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# the REBIRTH of SOUL

## NOBOARDERS MAKE THE PERFECT BREAK IN THE BC BACKCOUNTRY

BY DAN KOSTREWSKI

**THE ROOTS OF SNOWBOARDING RUN DEEP.** From golf-course sessions and the first Banked Slalom to highbacks and twin-tips, we owe our ride to thinkers who made it happen. With no set mold, these visionaries dropped in on a new idea and produced stoke out of thin air. One rider at a time, they checked out, moved west or holed up in ghetto condos before the sport was even a noun. Community formed and an alternative grew into our identity.

Two decades later snowboarding has gone big. But the arc from skegs and certifications to floodlight fame has taken a toll. With dollars and days now measured in millions, shred culture has changed from tight brotherhood to target market. Fashionable steez has replaced original style and the lift-line vibe is no longer the same. Many who ride have grown tired of the blown-out scene seek to rekindle a personal feel snowboarding lost long ago.

In this climate of conformity, word spread that snowboarding's lost soul had been dusted off deep in the Kootenays. The organic elements brewing were riders laying down sick lines with no straps, while inhabiting an old mining town and adopting the crusade of a fallen friend. A core crew shedding bindings to surf pow sounded like the perfect myth. Yet, if this underground reaction was real, it was something my soul desperately needed to experience.

### FINDING SOMETHING RARE

*"It's just the birthplace and the roots. Every rider who has ended up here has some sort of involvement in the industry. This is where they have landed and found something new."*

—Cholo Burns

The stoke rising was circa '88, but the location was not public record. Many drawn to this movement were refugees from the boom and had witnessed tight scenes explode into professional chaos. These pioneers were eager to share the love but in no hurry to make the same mistake twice. They had adopted a surf mentality and enforced an invite-only policy to protect their zone. With a BC blend of openness and localism, I was invited to tell the story straight but also to keep the secret. And it would be better if I came alone.

Heading north with loose directions, it seemed like I was on the right track. An hour past the nearest blinking light, a long stretch of washboard ended in a shuttered town with head-high snow banks. The tour past the plow shed, the post boxes and the Noboard Cafe landed me at a combination general store-gas station-laundromat for directions. The surly woman roused from an apartment inside turned me around and pointed me toward the Windsor.

Even not lit up, the Windsor is an impressive structure. The century-old hotel was built to

serve the silver rush and survived boom after bust thanks to one female proprietor who refused to abandon her claim. Lazy dogs linger out front, while sunken hardwoods, brothel-era balconies and resident ghosts give it a grainy texture. Wireless connectivity and single-screen cable make it the town's main conduit to the Information Age. But more than a stop on the scenic route, a tavern for scruff miners or a sledneck bunkhouse, it is the hub of Noboard, BC.

On the saloon side I found Cholo Burns—the ambassador of Noboard—throwing back bottled Kootenays with team rider Sky Sheele and the boys. A former aspiring pro from coastal hippie stock, Cholo now sits at the centre of this unstrapped movement. Cholo grew up in the Richmond Ranch skate scene and found shredding back in the day at Cypress. He is not only the guy to call if you want a Noboard pad or a T-shirt, but the animated voice of this throwback revival. His open invite is why I landed deep in the Interior.

As a Noboard was pulled from behind the bar, I was shown the reason why. With an overgrown polymer stomp pad instead of binders and a rope from three-hole to three-hole, this was far from a standard ride. Yet I was assured with cryptic smiles that the setup knew how to surf. And here, in the Windsor's dimly lit time warp, it seemed only fitting to drink a few beers, open my mind and suspend my disbelief. →



An early morning pow turn by Cholo Burns in the birthplace of noboarding, the West Kootenay Mountains, BC. Adair photo



## THE INSPIRATION

*"The idea of riding without bindings is something people have always had. People who snowboard every day know they are attached and they think about it. But to make it into something that people recognize, you have to be Greg Todds. It's the only way."* —Cholo



This is how you get picked up in the Kootenays. Jmieff photo

Surfing snow has always been the stated mission. From Sherman Poppen's Snurfer to John "JG" Gerndt's Fish, landlocked souls have long tried to replicate that feeling of flotation. The roots of snowboarding are offshore, yet straps have long kept us tethered. The thought of riding just a deck has crossed many minds, but until Greg Todds invented the Noboard in 2001, no way had been established to drop in without bindings.

