

O Skate Une e Não Divide: How My Taiwanese Mom Wound Up Cheering for a Brazilian Skater in the Olympics

My parents had every reason to believe my sudden interest in skateboarding—and action sports in general—was a peer-influenced preteen phase. After all, I had gone through learning how to be Posh Spice, aspiring to be an Olympic gymnast, and declaring I was a tomboy who would never wear dresses or skirts again (the tomboy part did linger until I realized I was nonbinary). I had a habit becoming obsessed with things my friends were into and then changing my mind one or two years later. Action sports were different. I found that all on my own, and as a result, I wasn't going to let it go.

My family and I spent the early part of the summer of 1999 visiting relatives in Taiwan. We had to go in the summer because of school, but that meant facing the miserable weather. If typhoon season didn't bring torrential rain, it gave us suffocating humidity. As a result, my brother and I found ourselves stuck indoors while our parents napped in the one room that had air conditioning. He would often join them, but being a self-proclaimed insomniac since I was 9, I sat in front of the TV with a fan on full blast. Usually there was a movie or anime to watch, but one day, I found the X Trials, the qualifying BMX, aggressive inline, and skateboarding competition for the X Games.

I was intrigued because the previous year, I watched the Disney Channel Original Movie *Brink!* and developed a crush on its Rollerblading lead. Now I was watching real inline skaters doing even bigger tricks. And the skateboarders and BMX riders were doing similar stuff with the added risk of losing their apparatus of choice! If *Brink!* had planted the seed of my interest in action sports, watching the X Trials in Taiwan allowed it to sprout.

That flower would reach full bloom when we returned home in time for me to watch the X Games. That night—June 27, 1999—Tony Hawk landed the first 900 (named for the degrees of rotation) on a skateboard. I loved everything that happened before that historic Skateboard Best Trick contest and admired all the athletes for their fearlessness. But even as a newbie, I knew this was special.

“Why is he still going?” my mom had asked, as my brother and I watched Tony take slam after slam, only to get back up with fire in his eyes and march back up the vert ramp.

I wanted to tell her, “Because he has to.”

But I was an outsider, glimpsing into the mind of an action sports athlete. These individuals relentlessly pursued a goal for a personal sense of accomplishment, regardless of physical risk or whether they would even be rewarded (the clock had long run out in the Best Trick competition and to this day, different pros competing in that event will disagree on who actually won). I was a twelve-year-old with a ten year plan to make sure I could get into veterinary school and have a financially secure career that also appealed to my love of animals. I was so afraid of failure and conflict that I regularly gave up things that my friends suddenly weren't into or that I wasn't very good at. Watching Tony, who had broken a rib attempting a 900 ten years prior and was considered “old” for a pro skater at the age of 32, finally land the previously-impossible trick showed me that I could persevere and do my own thing.

Thus began my lifelong obsession with action sports. I already had Rollerblades, but they weren't the same kind for aggressive inline. Plus a skateboard seemed cooler. I begged my parents to let me get one. My mom refused, relaying the story of a friend of a friend's son who wound up in the hospital after getting hit by a car on his skateboard. I pointed out that our

driveway was big enough that I never had to go into the street. She didn't relent until I decided to use skateboarding as a topic for the science fair. I wasn't ready to quit school to go skating like some of the pros I admired, but I could try to integrate it into as many assignments as possible. My mom bought me a board from a toy shop, and not knowing what proper equipment was, I was satisfied. She turned her concerns to my brother who had chosen freestyle BMX as his sport of interest.

My brother would eventually lose interest in BMX, as he got a driver's license and I wasn't around to encourage this interest. I didn't know where to skate in college so I left my board at home, and my parents assumed I had found new interests. They were correct, and I had abandoned my attempt to learning how to ollie (a jump that was the foundation to most tricks). But every summer, I fell in love all over again after commandeering the TV to watch the X Games.

And every year, my mom remained perplexed as to why I was drawn to what she saw as recklessness, but she still sat through some moments with me and my brother. Eventually I saw her start to smile when my brother and I cheered for more historic moments. She stopped calling this obsession as a "phase" and referred to it as a "strange interest" to her friends because I was an adult now and had even managed to find a boyfriend who was fine with this.

In 2015, I realized that as an adult who was earning an income, I could just go to the X Games, a long-time dream. Conveniently, it was taking place in Texas so I could take the bus or a short flight. "You can't go alone," my mom protested.

But I could. I had always been alone in my love of action sports, having been too afraid of embarrassing myself in front of the skater boys in school and far too obsessed for my friends

and even boyfriend to tolerate. Everyone would always reach their limit and ask if we could change the channel or leave a local demo. I spent sixteen years waiting for a kindred spirit, and it was past time to pursue this dream of mine to see the X Games in person. I live in Japan for a year; I could surely travel to Austin alone.

“Where are you going to stay?” she asked.

“I’ll get a hotel,” I replied.

“You don’t drive. How will you get to the Circuit of Americas? It’s far from downtown.”

“I’ll take a taxi.”

“Can’t your boyfriend go?”

“He can’t take time off work and isn’t interested like me.”

