ALWAYS be viewed as a young person's game. Even as it ages, snowboarding still wears its cap backward and flips its middle finger in the air. The whole culture remains young at heart. Like Dave Schmidt of Burton said, "We don't market to people over 25. People in their 20s don't aspire to be 40. But people in their 40s aspire to be 20."

Here's where I'm supposed to say snowboarding's gonna have to grow up and finally get a job. Quit hanging out all night.

But, I don't think so. A yellow bus just rolled up carrying the next generation of riders. According to retailers and manufacturers, a growing number of young kids are snowboarding these days. And I mean little kids—the lunch box crowd.

Smart companies have just begun to serve these kids the gear they need. Of course, they want to win these juniors over, and be their big brother, or big sister, and some day teach the youngsters about rock and roll.

LITTLE KIDS ARE BIG BUSINESS

The snowboard industry hasn't buzzed much in the past couple of years. Not that it hasn't bustled with activity. Scott Walker, wintersports buyer for Galyan's, compares it to sitting in a loud airplane. "After a while, you really don't hear the noise anymore," he said.

But rising above the drone of noise are the shouts of children. The emerging kids' market has certainly turned the heads of snowboarding companies.

"It's a significant part of the business in terms of the potential that it holds," said Burton's Schmidt, noting that kids' snowboarding participation has risen along with gear sales. He said resorts now offer as many beginner lessons to young snowboarders as they do to young skiers, a true break from the past.

"In terms of growth with boards, it's growing at a faster pace than [boards sold to] adult males. So it all adds up to a significant opportunity," said Schmidt.

Dane Hjort of Rossignol said the company's junior and youth business is growing at a quicker pace than any other categories. With regard to kids' boots, boards and bindings, Rossignol is "selling greater quantities at an excessive rate," said Hjort.

As a result, Rossignol is putting much more effort into developing its kids' products. "You're seeing more dedicated focus and follow-through with the lines. We're putting more thought into the products to make sure they're as well planned as the adult products," said Hjort.

While Salomon focuses on teens and adults, last year it introduced its first junior board, the Fierce, in sizes 129, 134 and 139 for kids 8 to 13. "Young kids are focused on getting some freestyle skills, so we do some freestyle

SNOWBOARDING'S ROCKIN' OUT
AND TODAY'S YOUTH ARE

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THE SLOPES TO HEAR
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SNOWBOARDING HAS ENTERED THE MAINSTREAM, EVEN GRACING

shaping, and make boards that are a little softer and more forgiving,” said Salomon’s Tyler Lamotte. The Fierce is back for this year, and Lamotte said that Salomon will “continue to evolve the kids’ product based on what the market demands.”

CREATIVE RETAILING CREATES BIG DEMAND

“This year I brought in some package deals, and we’re blowing through those,” said Gershon Dorfman, snowboard and skateboard buyer for Nestors Sporting Goods in Pennsylvania. “That’s the biggest thing we’re seeing is kids getting into it,” said Dorfman, noting that the kids are around

7 to 16 years old. At Nestors, they can get a package including boots, a board and bindings for \$279.95.

In Santa Fe, N.M., 38-year-old Alpine Sports has always catered to the older crowd of riders and skiers. Manager David Koska said the local skate and snowboard shops pick up most of the kids. “But in the last two years we saw a lot of juniors coming in,” he said, adding that he sells them products from Burton and Salomon.

Hostel Shoppe in Stevens Point, Wis., does so well with kids that it developed a “growing foot program” for kids up to 16 years old. “We’re sticklers when it comes to fit with boots,” said Josie Gruber, Hos-

tel Shoppe manager. She explains that parents pay an initial \$30 fee to enter their kids into the program. Then the store sizes kids for ski or snowboard boots, which they rent for the season for \$30. Each new season, until the kids are 16, the store will fit them with boots, and parents pay \$30 to rent them for the season.

Gruber said she noticed that sales to juniors really picked up last year. “Where other things seemed to be at the same levels, I saw a huge growth in sales to kids,” she said.

WHY THE GROWTH SPURT?

Clearly, one of the most prominent recent events in snowboarding is its inclusion in the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. While many in the snowboard industry say the Olympics had little direct impact on the market, the event certainly signaled that the activity had entered the mainstream. In fact, you now see snowboarding depicted on cereal boxes and Saturday morning cartoons.