Odd offshoots with a cash focus are a chronic industry irritation. But Noboarding was not some scheme, and Todds was a visionary, not a kook. In '96, he built one of the first parks at Lake Louise and constructed the first Superpipe with Al Clark when U-tubes were head-high ditches. His rider-based summer camp at Brohm Ridge was the antithesis of resort corporate, and he soon traded Whistler's glam for the grit of the Interior.

In Revelstoke, Todds pioneered big lines with the likes of Scott Newsome, Jonaven Moore and Taylor Percy when drops were cheap and competition scarce. Like many in *The Search for Mountain Jim* circle, Todds later looked for an escape from the drama in Revelstoke. Finding pay dirt in a spot that two friends had stumbled upon while logging, he struck deeper into the mountains. He staked an official claim on the site of an abandoned mining camp and built a rustic cabin at the end of the road in solidarity with six friends.

Straight off knee surgery and shafted by a former sponsor, Todds spent the entire 2000 season riding switch—or Gregular—to stave off boredom. Burnt and riding by reflex, he needed a new challenge and surfing without bindings seemed the next logical step. With no previous template, he drilled 50 drywall screws into a blackened K2 Eldo, ground flat the tops and slathered the surface with hot wax. He affixed a rope to the nose and added a grab handle cut from a garbage can. On this contraption he linked 10 turns and was Noboarding.

His friends thought he had a screw loose. Few believed noboarding had a future, and no

one gave it any respect. But his learning curve was steep, and by the end of the season he was riding big lines and taking huge tumbles. Cholo Burns landed back in the Interior after a winter in Chamonix and put in a day with Greg. He was in awe as Greg rode steep, north-facing chutes, bomb-dropped big cornices and exhibited edge control without a single buckle, strap or ratchet.

"I couldn't believe it. I heard all year what he was doing, but I envisioned it as four turns down a 20-degree slope," Cholo says. "He took me up that day, and he rode some stuff that I rode after in my bindings, and I was thinking he was crazy. It didn't make any sense."

That first day back Burns was keen to promote the idea. Greg suggested ziplocking 50 drywall screws with handwritten instructions and bulk rope, but Cholo knew that in an era of polished sheen, only a finished product would be taken seriously. They built a ghetto mold in 2002, had 50 prototype pads produced and ordered ropes of one-inch tubular webbing sewn in Revelstoke. That winter, Spencer Francey shot the first photos of Noboarding, and Colin Adair made a trip to the sticks for professional documentation.

Two-thousand-four started off strong with a 400-pad production run in the works and write-ups set to run in *Snowboard Canada* and *Frequency*. But before the movement gained traction, an avalanche claimed Greg Todds on January 13, 2005. Caught and buried in a bowl high above his cabin, he was dug out quickly by friends Shin Campos and Colin Adair. He was evacuated by a CMH helicopter with two doctors onboard, but did not survive the flight.

As a father of both an actual and an extended family, the sudden death left many reeling with grief. Conditions turned sour, and his friends drifted in directions that took them away from daily reminders of the tragic accident. The loss also created a painful void in the Canadian snowboard community and forced many to think hard about life.

The Noboard Café.  
Adair photo



## THE EARLY DAYS

*"Noboarding is really turning into a crew that the snowboard industry has decided they don't need anymore. Snowboarding seems to have left the people who just want to ride out of the fray, and that's where Noboarding is bringing in a lot of people who are tired of seeing that. It's not something we've tried to sell, it's just happening organically."* —Cholo

The first one is impossible to forget and mine was on a borrowed Burton Backhill through upstate lake effect. With no idea how to make a turn, I pointed it straight and tumbled at speed. But the feeling I found changed my heading and sent me west after college. With multiple seasons in both Jackson and Mount Baker—and many storied trips along the way—I've since had my share of sick days. Riding has taken me far, but it no longer feels like that first time.

