

TRANSITIONS

From Quads To Blading

PARK ROLLER SKATING DATES BACK TO THE 1970s. BUT FOR MANY PEOPLE TODAY IT IS A NEW THING. ONE REASON FOR THIS IS THAT THE EARLY 90s MARKED A TURNING POINT. BLADING HAD BECOME SO BIG THAT MOST QUAD SKATERS SWITCHED DISCIPLINES—WITH SURPRISING CONSEQUENCES

WORDS
ILLUSTRATION

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Recently I posted a video of Fred Blood that got me thinking. It shows 17-year-old Fred skating side stance at the Oasis Vertical Roller Skating Pro/Am bowl contest in 1980, in San Diego. At some point, the clip started to go viral. And by the time I started writing this article, it had almost 600 comments. In between all the humor and some hate in the comments section, there were a lot of remarks like, "Almost nobody can do this today," "I did not know fruit booters went back that far, seriously," or, "[...] there is so much progression left for current roller skating. I had no idea it used to be like this." It reminded me that quad skaters in skateparks did not just die out; their history and evolution haven't been preserved, as, for example, in skateboarding or aggressive in-line skating. And this perception lines up with conversations I've had with younger skaters.



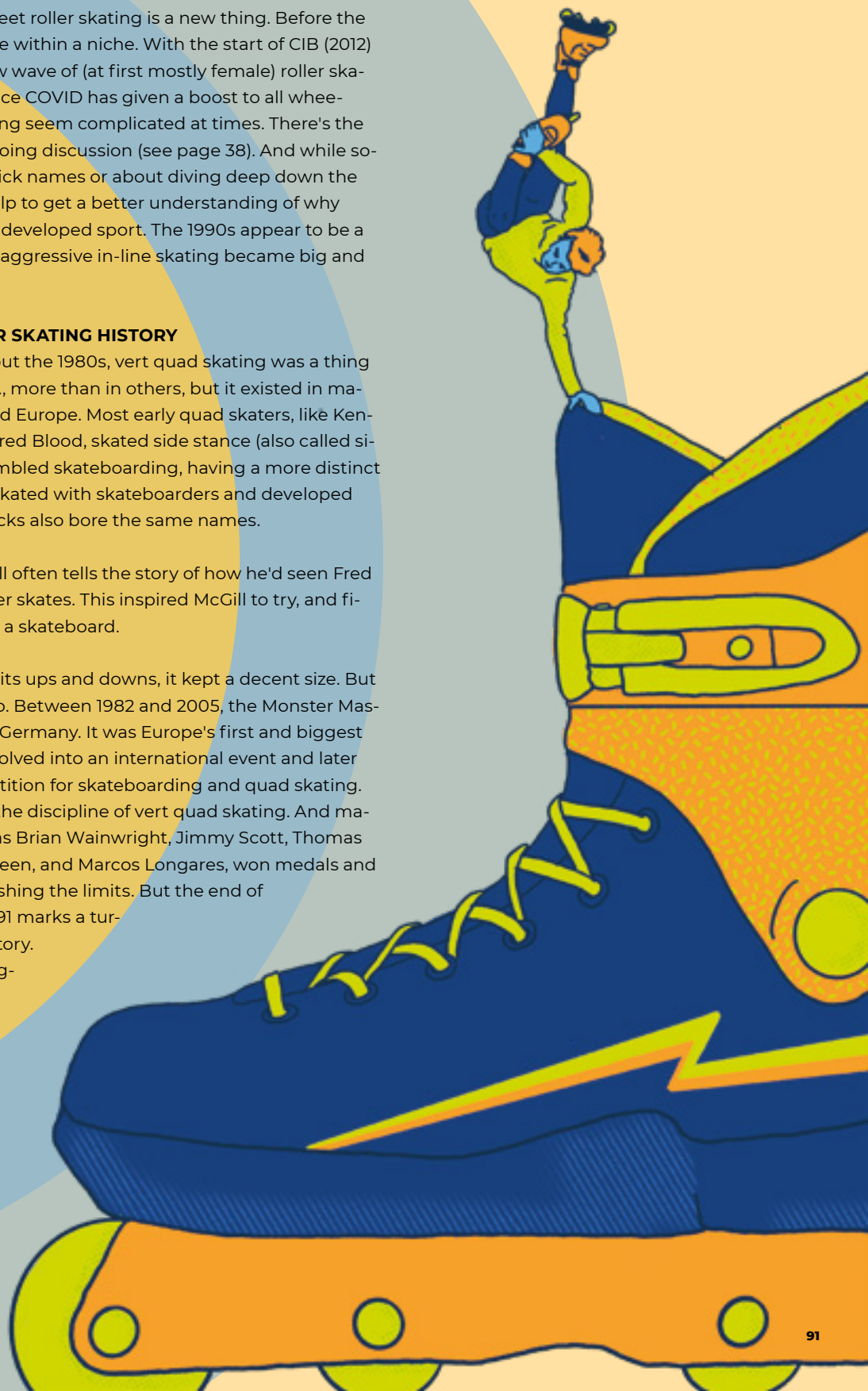
For many people, park and street roller skating is a new thing. Before the pandemic boom, it was a niche within a niche. With the start of CIB (2012) and the early Moxi team, a new wave of (at first mostly female) roller skaters hit the skateparks. But since COVID has given a boost to all whee-ly sports, things for roller skating seem complicated at times. There's the trick name confusion and ongoing discussion (see page 38). And while some people don't care about trick names or about diving deep down the rabbit hole of history, it can help to get a better understanding of why quad skating seems like an undeveloped sport. The 1990s appear to be a big black hole, the time when aggressive in-line skating became big and took over.