This mainstreaming of the sport has likely played some role in raising the interest of young kids. Snowboarding is simply more present in their lives.

“The options for kids are greater,” said Schmidt of Burton. “These alternative sports are as in their face as much as soccer or any traditional sport. Their peers are snowboarding so it’s natural for them to be interested.”

Dorfman said that the kids coming into Nestors are heavily influenced by television and video games. “A lot of kids coming in want a snowboard because they see a guy on TV doing amazing tricks, and it’s just the cool thing right now,” he said. “I ask them what’s bringing them into the sport, and a lot of them just play video games all day. They do all this stuff on their video games, and they want to be able to do that on the hill.”

While television is often referred to as a surrogate parent, real flesh and blood parents are also at play here. Members of snowboarding’s first generation are now having children, and these active parents are taking their kids to the slopes.

THE THRILL OF VICTORY

Even though the Olympics symbolize the mainstream nature of snowboarding, it’s not clear whether the event itself is responsible for sparking sales of kids’ gear or participation in snowboarding.

“I don’t think it had a major impact, but it’s been a vehicle that has opened eyes to the sport,” said Hjort of Rossignol. He said the Olympics are simply not as influential as other well-established competitions, such



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Lamotte said that the Olympics would not influence kids heavily because the games focused on half-pipe competition. “Even though participation is up in half-pipe riding, that’s not where the sport is getting recognition. It’s getting recognition from freestyle riding,” said Lamotte. “All mountains are building superb half-pipes, but from an image standpoint, magazines and videos are focusing on freestyle riding, not half-pipe riding.”

Lamotte said that terrain parks are actually a primary influence on younger riders. “It’s getting super competitive with the resorts to see who can build the best terrain parks,” he said. “A park will put in a rail, and kids will know about it, and try to be the first to get up there and bust their latest barrage of tricks.”

Kids prefer terrain parks because they are diverse, while half pipes tend to be standard. “With a terrain park you have a lot of latitude to be creative and build fun obstacles,” said Lamotte.

That sense of creativity and freedom attracts skateboarders who cross over heavily into snowboarding and greatly influence snowboarding culture.

“A lot of our core snowboarders are skaters in the summertime,” said Keith Fulton, manager of Adventure Sports in Frostburg, Md.

GIRL POWER

While terrain parks likely influence more kids than the Olympics, there is one group of kids who very well may look to the games as a major source of inspiration—young girls.

“The interest of young girls has increased because of the Olympics,” said Georell Bracelin, marketing director for Chorus, a company owned by women that manufactures women’s-specific snowboard products. “I see it from emails from consumers on our website. Girls are finally getting some visibility, and (gold medalist) Kelly Clarke has made quite an impression.”

Bracelin and others say that young girls have more snowboarding role models now that women are riding at higher levels.

“You just look at the caliber of women’s riding. It’s so much different than it was in years past—the terrain they’re riding, their style and overall ability is incredible,” said Hjort. “Young girls see these riders and the intimidation factor is no longer there.”

As girls show more interest in snowboarding, companies are responding with


gear made specifically for them. “We’ve increased our product line with kids’ boards made specifically for girls and boys,” said Haley Martin, K2 marketing director. “Last year we introduced the Kandi for girls and it was an instant top seller.”

Chorus has introduced two boards for young girls, which have been sold through some of the company’s 150 specialty snowboard accounts. Bracelin said sales have not been significant, but distribution has been limited. She expects healthy sales once Chorus places them in larger specialty dealers.

What has been significant is interest in clothing. “We hear from the younger girls that they want apparel,” said Bracelin. “We debuted a small [casual] apparel line this season. We’re sold out already, and I get 40 emails a week from girls who want to buy it. We didn’t offer that many pieces, but we were surprised by the demand, and so were the dealers.”

The snowboard community may have been caught off-guard by the enthusiasm, but they’re not likely to overlook these girls.

Schmidt of Burton said snowboarding companies have “learned a few lessons” from the ski market. “One thing the ski industry did not do well is it abandoned youth for a long time. It gave snowboarding the opportunity to take a chunk of their business.”

And if there’s one thing we know about the ski industry, it’s been a long time since they rock and rolled. 



Jagged Edge



booth 545

801-633-8989

jemg@jagged-edge.com