

Josh Friedberg [00:38]: I'm honored to introduce the first ever American Olympic skateboarding team today on skateboarding day. [00:44]

KAILA: On June 21st, USA Skateboarding, the official governing board of the sport, announced the team that would be representing the country in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. Yes, we're still calling it the 2020 games.

KAILA: Twelve skateboarders are in Tokyo now. Three of those skateboarders have Arizona ties and most notable is Jagger Eaton.

{MUSIC BREAK}

KAILA: WELCOME TO VALLEY 101, A PODCAST FROM *THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC* AND AZCENTRAL.COM WHERE *WE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS YOU ASK ABOUT METRO PHOENIX*. I'm your host, Kaila White

KAILA: How are there so many Arizonans on the team? What impact has the Valley had in the growth of the sport? In today's episode we're diving into the skateboarding community here in the Valley and its history.

(OUT CUE MUSIC)

Donnie Ho was 10 years old when he discovered skateboarding while walking through a K-mart and seeing the boards in the shopping aisles. Growing up he wanted to be a surfer but living in the desert with no beach, he saw skateboarding as the next best option. He mowed lawns to save up his money to finally buy a board.

Donnie: [00:03:41] , I think after you do a couple a couple of turns, it was just like. That's all I could think about, honestly. I mean, I literally I clean my board every day, I take it apart, I clean it, put it back together. I was in love with skateboarding from the get go. [00:03:57][15.8]

That was back in 1975 before skateboarding is what it is today. Commercial boards were narrow and the wheels were made of clay composite. It was more of a toy for kids than a mode of transportation or a tool to perform the sport.

Donnie: [00:21:04] my very first time on a skateboard was on a board with clay wheels and those boards didn't turn. I remember my friend was dragging me with his bike in a shopping mall. [00:21:19][15.3]

Then a man named [Frank Nasworthy created polyurethane wheels](#). These new wheels allowed for a smoother ride. Soon other parts modernized the boards like the trucks that allowed for better turns. Now, skateboarders could do more tricks and ride safely.

(CUE MUSIC)

In the late 70s, there were few parks dedicated to skateboarding. Donnie and his friends took matters into their own hands but not always in the most legal of ways. They would sneak on to people's properties to skate in their empty pools.

Donnie: [00:07:40] Well honestly, once you started skating pools, will you were full on trespassing. I mean you were breaking the law every day. It was part of it that you had to. It's not like I didn't even have the brain to think knocking on the door and asking somebody if it was cool. We just jumped the fence and barged, you know, and hope there was no dogs in the backyard, basically. [00:08:01][21.4]

Pool skating at the time was the most popular among skaters in the Valley. They'd stand at the top of an empty pool and drop in on their boards.

Donnie: [00:13:19] first thing you got to do, you got to carve around, carve it first and go over the light, hit the tile coping. [00:13:25][5.9]

It was a tight knit community because they'd keep those hot spots hidden and would only share where to skate with trusted friends.

However there were some spots that were well known to many skaters in the Valley, including an empty estate pool that donned the name Dead Cat. It was located on 91st Avenue and Camelback Road. That's where Donnie met another skater... Steve Shelton.

Steve: [00:17:10] but really in it's full majestic timeline of a daily thing. It was 76 to 84. So that's like a timeline of skating at the same place. And it was a giant backyard pool that had a big flush front ball and then it had four love seats with varying transitions inside walls that were more like a public pool. So that offered such varied terrain that it was unbelievable [00:17:40][29.8]

The pool was plastered with graffiti. For Steve and other skaters at the time it was like their holy grail. It was the spot to be at. Eventually, it was destroyed.

The next major skating area for these skaters was what they called the Desert Pipes. They were these huge nearly 22 feet concrete pipes or siphons owned by the Central Arizona Project. The pipes delivered water from the Colorado River. However when the pipes were empty skaters jumped at the chance to skate down and up them.

