

TRAVEL

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Back to Skate School

A week at Camp Woodward in central Pennsylvania is a childhood dream come true—20 years later

By **BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON**

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Rebecca Greenfield for The Wall Street Journal

HOT WHEELS | A Camp Woodward staffer on an indoor ramp

THE ROAD TO skateboarding paradise isn't paved with X Games medals—it's dotted with horse manure.

Camp Woodward, the world's premiere action sports facility, is located halfway between Lewisburg and State College, Pa., in the green Susquehanna River Valley, the heart of Amish country. Driving there, I passed four horse-drawn buggies and a number of shops displaying elaborate quilts on wooden railings.

It took me seven hours to get from Boston to Woodward, but my trip actually began 25 years ago, when I bought my first skateboard.

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The Rock, a 20,000-square-foot skating area

I grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas, a flat city on the Gulf of Mexico where people gig flounder and hunt quail. In Corpus, skateboarding was viewed as suspicious, antisocial behavior. My friends and I scouted drained backyard pools and sessioned them while the owners were at work; when city council elections rolled around, we "borrowed" plywood campaign signs to build rickety ramps. Cops confiscated our skateboards a lot. Once, a famous skateboarding team came to do a demonstration, but so few people showed up, they only skated for a short while. We took them fishing instead. When they left, I wanted to stow away in their van, to smuggle myself to wherever they were going.

Woodward was founded in 1970 as a gymnastics camp, and is still where the best athletes train for the Olympics. When the U.S. team boycotted the Moscow Games in 1980, the owner added BMX race tracks. Several years later, on a hunch, he built two skateboard ramps in

a warehouse. That decision transformed 70 acres of rolling hills into a multimillion-dollar global phenomenon. Professional skateboarders, BMXers, snowboarders and in-line skaters began descending on Woodward, establishing it as a kinetic think tank where ridiculously difficult tricks were conceived and perfected. It became the dream vacation for amateurs, a Disneyland for the disenfranchised. There are currently five Woodward locations, including one in Beijing.

Photos: All Around Camp Woodward

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When pictures of those first ramps started appearing in skate magazines, I sent away for information and checked the mail every day until the camp brochure arrived. I begged my parents to let me go, promising to improve my grades, do more chores, eat more vegetables. When they said they'd love to send me but couldn't afford it, I suggested a garage sale. I offered to start a lawn-mowing business. The airfare alone was insurmountable. I suggested driving, but I might as well have proposed swimming to the sun.

Danny Way, arguably the world's greatest skateboarder, was my ticket to Woodward. In 2010, I wrote an essay about him and met the film director Jacob Rosenberg, who invited me to work on "Waiting for Lightning," a documentary about Mr. Way. Through that I met Dave Metty, director of Woodward's digital media camp, and joked about how I'd spent my whole life trying to get to Woodward. When he asked why I hadn't gone as a gainfully employed adult, I said I'd thought I was too old.

"For a Harvard professor," Mr. Metty said, "you're pretty dumb."

"By the time I left, I was landing airs that spanned approximately 30 feet across one of Camp Woodward's mini Mega Ramps. "

Woodward, it turns out, is open to anyone over seven years of age. (The camp sleeps 1,100.) Its summer programs are the most popular, but there are also weekend getaways for families and adults who want to visit in off seasons or avoid crowds of youngsters.

I bravely booked a full summer week, and to my surprise the only difference I noticed between the younger skaters and me boiled down to pacing. The kids and teenagers hucked themselves down rails and over ramps with abandon, whereas my approach was more measured. They took run after run; the adults, we took our time. The younger skaters outnumber the adults, which allows for breathers between rides.

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The cabin shared by adult campers

The typical day at Woodward goes like this: Wake up in the cabin you share with about 15 other campers—all have air-conditioning and bunk beds—and head to breakfast in the mess hall, then morning stretches and instruction with counselors who provide hands-on help with specific tricks or skills. (When young campers arrive at Woodward, their skills are evaluated, and they're placed in appropriate instruction groups. Adults can opt out, which I did to preserve my ego.)

