

SKATEBOARDING'S FIRST WAVE: A Palisades Story

A Look Back at the Birth of Skateboards and Skateboarding in the Early 1960s

By TIM KELLER
Special to the Palisadian-Post

With a final thrust, Terry Keller leans forward and takes the drop into the fast right-hand wall, rapidly accelerating as his board approaches a challenging 90-degree bowl turn. The talented goofy foot squats low over his board, hands throwing shadows across the dozens of tracks left on the wall by previous rides and riders. The sharp turn snaps him into a new line, the speed whipping him ahead until he exits the ramp at the end of the long wall.

He circles back and into position for another ride. Although he's a beginning surfer at the beach, this board has wheels under it, and this steep right-hand wall borders the asphalt playground of an area elementary school. The year is 1964. Keller is 11 years old, one of dozens of Pacific Palisades kids pushing the limits of the newly invented sport of skateboarding.

A budding photographer, I took a break from skateboarding to climb the playground backstop and take a picture of my brother Terry making that drop at Kenter Canyon Elementary School. At 13, I was the oldest of a group of increasingly talented skateboarders. Entrepreneurs saw the commercial potential in these new contraptions—skateboards—and signed teams of kids to promote their new products. Makaha Skateboards came first, then Hobie.

I shopped our team around and found a sponsor right in the Palisades. Don Burgess Pools had developed a paint-on non-skid coating for pool decks. Burgess's sons had taken up skateboarding, and he saw the potential to apply his non-skid coating directly to skateboards. He launched Palisades Skateboards, and we became his Palisades Skateboard Team.

One week later, Laguna Sportswear finally returned my calls and said they'd decided to be our sponsors. Although that would have given us the budget and national scope of Makaha and Hobie, I told them that we'd already committed to Don Burgess. Riding for Burgess kept us at a lower profile than the Makaha and Hobie teams—but it didn't keep us from being competitive against their skaters in competitions.

Before skateboards appeared, I had a pair of shoe skates and loved weekend racing and figure skating at the roller rink on Santa Monica Pier. At home on Palmera in the El Medio Bluffs, I did as other area kids did, taking the wheel assemblies from metal skates and nailing them to the bottom of a 2x4 board. Initially, a vertical 2x4 was nailed to the front to support another 2x4 across the top as a handle. I'd roll down the Palmera sidewalk to Northfield. The metal wheels allowed too little control to try rolling down the steeper Northfield.

Then three things happened in quick succession, perhaps within one year around 1962-

63. Someone discovered that the vertical piece wasn't necessary—you could ride without a handle. Next, someone replaced metal wheels with composition wheels from indoor shoe skates. The pavement quickly wore down the indoor wheels, but they provided real traction and opened the door to maneuvers that could mimic surfing. Finally, the 2x4 was replaced by a wider piece of hardwood that came to be shaped like a surfboard.

The first person I saw riding like a surfer was Sandy Morrison. He was a couple years older than I was. I saw him doing kick turns up the sidewalk on Tahquitz Place. He was so cool that I wanted to change my name to Sandy.

Skateboarding's first wave lasted from about 1963 to 1967, born in the Palisades. Most of the skateboarders were in junior