Steve: [00:18:06] And those were the greatest pipes and the greatest Skate's terrain of all time because it was cast concrete. They had these machines and they carried the pipes down into place as opposed to... So the surface of the cement was like glass. It's just a special thing, 22 feet [00:18:25][18.6]

Although they could face a fine if they were caught trespassing their teenage courage and wild spirit kept them going. Skating these pipes attracted people from all over the Valley and even according to Steve skaters from California.

Steve: [00:18:56] And then there we are, the locals, you know, and in the end, you know, hopefully dominate over them eventually, which I think is true. But, you know, whatever. But so that was a big deal to the pipeline. It makes Arizona a place that's known worldwide for like that golden age of skateboarding terrain that that will never exist again. [00:19:22][25.9]

History shows Arizona had a thriving skateboarding community even before skateboarding really became an Olympic sport. It's one that Donnie and Steve along with their friend Rob Locker are hoping to preserve. They've spent the last few years putting together a documentary that outlines this skateboarding timeline in Arizona. They premiered their documentary High Rollers right before the pandemic took hold.

Steve: [00:52:41] And there is a grassroots, albeit still worldwide, interest in this kind of thing, whether that be the Dogtown skaters or Arizona skaters. Again, back to that point of having this really special terrain that that will always be remembered as the best terrain, [00:53:00][18.8]

(Transitional Music)

As time went on, cities began investing in skateparks, partly to curb trespassing and street skating. The parks replicated skating in empty pools while also having elements of street skating like rails and ramps.

City skateparks aren't the only place that kids go to. As the popularity of skateboarding continued indoor facilities were created like Kids that Rip and AZ Grind in Mesa.

Kids that Rip contributed to the development of several Valley skaters, including two first-time Olympians.

Both Jagger Eaton who is on the men's street team and Alana Smith who is on the women's street team, started their skating career at that skateboard school. At Kids that Rip or KTR, they have classes where you can learn to skateboard from the most beginner level up to higher, more elite levels.

It's also where Markus Neustaedter (new- steder) got his first coaching bug. When it first opened he stopped by with hopes of skating at the indoor facility, but the program director denied him.

Markus: [00:14:50] I do need a coach for the summer camp and I think you'd be perfect. Or just like what? Like, all right. I mean, I like I said, not on my radar, but. In a way, it was almost like a double whammy where I was like not at. So not only can I go skate this park like I was just asking, but they're going to pay me like. All right. Heck, yeah. And I gave it a shot. [00:15:12][22.5]

At the time Markus was finishing up his college degree and it never had crossed his mind that he could teach, let alone coach a sport he'd been doing since he was in the 7th grade. He instantly connected with the young kids helping them develop their skateboarding skills.

Then in 2011 Markus suffered an injury that kept him off his board for weeks.... But the facility needed someone to cover the more elite classes after the main instructor left. So with a knee brace, he covered the class for two weeks. And again he got along well with the kids.

Markus: [00:17:54] And all those elite level kids, like, I guess they love me. And they and they and they asked for me to be like the regular academy coach moving forward. So for the next two years, I was the the head rail coach at the kids that rip Mesa facility. In the academy program, so that's that's how I got my start into the skate instruction. [00:18:19][25.4]

He saw how invested parents were with their kids' skating. He said he'd see parents bring their kids three to four times a week to the skate school. Instead of seeing skateboarding as an outlaw or punk type of sport parents saw how their kids persisted.

Markus: [00:21:55] this was a program that was getting built that was progression based where it was like tangible progressions, like words like, look at your child is doing something that they weren't able to do last week. They're doing something they weren't able to do last month. And building kids up like that, regardless of of what the the sport or pastime is, I think parents instantly saw the value in that for sure. [00:22:17][21.7]

Markus gives credit to the program Geoff Eaton created at Kids that Rip. He said that Eaton had the vision long before skateboarding was even announced as an Olympic sport.