With run one again pending, we met Sky at his Noboard Café. Sky speaks softly but rides with powerfully compact style. He was first on the scene while felling timber and bunking in a trailer behind the hotel. In 2006, he built the café with his girlfriend, Jessica, for stable local employment. The four-stool establishment is littered with snowboard mags, scented by the aroma of Negro roast and decorated with framed Gallup prints. The Snurfer in the corner was the only clue that my morning shred would not be the same as hundreds before.

Caffeine was on the house, but petrol was not. After fueling up on both, we four-wheeled up the old mine-to-market road then doubled up the trail. Pulling into a roundabout, we shut her off at Broadview, the sacred tree stash and birthplace of Noboarding. The staging area was clustered with Noboards frozen upright and a 1972 Bombardier cat resting under a tarp. Half the early crew recycled to the pickup, while others set trail to the CMH flags atop the knob, and I followed with a naked Fish slung over my shoulder and advice to take my time.

After watching locals float off into steep trees, I grabbed the rope with the front hand as instructed and dropped in vert-ramp style. Tentative turns were followed by a backside landing after leaning into phantom highbacks. Shaken but not deterred, I pointed it again only to take a header on the next turn. Trees flashed past in close proximity and, pulling frantically on the rope, my style was like a drunk on a mechanical bull. Spin-cycle falls continued as expectations realigned with beginner status. The posse was waiting when I hit the cat road hard but there was no rush or panic since we were the only ones here. ➔



Al Clark with a "holy shit!" Noboard line in Bralorne, BC. Low photo





A Wu-style take off presents its own set of difficulties on a bindingless board. At least Cholo Burns has plenty of time to contemplate the landing. Adair photo



Scott Penner kicks it out. Scott's lovingly referred to as "the world's best Noboarder", and this is why. Adair photo

A few runs later, a breather was needed and, just in time, we fired up the cat. The 35-year-old is a classic, so rule number one is don't slam the door. The interior of the straight-six machine had, shall we say, a homegrown feel, with rigged speakers blasting anthem rock, goggles defogging on the heater and indoor smoke wafting around. Intensity mellowed, and my mind let it flow for a few clean runs. End-of-day exhaustion was total, and the whooped 10-kilometre return made sure the tank was empty. It was time to dry out and drink up.

We returned later to the cabin with pasta home-cooked by Cholo's girlfriend Jenna, who shoots, rips and cooks. The cabin was built not quite to code in a rush to get the roof on before the 2000 winter. The entry is littered with drained jerry cans and battered two-strokes, but the interior pays homage to the past. The walls tell many stories with print eulogies and Noboard clippings on display. An oversized topo shows both access and tenure with the heading "Poachers in the Terrain" for local reference. Two mounted bears—one black, one griz—keep watch while a photo of the Creekside Mob sits proudly on display.

As the Vancouver Canucks almost pissed one away after dinner, I spoke with Gary "Tuttle" Hall during second intermission. Tuttle is the cabin's current caretaker, but his real contribution is the cat. A summer of love maintains his baby, which keeps the road to the high country open all winter. Tuttle grew up stalking fish and game in the neighbourhood ranges and was instrumental in laying the cabin's foundation. He moved in to

decompress after four intense years and shed his bindings just this season. His character would clash with a world of spinning rims and slopeside bling, but he has earned a spot in Noboard's inner circle because—after tallying 100 days without—he is both living it and killing it.

#### MAKING IT HAPPEN

*"So I think from Greg passing away, a lot of people came together to heal. And people started getting on Noboards. I think losing Greg made people think twice about being open and realizing what life was about. It's about new experiences. And I think Greg really taught that in his passing."* —**Cholo**

After Greg's death, his friends came together to carry on the crusade. Many invested in an unspoken commitment to push forward his dream a few steps at a time. Burns moved permanently to the birthplace, taking sole charge of the business and buying a house in town. Minds that had been closed suddenly opened, and many found a fountain of youth in a new challenge. The community grew together to find solace.

Sky Sheele and Scott Penner started pushing Noboard riding to new levels of sickness and became the first riders on the team. Penner discovered the vertical possibility at Ice Creek Lodge on his own duct-taped one-off at the end of 2004. But his skill is what turned industry heads as he soon rode the same lines as visiting pros, but without bindings. He began landing 20-foot drops clean, sticking huge one-footers and trying fingerflip trickery.