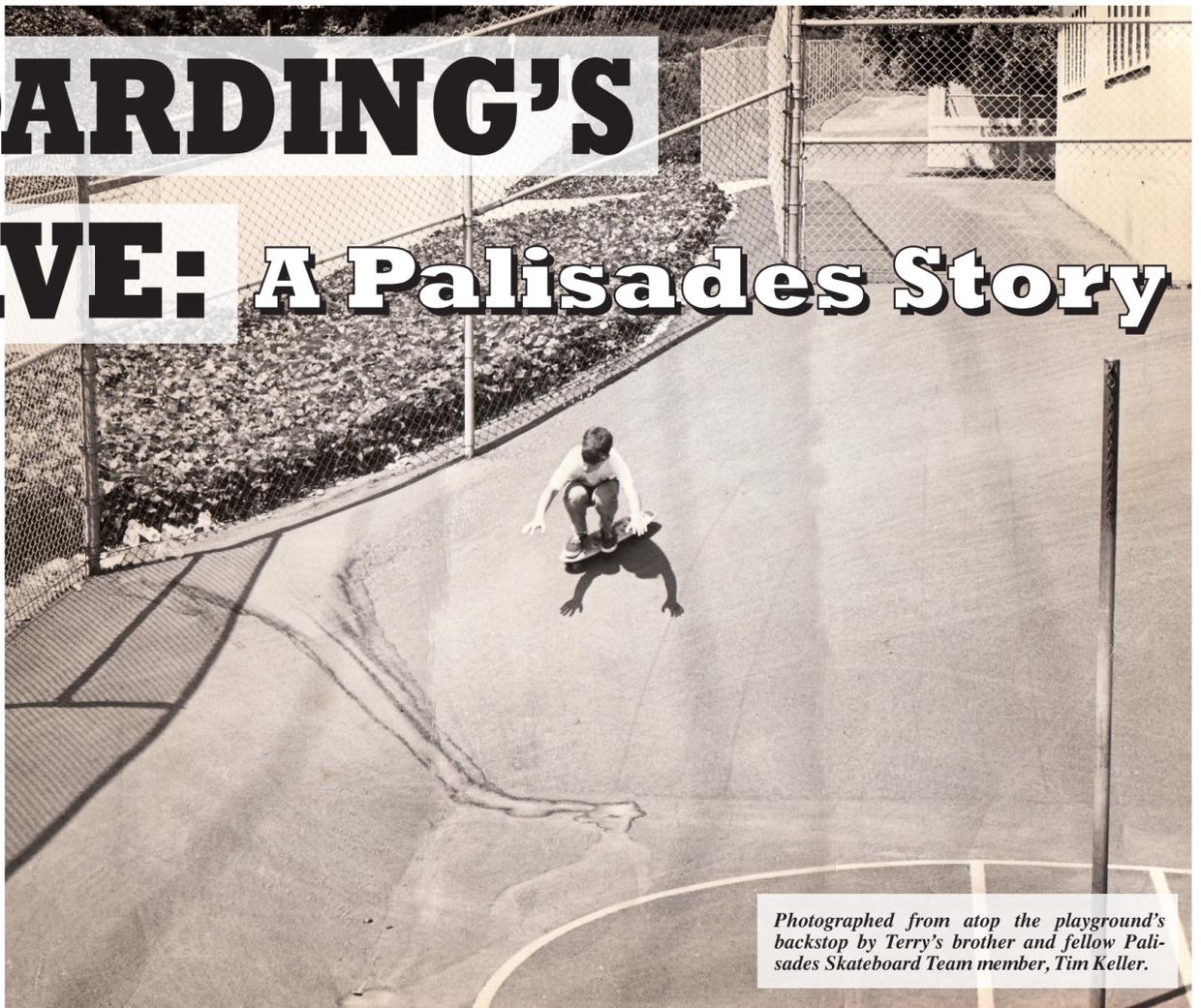


Tim Keller, riding atop a school trashcan, competes for Palisades Skateboard Team in the 1966 Palisades-Malibu Jaycees Skateboard Tournament at Palisades High School. In its first wave, skateboarding was a youngster's sport: Tim competed in this contest's Senior Division. He was 15.

high or elementary school. They were also beginning surfers, and skateboarding moves were naturally linked to surfing. It was even called sidewalk surfing.

I've always thought there were two reasons that the three dominant skateboard teams—Makaha, Hobie, and Palisades—all formed in and around Pacific Palisades. First was the proximity to the beach and surfing. Second was another function of geography: because they're carved into the sides of the Santa Monica Mountains, most of the school playgrounds in the Palisades and Brentwood have asphalt slopes that surround them. At the corners, two slopes connect in a 90-degree bowl section that provided skateboarders a ride similar to surfing.

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Photographed from atop the playground's backstop by Terry's brother and fellow Palisades Skateboard Team member, Tim Keller.