Markus: [00:51:02] And and he had this vision and he had the vision not just for him, but he created the program [00:51:09][6.6]

The program created ways for the kids to skate fearlessly with catch mats and using repetition based training. According to Markus, there's still a sort of taboo of using a coach in the community. However, it's been the way for these competitive skaters to advance in their skills.

Markus: [00:52:45] Jagger, Alana DaShawn Jordan, who who just barely missed, but he's from Chandler Brighton Zauner on the on the park side. She's on on the park team for the women. All those kids grew up in that facility using these mats. So I got to give a lot of credit to to the kids that rip program. And you know, they had a vision that at some points in time almost didn't even seem realistic. But, you know, give them credit. They had they had the long view. And here we are. [00:53:18][32.5]

These athletes have been competing on the national stage since they were young teens. Jagger was the youngest skater to compete in the X-games at the age of 11. In 2018, the 18-year-old spoke with The Arizona Republic and talked about his Olympic dreams.

Eaton: [0:26] Obviously in any sport the dream is to make it to the olympics to win a gold metal. So you know for me the fact that skateboarding has the opportunity to do that now with the opportunity to be in skateboarding to have that opportunity to compete for my country, USA. And to win a gold metal is my dream. [0:40]

Alana Smith, on the women's street team, was 12 when they won a silver metal at the X-games in 2013. At 14, they spoke with the Republic about their love for skateboarding.

Smith: [4:58] It's a dream but then you pinch yourself continuously and realize it's not. [4:04]

Brighton Zeuner, on the women's park team, is 17 and has been skating competitively since she was 12 years old.

While most of these athletes started their career in Arizona, most of them have since moved to California and other states where the industry is larger. I asked Markus why this is.

Markus: [00:48:51] I would tell it to my own, to my kids that I work with to this day, I still do like where it's like if you really have a chance to do this and this is what you want to do, like you really have this dream. Like I want to be pro skater. You got to go to California. [00:49:03][11.9]

And apart from the Kids that Rip skate school, I asked Markus why it seems like there are so many competitive skateboarders originating from Arizona.

Markus: [00:49:44] I think our weather is huge because we're one of the places we're one of the few places in the United States, aside from California, that if you really want to do it and you're passionate, you can skate year round. Now, it's rough right now in the summer. It's hard, but we do it. We did it [00:50:00][16.0]

It's also the large influence from local skate shops in the Valley.

Markus: [01:02:32] The scene would not be what it is without cow town, sidewalk and freedom, just being able to offer like quality high quality skateboard parts and making them affordable because skateboarding is an expensive hobby. [01:02:47][15.4]

Sidewalk Surfer in Scottsdale has been around since 1977. These skate shops also often hold events and contests that continue to fuel the community.

(Transitional music)

As the sport continues to grow and become more accessible to people, Markus hopes to pave the way for young skaters to thrive in skateboarding. In 2013, he left Kids that Rip to start his own skateboarding coaching company called Skatetrue. He wanted to formulate a program where kids could go to different skateparks and not get too comfortable in one place. Almost mimicking how it would be to go to different competitions.

He first started by driving 4 kids in his dad's Audi. Within a few months he outgrew that car and bought a minivan to accommodate more kids.

Markus: [00:29:22] So I took out the middle row, put it put in like a third, a second, three rows, see with the three seat belts and like add in my capacity. So I had like seven kids I could take to the skate parks and I ran it that way for two or three years. And then I ended up getting a fifteen passenger van in like 2016, I believe. And then I've been able to run it that way with the dual vans. If there's six or less, I use the small van, seven or more. I use the big van. [00:29:51][28.2]

He does the group skateboard sessions about 3 times a week. I joined Markus at one of his skateboarding lessons in Buckeye. He had a group of six kids, all different ages.

Markus: [00:09:17] oh, all right, all right, Cole [00:09:23][6.6]

At the first park, the kids warm up and get the blood flowing throughout their bodies. Most skateparks are not formatted the same. The Buckeye skatepark is flat with some simple rails in the middle and ramps.