"The first year after Greg died, we all realized it was in our hands, and that's where Penner really stepped up and started turning the industry on its head," Cholo says. "Penner can hang with the pro snowboarders and do all the stuff they are doing on a Noboard. He really opened the snowboard industry's eyes."

At the same time, Greg's apostles spread the word in microclimates. Taylor Pearcey in Revelstoke, Spencer Francey in Banff, and Sean Balmer on Vancouver Island began riding fresh lines and cultivating local scenes. Through PayPal and out of the back of his car, Burns sold 100 pads by the end of the season.

The steady stream of super-pros shooting at Greg's secret spot began to see a new angle to shredding and passed the word back. Trailing filmers were drawn to the ride and sampled a few runs without bindings. A segment was shot for *ir77*, due not to monetary sponsorship but to the impression Noboarding left on Lucas Huffman.

Rob Stevens—president of Canada's Association of Snowboard Instructors—became an advocate, insisting riding without bindings taught edge control better than any other method. John "JG" Gerndt, Burton's longtime hardgoods guru, made a pilgrimage in 2006, sampled raw footage and saw potential. The pad was a perfect match to the tapered Fish he developed seven years earlier, and JG headed back east to spread a stealth scene in the Vermont backcountry. Even legendary ripper Al Clark, one of Greg's closest friends, started dropping photo-calibre lines in his home range around Bralorne. ➔





Freedom of expression: Stalefish sans bindings by Scott Penner. Adair photo

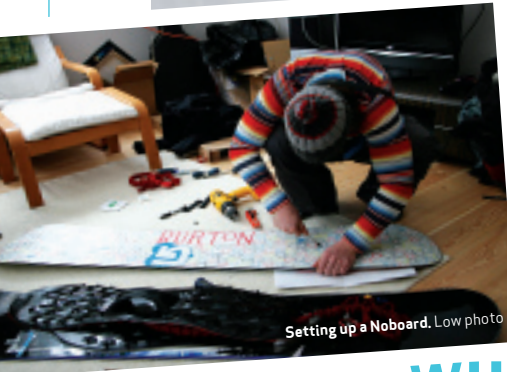
THE RIGHT CREW

*"It boils down to group dynamics: it's who you want to be with up there because shredding is all about how much fun you have, what your attitudes are and how you gel. It takes a heavy gurning when you first show up. The people who show up that you hardly know get gurned the most. But once you get to start to know them they're in the group."* —Cholo

The snowboard industry has always rolled into town with a free pass. Ability equaled entitlement as visiting crews were welcomed with handshakes and high-fives. Yet higher stakes have turned backcountry secrets into tracked-out zones. Left only with swarms prospecting their stash, many realized fame might not be the best outcome. As zones changed, backlash started to build, localism swelled and open access became guarded.

My hosts set it on the table the next morning as coffee came with a gurning. Concealment was the rule for a reason. We had all seen the fallout from fame, and no one wanted to be crowded out of an area they had pioneered. British Columbia is stacked with sick zones, but this one was respected as a birthplace and a refuge. Keeping quiet keeps that element in play.

Word was already filtering out, and transformation—in the form of industry crews, a mining effort for moly and rising vacation-home real estate—would do damage. But for now, the community was acting to keep it in check. The warning put me on my heels, since subjects are usually hungry for exposure. But by noon I was again knee-deep in untracked, had taken my turn driving the rumbling cat and was feeling invested in protection to keep my card from being revoked.



Setting up a Noboard. Low photo

"...I WAS BREAKING INTO THE WHITE ROOM WITHOUT BINDINGS."

LOSE YOUR BINDINGS

STEP ONE: GET THE SETUP

Any deck can go no, but the ones that surf best are tapered pow sticks such as a Burton Fish, Lib Tech Magne-Traction Mullet or Option Northshore. Noboard.ca is the place to order a rope and pad, which also comes with an award-winning DVD and a journal-calibre mag.