After instruction, campers roam from one skate spot to the next until lunch. The meals are fresh and locally grown, heavy on pasta and vegetables.

After the noon feeding, roaming resumes. Campers move from the concrete street-skating area, a massive multilevel plaza that city planners would salivate over, to Woodward's video production room, to edit the footage they're constantly shooting. There's usually some sort of friendly organized competition just before dinner, and more roaming as the sun drops behind the Appalachian Mountains. Just before lights out at 10:30 p.m., there's a rush to the canteen for lemon julep slushies and pizza.

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Practicing on a plaza

Without question, part of Woodward's draw is its vast terrain. Here is some of what comprises just one of its six indoor skate parks: bank ramps, kidney bowl, mini ramp, vert ramp, fly box, manual pad and a pyramid. (Ask your kids to translate.) It took me three days to grasp the camp's layout; I never found a reliable route to the mess hall and had trouble remembering which ramps were in which warehouses.

Woodward has also done an unparalleled job of designing obstacles that enable campers to safely and swiftly improve their skills—like ramps and rails that start small and gradually get bigger.

When I arrived, I was hesitant to drop in on one of Woodward's mini Mega Ramps. (Megas look like giant plywood ski slopes; Mr. Way used one to jump the Great Wall of China in 2005.) By the time I left, I was landing airs that spanned about 30 feet across it. No need to dwell on

the times I landed with my weight wrong and slammed forward onto my shoulder and neck and face, falls that resulted in a painful knot of pinched nerves and a numb arm for the next three weeks.

The Lowdown: Camp Woodward

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Camp Woodward

Getting There: Camp Woodward is about a seven-hour drive from Boston and around four hours from New York. You can fly into State College, Pa., and take an hourly shuttle to the camp, 45 minutes away. A bus also runs every Sunday from Rockaway Mall in Rockaway, N.J.

Learning There: A week of Action Sports camp costs \$925 to \$1,145 per person, including room, board and instruction. (Activities like paintball and horseback riding are not included.) Weekend Getaway packages (offered off-season) start at \$115 per night, including a room in the Woodward Inn or the Woodward Lodge and access to the two largest skate parks. campwoodward.com

Staying There: Campers stay in cabins outfitted with bunk beds, air-conditioning and shared bathrooms. Weekend Getaway guests can stay in the 12-room Woodward Lodge, a modern inn with exposed beams, oriental rugs, a large stone fireplace and relaxed seating areas.

What to Bring: If staying in the cabins, sleeping bag and/or sheets, pillow, towels. Pack safety gear (helmet, elbow and knee pads are required) and, of course, your skateboard.

As extraordinary as the terrain is, what truly distinguishes Woodward isn't the ramps; it's the community I longed for back in Corpus. The kids who come to Woodward are the ones who avoid homecoming dances and team sports, students whose teachers say they lack focus. Woodward is a place that assures them they're not alone and they're not crazy.

Each week, the camp hosts a roster of top-shelf professional athletes like Chris Cole and Jamie Bestwick, who mentor campers on how to ride away from alley-oop 50/50 shuffles and flairs. Kids come to Woodward to learn tricks, but also for lessons that transcend tre-flips and tailwhips. Dedication and resilience. The sustaining power of process, and the viability of their own vision.

I often felt as if I was at an artists' colony where the tricks served as paintings or sculptures. Each grind was an incarnation of imagination; each 360 varial a breathtaking collage of movement. The skaters I spent time with were rooting for each other, laughing and sweating, carving their names into the air with each new trick.

For all the innovation, Woodward is simple in an old and pure way. At night, that air smells of horses and pine and of nearby streams. The urethane wheels on asphalt sound like a soft, easy rain. I didn't feel like a kid again, exactly. I wished I had come to camp when I was younger, but I also thought it was worth the wait. Although I'll never land a 1080 and the sun is setting on my time as a skateboarder, I felt at the beginning of something.

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