

Catching some big ai



CDT photo/Craig

Keith McElhinney, of State College, performs a stunt while practicing BMX Freestyle on the Street Ramp at Woodward Camp.

By Gill South
For the CDT

Woodward Camp gains prominence as extreme sports ta

Somewhere in Australia, at this very moment, a teenager may be lying in his bed, daydreaming about spending a week this summer in rural Centre County.

The lure is Woodward Camp, a mecca for skateboarding, BMX cycling, in-line skating and snowboarding enthusiasts that each summer draws 10,000 boys and girls, ages 7 to 18, from roughly two dozen countries.

Woodward Camp began in the 1970s as a gymnastics camp, but co-owner Ed Isabelle decided to experiment with a BMX cycling camp in the early 1980s,

when interest in gymnastics slowed. He introduced skateboarding a few years later, and now Woodward is perceived as the granddaddy of action sports camps in America and is an innovator in the billion-dollar industry's development.

Kevin Sullivan, a 12-year-old-skateboarder from Tampa, Fla., gives it his

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A short glossary of X-sports te

ON THE WEB:

Woodward Camp
www.woodwardcamp.com

Woodward West
www.woodwardcamp.com/wwwest_index.html

Extreme sports' popularity fuels camp

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seal of approval: "These days, skateboarding is all in the street, over stairs, on ledge. Woodward is probably the camp that is most like the street."

In addition to the 425-acre camp about 10 miles from Millheim, the company operates camps in Wisconsin and California. It has hosted X-Games competitions, provided the backdrop for Adidas commercials and attracted corporate sponsors.

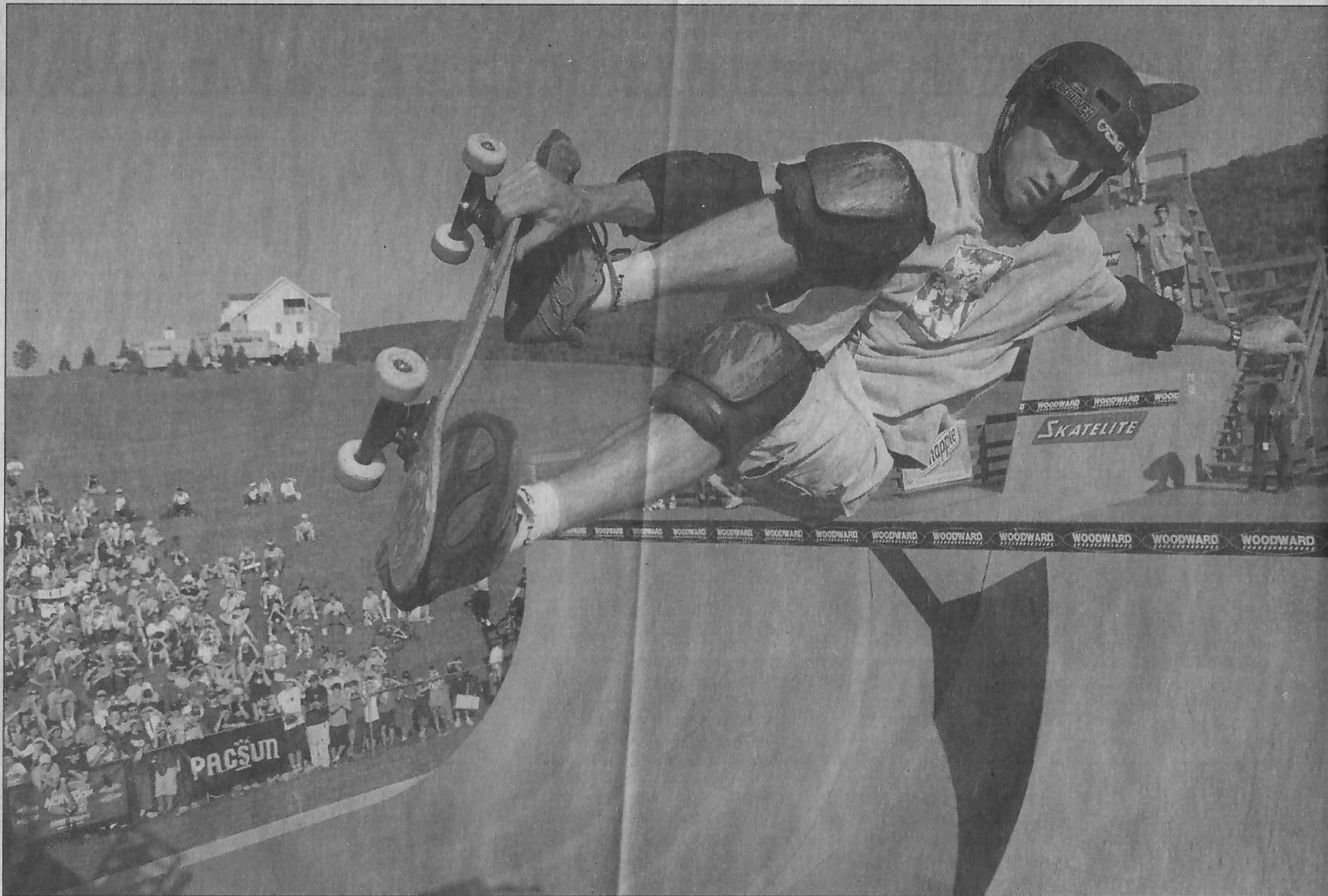
Last year, Woodward signed on with IMG, a sports management conglomerate that represents athletes such as golfer Tiger Woods, tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams, and hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.

