

Snowboard Is No Blast For Rookie

BY ROBERT NELSON
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Ashland, Neb. — Zach and Tyson Schaefer were visibly perturbed with the old man lying before them on NebraSKI Area's nearly horizontal kiddy slope. The 28-year-old was whining about a throbbing tailbone and an uncontrollable quiver in his thigh muscles. He wanted to leave the icy hillside and go home to his couch and television and contour pillow.

That type of can't-do attitude isn't part of the Schaefer boys' mentality. These guys are snowboarders, meaning they're too young or too preoccupied with speed to realize they are going to die someday, and that their someday comes sooner if they hit cedar at highway speeds. Snowboarders are the guys those spastic Mountain Dew commercials target.

Zach, 18, ruddy-cheeked, stubble-chinned and wearing a stocking cap high off his head like a cotton megaphone, quickly covered his frustration with his optimistic teacher face.

"I think you're getting a little better," he said almost genuinely. "I think you're getting it. It's tough. Even we had trouble figuring it out."

Which is saying something, since these two have been skiing, almost, since they were in diapers. Before they skied, their dad, NebraSKI instructor Ed Schaefer, used to haul them down ski slopes in a back pack.

"That was back when that was legal," said Tyson, 22 and a recent graduate of Montana State University. Zach is a freshman at the University of Montana. The young men, who chose Montana schools primarily for their proximity to mountains, were in Nebraska visiting their father for several weeks.

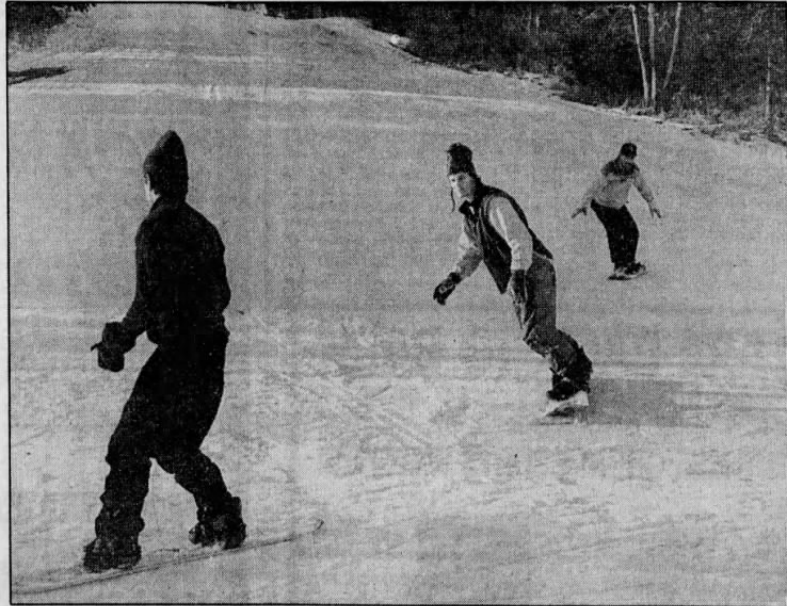
It took the Schaefer boys three days to learn to snowboard during a Breckenridge, Colo., ski trip five years ago. As Schaefers do, they went to the blackest black diamond slope at Breckenridge and threw themselves off. Tyson cracked his head open in one fall.

"It finally stopped bleeding," he said, at which time they tried again, all the time getting more bloody and bruised and determined. "You've got to keep trying," Tyson said. "Just keep going and you'll get it."

They did, and now they love the sport more than skiing. It feels faster, they said. You can maneuver more, they said. You don't need to carry poles.

"It's hard to explain," Zach said. "It's just cooler."

I didn't get it, even after an afternoon of their determined teaching, and I still have nothing good to say about the sport except that it looks fun when the



IT'S EASY FOR THIS FAMILY: Tyson Schaefer, left, and his brother Zach said they were able to teach their father, Ed, how to snowboard. Ed is an instructor at NebraSKI.

ROBERT NELSON/THE WORLD-HERALD

Schaefers do it. You must really want to snowboard to learn to snowboard. The Schaefers said I didn't want it badly enough, and they were right.

We began the lesson by placing my feet in the bindings of the snowboard, which looks and maneuvers like a small surfboard or really big skateboard. The Schaefers adjusted a board to accommodate my right-foot-forward stance, which, in snowboarding, is called "goofy foot," the unhip snowboard equivalent of being left-handed.

The brothers lectured about placing pressure on the "backside edge" and the "toe-side edge" of the board. They stressed balance. They showed me how to stop. They suggested I stay in a low crouch and use my hands as outriggers and rudders. If I progressed past the hand-rudder stage, which I didn't, I could learn to change direction by pivoting my back foot left and right, they said.

My first trip down the hill went well. The Schaefer boys seemed impressed. For about two seconds, I got that blur-of-trees speed sensation that makes skiing such a rush. Then I fell backward and took the first of more than a dozen progressively more painful blows to my tailbone.

After the first run, my lesson increasingly became a revolving blur of falling and standing and falling and standing and being lectured and then standing

and falling. When I learned to ski three years ago, I felt like I was adequate at the sport within two hours. No such payback with snowboarding. I actually became worse after three or four runs, probably because my head became a rabble of conflicting instructions. My mind and body started taking different routes. "Relax," Tyson said. "Stay smooth."

My fourth time down the hill, I slid slowly and helplessly into a fence bordering the slope. Tyson stopped, showed me again how to turn by edging and dragging my hand. I stood, gained some speed and ran into the fence again. "Remember your balance," he said. "Keep your weight over the center of the board."

I fell about 10 times that run. My attitude changed from "I can do this! I can do this!" to "How can I fall less painfully?"

The next several runs, the Schaefers tried in vain to keep me positive. They talked about how their dad, the skiing expert, failed miserably at snowboarding too. They presented the snowboarding carrot: "Once you finally get it, it's easier than skiing. It's a blast."

None of which worked. Bruised and bowed, I asked to quit the lesson early.

After they agreed, we walked into the NebraSKI Lodge, where we discussed snowboarding and my shortcomings while Zach and Tyson ate their dinner of nachos, pretzels and Pepsi.

I should have gone in with lower

expectations, I figured. I should have worn some sort of padding on my backside, they suggested. It would have been easier to learn on soft powder. I learned on ice.

The Schaefers recommend buying a snowboard, then learning. Once you've invested a couple of hundred dollars, you're motivated to see a return on the investment, they said. "I wasn't going to quit after spending that much," Tyson said.

Typically, experts suggest borrowing or renting when trying out a sport. But that's kind of wimpy and noncommittal.

Tyson said he thinks snowboarding is gaining popularity at NebraSKI. "Even old people are doing it now," he said.

"We saw some really old guy — probably about 60 — out there trying the other day," Tyson said. "He just kept trying and trying and trying. It was cool."

Which meant, if I picked up his hint correctly, that it doesn't matter how old you are. It's a matter of character.

"Guys, really, I've learned other sports," I said.

They gave me a friendly but very obvious "yeah, whatever" look. Manhood compromised, I made the promise they wanted to hear.

"OK, I'll try it again sometime. I promise I'll stick with it. I'll do it right next time."

"That's better," Tyson said with a satisfied smile.