A TURNING POINT IN ROLLER SKATING HISTORY

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, vert quad skating was a thing in some countries, like the U.S., more than in others, but it existed in many places, such as Australia and Europe. Most early quad skaters, like Kenny Means, Duke Rennie, and Fred Blood, skated side stance (also called side surfing), which rather resembled skateboarding, having a more distinct frontside and backside. They skated with skateboarders and developed tricks together. Thus, many tricks also bore the same names.

Skateboard legend Mike McGill often tells the story of how he'd seen Fred Blood pull off a 540 on his roller skates. This inspired McGill to try, and finally land, the first McTwist on a skateboard.

While skateboarding also had its ups and downs, it kept a decent size. But quad skating had potential too. Between 1982 and 2005, the Monster Mastership took place in Münster, Germany. It was Europe's first and biggest skateboarding contest that evolved into an international event and later became the world cup competition for skateboarding and quad skating. Until 1991, the event included the discipline of vert quad skating. And many international names, such as Brian Wainwright, Jimmy Scott, Thomas Kalak, Jason Jubb, René Hulgren, and Marcos Longares, won medals and set the bar high. They kept pushing the limits. But the end of the roller skating category in '91 marks a turning point in roller skating history. At the same time, the rise of aggressive in-line skating was about to begin.



THE SUCCESS STORY OF ROLLERBLADE

To get a better understanding, let's go back a few decades. In 1980, Scott and Brennan Olsen, two hockey-playing Minnesotan brothers, discovered an in-line skate while browsing in a sporting goods store. They thought that this design would make an ideal off-season hockey training tool. They refined the skate and began assembling the first in-line skates in the basement of their parents' home. It was that same year that they founded the company that would become *Rollerblade*. For many years, it was the only manufacturer of in-line skates that had worldwide distribution. They were so successful that the trademark *Rollerblade* became synonymous with in-line skates and is still commonly used as both a verb, "Let's go blading," and a noun, "Your blades look sick," to this day.

Rollerblade rolled out a clever marketing strategy, investing huge amounts of money in advertising and sponsoring in-line skating sports events, including the new trend: Aggressive skating! Other brands came on the scene too. And while many of the first-generation quad skaters in Europe stuck to their roller skates, a lot of second-gen, soon-to-be legends, like René Hulgren (Denmark), Marcos Longares (Spain), Taig Khris (France), Toto Ghali (France), and others, transitioned. They were young, athletically at the top of their game, and active around the 1990s. Perfect timing for aggressive in-line skating, which by the mid '90s became extremely popular at competitions, and was even included in the first ESPN X-Games in 1995. Media coverage and crowds were huge at all major events around the globe.

Quad skating had brought fun and excitement, but never money. As competitions and sponsorships came on the scene, many quad skaters who had been pushing their limits gave it a go, and it was quite easy for them. René Hulgren transitioned to blading in 1994, after six years of roller skating. In an interview with *ONEblade-magazine*, he said that it only took him a week before he could do everything on in-lines that he could do on roller skates. A month later, he was at the first Lausanne contest in Switzerland, where he took home gold.

Former Swiss pro skater Toto Ghali started roller skating as a kid in 1977. He switched to blading about a year after René. He says the reasons were simple. "All my friends had already transitioned; it was strange to be the only quad skater at sessions and contests." Being able to make a living as a pro skater suddenly became an option. "All the in-line companies offered incredible conditions. Back then, I was covering my own travel, food, etc., and *Rollerblade* was paying me \$2,000 a month, plus lots of bonuses," Toto recalls.

Another factor that quad skaters have had to deal with until today is the accessibility and compatibility of hardware. They had to assemble and build their own setups to hit the ramps. The range of choices was not as large as it is today. An aggressive in-line boot, on the other hand, came ready to ride right out of the box.

ROOTS DO MATTER

You can't blame quad skaters for defecting. Quad skating missed out on the chance to create an industry in the niche of park/street skating. It stayed a grass-roots underground thing. Aggressive blading also "died" after its short golden era, but it had already preserved its culture through events, videos, and many magazines.

Since the pandemic, we've seen a new development in skating. Today, we have a new generation of skaters, new brands, and the disciplines are growing closer together. It's great to see that people skate together, have events together, and it doesn't matter what's under their feet. What matters are the roots. We must be careful not to forget our history, not to water it down, and not to erase it. We owe this to our sport and to the pioneers who paved the way almost 60 years ago!