"One of the reasons we got involved was that they had a lot of people calling them with ideas," said Jay Ogden, senior vice president at IMG. "There are a lot of people who want to be involved in action-sports events, television events, and all of them want Woodward to be involved. It is like Woodward is the Good Housekeeping golden seal of approval."

Learning from the best

It all starts with the campers, the teens and pre-teens whose interest is propelling huge growth in the action-sports industry.

Every summer, they come from all corners of the globe — 49 states and 24 countries was last year's count — but to look at them, they could all have come from the same town, dressed as they are in the uniform of the skate industry: baggy pants,



Skateboarding legend Tony Hawk catches some air at Woodward Camp during the ESPN-sponsored "Tony Hawk's Gigantic Skatepark Tour" in 2001.

hooded sweatshirts, Vans shoes, pierced bits of anatomy.

These campers may look slightly down at heel, but their parents can afford to pay \$895 for a week of action-sports instruction. The fee for gymnasts is \$725. Few — just 12 to 15 or so over the entire 14-week summer — come from the local area.

They're attracted by top-notch facilities and the chance to learn heart-stopping feats of athleticism. Above all, they come to learn from the best.

Looking after the weekly count of 700 campers are 300 counselors and instructors. About 10 are pros, big names

Some X-sports terms

◆ **Alley-oop** (skateboarding): When a trick is performed in the opposite direction in which the skater is moving.

◆ **Back flip** (BMX): Done in the air with the rider still on the bike. In vert, and occasionally in street, the rider will land in fakie position on the same ramp. In dirt and street, the rider will do a back flip from jump to jump.

◆ **BMX**: Bicycle moto-cross. Originally moto-cross races for non-motorized bicycles, BMX has also come to include non-racing competitions involving tricks performed on ramp courses and skate parks.

◆ **Boned out** (multiple sports): A term



◆ **Ollie** (skateboarding): A no handed air trick performed by tapping the tail of the board on the ground or ramp surface.

◆ **Railslide** (multi): Also called board-slide. To slide on an obstacle or lip with the contact point being the underside of the board.

◆ **Resi ramp** (multi): A ramp made of a soft, rubber-like substance — though not as soft as foam — that allows riders and skaters to try tricks without, theoretically, getting hurt.