STEP TWO: DISMOUNT IT UP

Dismount bindings, clean the surface and bring it up to room temp. Lay down the nubby polymer pad to dial in your stance, which should run four inches back of normal. Peel backing at the nose, then stick it with even pressure from tip to tail. Attach a retractable dog leash to prevent projectiling, because you will fall before finding centre.

STEP THREE: DROP-IN NO

Mount included fasteners and hardware via the deck's three- or four-hole pattern, then affix the elastic rope and find the right length to keep it tight when learning. To go old school, cram ski boot liners into Sorel Mavericks—the team choice due to their extra grip—then go hit that stash.

I had been told there were no lazy days on a Noboard, and Day 2 proved that point. Unlike riding the highback couch, a lapse of focus—to think dinner or deadline—resulted in impact. Feet moved constantly for the right pressure and, rather than powering a turn, I realized the ride was really about flowing with the fall line. And finding the cleanest line.

We hit the backside since the trees were now abused, and my strapless style steadily improved on a mellower pitch. Shuttling sleds and finding continuous lines, we spread out on more solitary runs. Feel and float were now on my side, as taking time and letting it go found me the centre. The buzzer sounded since it was a workday, but a taste left me wanting only another turn.

OPEN MINDS

*"I wish Greg could see it now because, with all the years that everyone has put in, so many minds are open to it that were closed to it for so long"* —Cholo

Noboarding caught the public eye in 2006 with an impressive showing at the Banff Film Festival. Yes to the No, a short flick capturing the micro-culture, premiered to a sold-out crowd at the Max Bell Theatre. The 10-minute film—a collaboration of Eric Crosland, Frank Desrosier, Dave Mossop, Spencer Francey and Cholo Burns—made it onto the Banff Mountain Film Festival World Tour, showcasing noboarding at speed to hundreds of locations worldwide.

The seasonal advancement continued with Scott Penner sliding onto the lifts at Whitewater Ski Resort and dropping six backsides without resistance. A crew also hitched up the sleds and journeyed to Bralorne last winter for prime conditions in February to Noboard with Al Clark, who was consequently convinced that riding without was the next level. The next stop was Fortress, where the bindingless crew No-rode the rebuilding Alberta resort and was invited back at any time.



A noboarder's point of view. Jmieff photo

But the biggest sign of growth was the Greg Todds Memorial, which first took place January 13, 2006, on the anniversary of his accident. High in a clear-cut above town, the second memorial attracted 150 friends who raced, barbecued and raged late in remembrance. Heats determined Noboard bragging rights, and 29 souls braved the Asian Canadian Downhill—and its cloud of carnage—that ended with a frozen-beer shotgun where Sky Sheele walked away the sanctioned champion.

The scene was more old school than high school, and the entire community swarmed with good energy. With big-brand support flowing, but not one banner in sight, the event raised more than \$4,000 for the Greg Todds Memorial Fund, which benefits his son Ashton and daughter Lily.

FOUNTAIN OF YOUTH

*"Maybe that's the attraction. All these people in the industry that feel a bit lost in it, when they come here and live like Greg did or get to be in his shadow, it makes sense for them again. I really noticed that Greg lived the true essence of what the industry wishes they could live."* —Cholo

The essence broke through on Day 3. Abandoning cat for lack of traction, we roosted into the subalpine. The local posse set track to Fissure Bowl, where the fatal slide had let loose two years earlier. Doubling side-by-side to the bowl on Cholo's Yamaha, he relayed the story of the tragic accident over the muffled four-stroke hum.

Each detail seemed sharp and painful, but his reflective tone made clear the accident was inseparable from noboarding. Not just in this exchange, but also in every conversation where Greg's name came up, it was apparent catharsis

was still in process. Yet when his friends Noboard in this paradise he found, Geetz is still part of their crew.

"The hardest thing to do is fill in for someone else, but everyone who has done it, they've all put their small percentage in to bring Greg back and make it easier," Cholo explains later that night. "It'd be way better if he was here. Even if the sport hadn't grown, it would be way better if he was here just to see him crash."