Terry Keller races fast and low down the slopes of Kenter Canyon Elementary School, circa 1964. A close look reveals the dozens of tracks left by skateboarders, showing the various lines they've taken entering the "bowl" or corner turn. A close look also reveals that this is before Palisades Skateboards: he's riding a homemade board.

Photo: Tim Keller

long across the steep walls at Marquez Elementary School. After school one crowded day on the slopes at Palisades Elementary School, I remember the thrill we felt when finding ourselves watched from the sidewalk by the giant Lurch—Ted Cassidy—of TV's popular *The*

Addams Family.

Skateboarding grew so popular that the school slopes were as crowded as the lineup at Malibu. You had to get there early to have them to yourself. Long before dawn one morning, I skated to Sunset and past the high school and "the center." At Chautauqua, Dutch Myers was waiting for me. (His family kitchen had recently burned when his brother Dolph heated surfboard wax on the stove.)

Dutch and I skated in the darkness down the centerline of empty Sunset—I remember the smell of a skunk near Rustic Canyon—all the way to Paul Revere, then across to San Vicente. As planned, we reached Brentwood Elementary School at first light—only to find its slopes already occupied by two skaters that had gotten there ahead of us!

It grew crowded as we rode the slopes for a couple hours. Finally Dutch and I continued eastward, skating to my grandma's apartment near Wilshire and 14th, where I knew we could

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find ice cream and a ride home to the Palisades.

The oldest kid on Palisades Skateboard Team, I was organized enough to lead a skateboard team and land it a sponsor, but not organized enough to produce written records. Team member Peter Burg, now of Rye, CO, posted an impressive history on his blog in 2010. (Peter's history and Patty Burns's recent *Palisadian-Post* feature are both available through my blog at TimKellerArts.com.) His list of team riders includes himself along with Burke and Shane Murphy, Don Mike and Ricky Burgess, Tim and Terry Keller, Rick Purcell, Chris Picciolo, Todd Elmergreen, Jerry Giancola, Barry Blenkhorn, and Susie Rowland.

In July, 1966, my press release in the *Palisadian-Post* began, "Skateboarding—the nation's youngest and most rapidly growing sport—now represents Pacific Palisades on a team basis, and quite well. Sponsored by Palisadian Don Burgess, the Palisades Skateboard Team won the first annual South Gate Open Contest July 4." An accompanying photo shows the winner of the 11-year-old and under division, Barry Blenkhorn, doing a headstand on a Palisades Skateboard in the alley behind the former *Post* building. Barry later became better known as Barry Williams—Greg in *The Brady Bunch*.

Don Burgess made a 16mm feature film of the Palisades Skateboard Team in action. I

narrated the film for a crowded public showing at Palisades Recreation Center. None of us has seen the film for 45 years. I understand that it's in the hands of Burgess's son, Don Michael Burgess, who's gone from a junior member of the skateboard team to an illustrious career as Academy Award-nominated cinematographer of such films as *Forrest Gump*, *Cast Away*, *Spider-Man*, *Flight*, and *42*. I keep hoping he'll convert his father's Palisades Skateboard Team film to digital format and post it to YouTube for the world to see.

Beyond that, each of us—all now around 60 years old—has our own photographs and ribbons and trophies. My scrapbook includes my competitor's tags for three events at the International Skateboard Championships, May 22-23, 1965, broadcast by ABC's *Wide World of Sports* from Anaheim's La Palma Stadium.

When the films *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001) and *Lords of Dogtown* (2005) brought fame to skateboarding's second wave, I lamented the fact that the young sport's first wave seemed all but lost to history. A decade later—and a half-century after it all started—I'm gratified to see the story re-emerging and Pacific Palisades resuming its rightful claim as the birthplace of skateboarding.

Tim Keller is a professional photographer, writer and high school English teacher in Raton, New Mexico. Jack Keller and Terry Keller still live in Pacific Palisades.



When Palisades Skateboard Team was founded, sponsor Don Burgess outfitted members in team clothing and an unlimited supply of his new Palisades Skateboards. At home one night in the family living room on Muskingum, team organizer Tim Keller posed for the team's jacket patch, designed by his father, Jack Keller.