◆ **Spine ramp**: Two half-pipe ramps placed back to back, creating a double u shape.

◆ **Street** (BMX): An event consisting of different types and styles of ramps positioned so they can be approached in

as world-champion skateboarders Tony Hawk or Neal Hendrix or BMX gold medalists like Jamie Bestwick, Chad Kagy or Kevin Robinson.

"For kids into BMX riding, Woodward Camp is their Disneyland," said Bestwick, X-Games 2003 gold medalist in BMX cycling and a resident instructor. "The kids are getting the top instructors in the world. Just that alone makes it pretty priceless."

"It is the perfect place to learn things," agreed Keith Mulligan, editor of industry magazine Transworld BMX. "You are going to acquire skills and spend hours a day with different pros, watching and learning. I don't think there are many sports that would allow kids that kind of access."

The kids adhere to a regimented schedule. They receive mandatory instruction on their chosen sport for 2½ hours in the morning. After lunch, recreation opportunities range from go-kart riding, paint ball and horse-back riding to arts and crafts.

Of course, they also can practice skateboarding tricks or BMX maneuvers.

Ellen Pinker, whose son Justin aims to become a pro BMX cyclist, said the flexibility of extreme sports suits her

used to explain the emphasis of style in a trick.

◆ **Cased** (multi): To land short or miss a landing.

◆ **Drop in** (multi): To enter the ramp or obstacle from the top.

◆ **Fun Box** (BMX): A four-sided box jump (ramp on every side) that is included in street courses.

◆ **Half pipe** (multi): A type of ramp that is shaped like a "U" and used for vert skating.

◆ **Hip** (multi): The spot where a ramp or obstacle comes to a point. Tricks are done while flying over or off of it.

son's personality. She sacrifices part of her summers to work as a nurse at the camp so she can afford to send her son there.

"For artistic kids like Justin, baseball and football are not great because there are so many rules," said Pinker, of Maryland. "Freestyle BMX is so good for expressing yourself. It's an art form."

Co-owners Gary Ream and Isabelle, from Centre County, Pat Stillman, of Lancaster, and Robert Ellis, of Philadelphia, have created an addictive world for amateurs and pros alike.

Woodward East has almost 20 different locations for its campers to play. There is 175,000 square feet of ramps and rails inside and 325,000 square feet outside.

As well as numerous vert ramps, there is "The Cage," a contest-style outdoor park course built for ESPN. "Cloud 9" is a favorite of both the pros and the kids. It is the home of the Resi and foam vert ramp, a 48-foot wide, 6-foot tall, spine mini ramp with wall ride, foam pit and Resi jump boxes with street section. The appeal is that the surface has some give, so riders can try ambitious tricks without getting hurt in a fall.

"For someone who has never been to Woodward before," Mulligan said, "I would say that it offers everything the BMX rider is looking for: obstacles, things to ride, everything from dirt jumps and dirt ramps, a BMX track."

Ream points to a drawing board in his office that is plastered with

The renovated 19th-century barn has a kitchen/basketball court on the ground level, with a foosball table and bedrooms to house eight pros. Stairs go up to a pool table on the next floor and the piece de resistance, a large TV room with plenty of lounge chairs and a 60-inch screen.

"It is brilliant here," said visiting BMX pro Shaun Eglinton, of Cambridge, England. "I can't wait to come back."

"Our sponsors love it when we spend time at Woodward," said Hendrix whose sponsors include Vans shoes. "We are living with the kids for a week, sitting eating lunch with them, we really get to spend 24 hours a day with them. It helps your image. The kids see you skate. Our sponsors are hoping that the kids will see

Jordan Puckett, 14, of Floyds Knobs, Ind., practices in-line skating last week in the Playground Building at Woodward Camp.

CDT photo/Craig Houtz

◆ **Vert** (BMX): The half-pipe event.