He skates with the kids but also watches them closely to see where he can add input and make suggestions to their skating. He knows each trick his students are trying to accomplish.

Markus: [00:01:11] Caden's trying to overcome his anxiety of down rails, so he's trying to trying to go for the three rail over there. Oh! Gavin's trying to learn fakey oli switch front feeble, [00:01:25][13.8]

With the younger kids, he's more hands on because they're just developing their skills. Like Ranie, a younger skater, who was at the park with them.

Markus: [00:05:50] No, you got it. We'll get you up here. I'm going to get you with the fakey rock. OK? But I'm right here. I'm not going to let you fall. I know, but I'm not going to let you fall. [00:06:02][11.5]

Not only is he teaching them basic skating skills, he's also developing their confidence. He said so much of this sport is mental. The fear of falling can hold them back. By having such a wide range of young and older kids, it allows them to learn from each other. The older teens act as mentors to the younger kids.

Markus: [00:28:50] But I feel like there's an element where it's kind of it's nice to have all the different ages together because the older guys kind of act is like Big Brothers and tell me kind of show some of the etiquette and the unknown kind of rules of of skate park etiquette and the flow of what what's appropriate and what's not appropriate to do and how to behave at the skate park and stuff like that [00:29:13][23.4]

After two hours there he heads over to a park in Avondale. That park has a different set up that emulates the pool skating scene more. When he's not doing group lessons, Markus does private skateboard lessons. Skate True is his full time job. I asked him what it felt like for a hobby he took up at 13 to become his full time job.

Markus: [00:30:39] I still can't believe it to this day. I pinch myself all the time like it's you know, even the first five to ten years when it, when skateboarding was still so taboo, I never would have dreamt that it could be some viable like legitimate pastime, an option for income. But here we are. [00:30:57][18.4]

For Markus, it's hard to grasp how much has changed over the years in the skateboarding world. It was just a hobby and a pastime for him and so many of his friends. Now to see it get to the olympic stage is huge for him. Back in our studio I asked him if he'd be rooting for Team USA.

Markus: [00:55:03] Oh, absolutely. Yeah, of course I will. Yeah. I mean, I'm a I'm a skate. I'm like a skate nerd or a skate rat, they call it. So any competition that's especially that's at the absolute highest level. Love to watch it. It's so exciting to watch.
[00:55:17] [14.2]

Not everyone in the skating community is excited to see it in the Olympics but everyone I spoke to in this episode is excited to root for the skateboarding team. Including Steve..

Steve: [00:11:20] And I'm really proud at this point, also in time that it's become it's obviously completely worldwide legitimized an Olympic event, you know, so that's super stoked about that.
[00:11:33] [13.2]

Steve: [01:04:43] And we'll be rooting for those kids. It's going to be awesome. [01:04:45] [2.5]

{CUE SHOW MUSIC}

Maritza:

It's interesting to see how skateboarding has grown in Arizona. I remember when I was a kid and got a skateboard. To me it was just a toy not something that I thought was a legitimate sport. Boy, was I wrong. Kaila, have you ever skateboarded?

Kaila: TKTK

Kaila: By the time you listen to this episode the Olympic skateboarding competition will be underway. Will you be watching the olympics? Make sure to follow along with the azcentral sports team for full updates on Team USA in the 2020 Tokyo Games. As courtesy note, audio in today's episode came from USA Skateboarding on Youtube.

Kaila: If you've got more sports related questions make sure to submit them to our team at valley 101 dot azcentral dot com. And if you're a regular listener of our show, please consider supporting it by subscribing to azcentral dot com.

Kaila: And as always, thank you for listening to Valley 101, a podcast from *The Arizona Republic* and azcentral.com. Also if you're a fan of Arizona politics, be sure to check out The Gaggle...our sister podcast that breaks down local issues and helps you keep up with the state's political news.

Kaila: See you next week.