Out of concerns for my safety, my parents accompanied me, and as luck would have it, I won two extra passes so they didn’t even have to pay. My dad was an athlete with a motorcycle in his youth, and his engineer brain gave him an innate understanding of how the competitions were scored. He had been more opposed to my love of action sports until he realized it wasn’t a phase and it would no longer jeopardize my grades. My mom was clueless as to what has happening besides skaters and bicyclists going really high and sometimes falling, and yet people always tried to talk to her. The sight of a middle-aged Taiwanese woman, holding an umbrella for shade while glancing up at the Mega Ramp, was definitely unexpected so people probably wanted to know her story. To their disappointment, she made it clear that she was dragged into this, but one volunteer at the exclusive lounge her pass granted her access to (her favorite part of the trip) did try to explain some things to her. At the end, both she and my dad declared X Games Austin to be a fun trip and assumed I would be satisfied.

But Tony Hawk didn't stop skateboarding after doing the 900. Now that I knew I could go to the X Games, I wasn't going to stop at just one. I had lots of vacation days stored up, and I kept coming up with new reasons to go: I wanted to see what *Winter X Games* was like; the 2016 X Games was a tribute to a BMX legend who passed; why don't we see what Minneapolis was like? Although my parents claimed to accompany me out of safety concerns, they had grown listless in their retirement and jumped at any travel opportunity.

By the time, we attended X Games Minneapolis in 2018, my parents were used to be me occasionally running off for an autograph or selfie. They realized these athletes were like movie stars for me so they knew something was up when I kept trying to sneak glances at the seats behind us on our flight home. "I think that's one of the X Games skateboarders," I whispered to my mom.

"How do you know?"

"He has a Monster Energy hat, and he's Kelvin Hoefler, one of the top pros." I was trying to convince myself that it was indeed Kelvin as much as I was explaining who it was to her.

"Did he win?"

"I don't know. We had to leave before his competition." Men's Skateboard Street, where Kelvin got bronze, happened when we had left the venue to check out and make our way to the airport (because my dad always insisted on being at least two hours early). "He won last year," I added.

I did not tell her that this fact was cemented in my mind because a silly Tweet of mine about him ditching his shirt mid-contest appeared on last year's TV broadcast prior to his win.

Although I was pretty sure Kelvin didn't see that, the previously-cherished memory fueled my bashfulness in his presence.

"You should ask him for his autograph." My mom started digging through her purse for pen and paper.

I squirmed in my seat and sputtered out reasons that to not bother him. After being told half my life that I was "too much" for loving the X Games, I had wondered if I was. No one wants to be accosted by an overeager fan when they just want to take a nap or eat dinner. Kelvin was not doing either, and my dad argued, "He'd probably appreciate that someone admires him."

My mom had whipped out a pen and was ready to ask him on my behalf. "Wait!" I stopped her and pulled out the poster I had already collected signatures on and a Sharpie. It was less embarrassing if I asked him.

Kelvin was soft-spoken but incredibly gracious, thanking me both in person and later on social media when I shared my collection of autographs. My mom seemed taken with Kelvin, whom she later described as "handsome". She asked me what country he was from (Brazil) and what language he was conversing with his girlfriend (Portuguese). He helped her realize how international skateboarding was even though I told her about meeting the Japanese skateboarder Yuto Horigome earlier.

This was probably why my mom wasn't as surprised when skateboarding was part of the 2020 Summer Olympics. I also didn't shut up about it and made a second pilgrimage home to watch the action on their bigger TV. Despite running track as a high schooler, my mom wasn't interested in sports like my dad, but the Olympics transcended being just about sports. My mom was totally into the symbolism of unity and peak human achievement. I remembered watching

gymnastics with her in 1992, and a relative gave her a pin of the 1988 Olympics mascot, a Siberian tiger, which she gifted to me since my Chinese zodiac was a tiger.

Despite still not understanding which tricks were harder in skateboarding and how points were awarded, she paid closer attention to it because it was the Olympics. I didn't have the heart to tell that X Games gold still had more significance since it's been what these athletes grew up wanting. My mom asked about Team U.S.A.'s members, particularly the much-hyped Nyjah Huston, so she knew who to root for. "Who was the guy we met on the plane?" she asked just as Kelvin Hoefler began his run.

I pointed at the screen. "Oh we must cheer for him too. He was so nice. Jiayou!" Never had my mom used the common Mandarin phrase for encouragement at a skateboarder.

Although I had my favorite skaters, I still cared less about who was going to win Olympic gold and worried that the uber-competitive nature of the Olympics would bleed into the action sports. We saw the pressure get to Nyjah, who couldn't get a clean landing. At the same time, we watched Yuto Horigome become Japan's national hero as the first skateboarding Olympic champion, and our household favorite, Kelvin Hoefler, scored silver. Team U.S.A. did not walk away empty handed, as Jagger Eaton, who was a formidable skater in his own right, rounded out the podium. The three men embraced after receiving their medals, and the beauty of that moment, which would be repeated in the other skateboarding events, made me realize that it was the Olympics that was going to be changed by skateboarding.

Thanks to the Tokyo Games, more of the world, especially people like my mom who would normally shake their heads at skateboarders loitering around a storefront, saw why skateboarding is so beloved by its practitioners and fans. Maybe it wasn't as exciting as the 900,

but they could get a taste of it and witness the same dedication and camaraderie. This simple piece of wood with wheels transcended nationality, race, gender, age, and class even when thrust into the most competitive sports event in the world. As Kelvin said in an interview, “O skate une e não divide.” *Skateboarding unites and does not divide*. And it was his skating which did that for me and my mom.