◆ **X-Up** (BMX): While in the air a rider turns the handlebars as far as they will go in one direction without releasing the grip, then turns them back in the other direction before landing.

many different ways. Competitors plan out their runs through these ramps according to individual style.

◆ **Superman** (BMX): Where a rider takes both feet off the pedals in the air and stretches his legs as far behind the bike as possible. Looks like Superman flying holding the handlebars.

Source: www.EXP.N.com

surfing and BMX riding.

Ream and Isabelle are making sure Woodward is growing with the industry. In 1985, Woodward management bought a similar camp at Lake Owen in Cable, Wis. Last July, it opened Woodward West, a camp on 90 acres in Stallion Springs, Calif., two hours north of Los Angeles.

The three Woodwards together attracted 15,000 kids last year.

"Before Woodward West, we were a national brand with a regional presence," Ream said. "Now, we are a national brand with a national presence."

Woodward has close relationships with all the broadcasters interested in action sports, Ream said. Woodward East has hosted such national competitions as the U.S. BMX

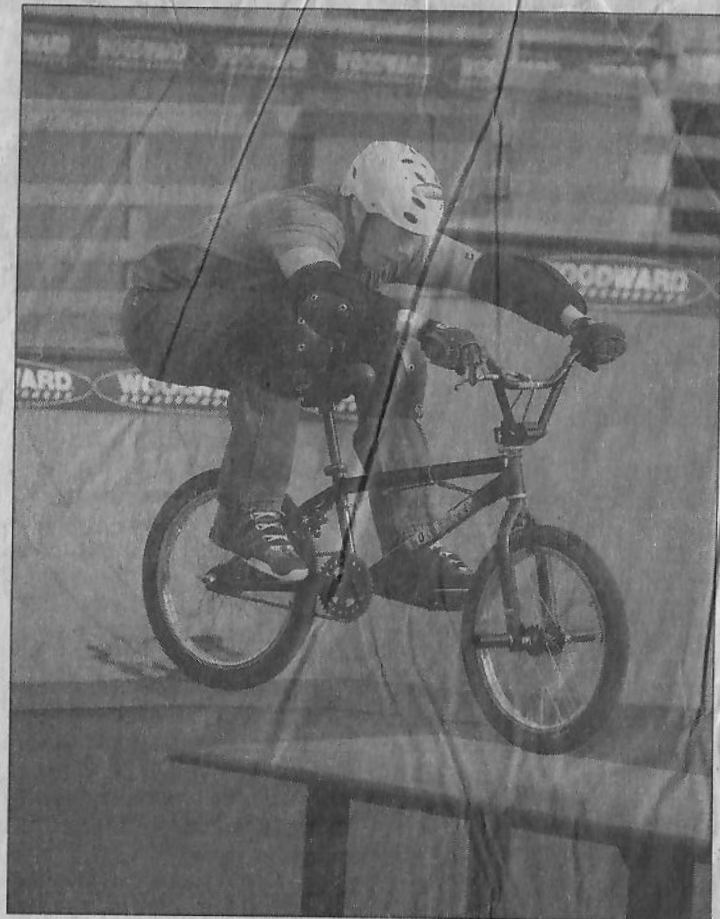
parents are really into it," Williams said.

Woodward is developing in other directions as well. On top of the \$15 million in fees it pulls in from its campers, Woodward signed up corporate sponsors Target and Red Bull almost two years ago, and camp officials say another sponsorship announcement is imminent.

In the freewheeling, independent world of action sports, such business decisions are not always popular. While BMX riders court sponsorships, for example, skateboarders, as a rule, shun them.

Jesse Fritsch and Matt Dove, former Woodward campers and now pros on the skateboard circuit, see it as selling out.

"In the beginning, Woodward



Kevin Robinson, of East Providence, R.I., practices BMX Freestyle last week on the street ramp at Woodward Camp.