We hit the bowl, and I dug into the pack to have a look while Cholo and Mike Nyhuis—who arrived with two barking dogs the night before—put in a track topside. The rest of the crew pinned it up the trench and parked it on the bench. Taking their run in the rotation, Tuttle and Mike—the Windsor's bartender—No-rode from tip to toe. As vis' became an issue, half-laps into the bowl followed while Cholo took turn after turn with no rope. ➔



Cholo Burns, no rope, all glory in Bralorne, BC. Low photo



My mental breakthrough came on the bordering shot. With speed and control firing, slashy frontsides started miraculously to flow. Instinct took control as the Fish danced and dived in three dimensions with only slight downward pressure. This unanticipated sensation was completely irrational—and few back home would believe my rant—but I was breaking into the white room without bindings. The sky shut and a CMH ship rotoed into a safe drainage as a reminder of a soulful legacy that allowed me to momentarily float free.

Sleds bogged down, and that would be my last run. Four of us stopped in one last Imax amphitheatre as Cholo lined up a steep, stucco flute. Riding it ropeless—but not quite clean—he ran it out into the flats after pushing the level right to the edge. Negativity was absent, and there was no lens in sight, but the image was vivid. Deep in this protected bowl, my eyes glimpsed the future of a movement many clicks removed from anywhere.



The snowcat (driven by the author) and sleds. Adair photo

THE PERFECT STASH

*“The snowboard industry is paying attention to what we have done strictly because we have soul and the roots are undeniable. That’s the cool thing about the world: you never know where it’s going to come from.” —Cholo*

It’s natural to want to spread the word, but unchecked growth has its peril. Snowboarding went big-screen, but the soul was forced underground so as not to be lost entirely. In this environment, the next evolution may come from a pro-stock video part or one more rotation at Winter X, but it may also come from lifelong riders shedding their bindings for a new challenge. In this case, a synergy of hushed zone, tight community and a building movement is where that rebirth of possibility just might be found.

The future of Noboarding is hard to predict, but scenes that started with one order are growing. Shops from the Golden Triangle to Utah and Alaska are stocking pads, a new run of 500 is on order and major brands have expressed interest. Trips to Arlberg and Japan are in the works and standing invites exist from Baker to the Swiss Alps.

The Noboarding vibe is spreading and, one by one, is being picked up by old souls looking for a fresh line. Word will eventually filter out, but the stated goal this time is keeping the feeling among friends and preserving a stage of discovery. As Cholo said to me after a few beers, the right people will find out and they’ll know where to go. We all have our secret stash, and that is where Noboarding will thrive. I know exactly where my zone exists, and I’m definitely not telling you where to find my line.



A portrait of the king on his throne—the late, great Greg Todds. Adair photo

BACK TO THE FUTURE

*“My biggest fear is that it would become illegitimate. I’d rather slowly get people on Noboards and build a scene than sell 10,000 of them and have only two per cent of the people understand it. Yeah, we’d make some money, but that would be the death of it.” —Cholo*

*“I think it’s really cool that everything is accessible now, but the idea of kids reading magazines and dreaming about trying something for years is really, really cool. Those kids pushed snowboarding to what it is now. So that’s what I hope for, that’s the dream.” —Cholo*

Day 4 was a bust with rain overnight and natural slides tumbling down. Tape was run on the history over four-finger Canadian Icewaters and a course of cheesy poutine. Five of us sat down for a shit-talking, bluff-calling poker game, and Nyhuis walked away with the winnings as far as the bar to pay the tab. A gourmet home-cooked meal and local news discussion—about the winter, the mine and the future—ran out my time in this sanctuary.

When identity is linked with something for so long, the original intensity is lost. Finding it preserved was like pulling a relic out of the ice. Change is inevitable and—for both good and bad—snowboarding will never be the same. Yet without erasing my days or resetting the record, I was gifted a rebate to strip it down to that first-turn sensation. In the same way, being shown a plot of paradise convinced me community was still strong, but in a place intentionally kept off the map. Heading south on a lonely dirt road the next morning, it all of a sudden hit me that this was a rebirth I was fortunate to find. 🍷



This photo of Skye Sheele’s Indy sums up the Noboard mystique: Quiet solitude with an air of pure originality. Adair photo



Noboards Taylor Percy, Cholo Burns and Skye Sheele. Adair photo



A no-hands-on-the-rope pow slash—as hard as it looks. Low photos