CDT photo/Craig Houtz

325,000 square feet outside.

Ream points to a drawing board in his office that is plastered with photos of campers. A global X-Games medal, given to Ream by one of the world's top BMX freestyle champions, Kevin Robinson, hangs on the wall.

The loyalty of Woodward campers rivals — even exceeds — that of Penn State alumni, Ream said, noting that 38 percent of campers return to Woodward. It's a good rate, he said, given that kids can only come until they are 18.

Key to the camp's appeal is the relationships Ream and Isabelle have cultivated with the pros, who give back by offering them tips on how to improve or update the facilities.

"I am a ramp skater, and the evolution of ramps has changed a lot," said Neal Hendrix, who has been ranked as the world's sixth-best skateboarder. "Every time there is a change, I talk to the guys at Woodward, and they tear the old ramp down and build another one."

Buds Barn has been built for visiting professionals who want to drop in to try out some new tricks or spend a week at camp.

"Any pro can call and come and stay and train here," Ream said. "That's the Woodward way. We support the industry. All of us, we sit here and listen to the pros. We develop the fantasy."

Our sponsors are hoping that the kids will go home and get the skateboard and buy the shoe brand you represent."

Building the business

The action sports industry is a billion-dollar phenomenon that shows no sign of slowing down.

Interest in skateboarding, the core of action sports, has spurred the construction of more than 800 skate parks across the country in the past two years, according to www.rideskateboards.com.

While 18.7 million kids and adults played football in 2002, according to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, 21.5 million kids were doing in-line skating more than once a week, 13 million were skateboarding — up from 6.5 million in 1998 — and 4 million were BMX cycling.

This interest has not gone unnoticed by ESPN, NBC and Fox. They have events and entire channels devoted to the sport watched by a key demographic, mainly boys ages 12 to 17.

ESPN has the X-Games, known as the Olympics of extreme sports, and NBC has the Gravity Games, an annual action-sports, music and lifestyle event. Fox Entertainment last year launched Fuel, a 24-hour channel devoted to action sports, including skateboarding,

hosted such national competitions as the X-Games Downhill BMX 2002 Downhill Race, run in co-operation with ABC. Shortly after opening in July last year, Woodward West hosted the X-Games Downhill BMX race.

Opening in California was a no-brainer, as the skaters would say. Many of the pros live on the West Coast and it is a good location for kids coming from Asia and Australia.

Jesse Fritsch, a California-based skateboarding pro who grew up in State College and went to Woodward, did not find his hometown a skate-friendly environment. He is still bitter about State College making him take a ramp down in his backyard in the mid 1990s.

"You come to California and watch the kids come out from high school," he said, "and they are all wearing skate shoes and T-shirts."

Some well-heeled campers go to both Woodward West and Woodward East in the same summer. Woodward has set up the Coast to Coast club, said Debbie Williams, the Woodward West camp director and former director of campaign communications for Penn State's Grand Destiny fund-raising campaign.

"The kids think it is very cool to go to both camps. Even the

cut, see it as selling out." "In the beginning, Woodward was separate. It did not care what the industry thought. But since then, all they can see is dollar signs," said Dove, 31.

"With their ESPN agreement, they are as commercial as you can get," Fritsch said.

Ream said the sponsors fund various activities during camp, such as ice cream socials. He would like more such deals and, in fact, a range of Woodward apparel is expected to be rolled out in the next year with Target.

"The brands are very well respected by our clientele. In a way, we have a similar sort of message," said Ream.

Ream also is considering setting up temporary, weeklong camps in international locations and flying in the Woodward pros and instructors to run workshops. He said he has received inquiries from Australia, Asia, South America and Europe.

And he's not ignoring relationships closer to home. Some students from Penn State's Smeal College of Business will serve internships at the camp, helping it implement the corporate sponsorships.

"There will come a day when there will be skate parks on college campuses," said Ream, who has two children at Penn State.