



[photo] Iguchi at home in Jackson Hole, 2002. [Danny Zapalac]

digging for truth
in snowboarding

BRYAN IGUCHI

Michael Sudmeier

While snowboarding was still in its infancy, Bryan Iguchi became an apprentice to the mountains. He began exploring them, studying their topography, weather and snowpack—a commitment that continues today. And while his interest in the mountains is not unique, the depth of its influence is uncommon. This passion nearly cost him his career as a professional rider. Yet it has also sustained him, triggering not only the resurgence of his career but also shaping his very existence.

THIS PAST WINTER, on the threshold of turning 40, Bryan Iguchi was as busy as ever. As the snow started to fall, he welcomed his second son into the world. When not changing diapers, he guided crews throughout Wyoming and filmed projects with Volcom, Travis Rice and Jeremy Jones. Those who know Guch talk about him with a blend of reverence and awe—and they should. For more than two decades, he’s been driving progression, first in fledgling parks and pipes and then in the backcountry. Nonetheless, the snowboard industry has intermittently embraced and shunned him—such is the price of being a visionary. Even when not in the spotlight, Iguchi has remained committed to his craft.

concrete, waves and a thing called snowboarding

LONG BEFORE BRYAN turned to the backcountry, he sharpened his skills on concrete, waves and kickers. With the Pacific coast only 20 minutes from his family’s home in Mora Park, California, he took up surfing and skating at an early age. “I remember my mom taking me to the beach when I was a really little kid and just sitting on Ventura Point and watching the guys surf,” he explains. “I wanted to do that. I watched them and thought it was the most amazing thing. When I was 11, I started surfing and skating and just never stopped.”

Southern California provided the backdrop for Bryan’s interest in boardsports. His mother often drove him throughout the state to compete in skate contests or to watch pro surfers and skaters throw down in demos and competitions. Soon, he was a sponsored skater, riding for companies like Epic, Toxic and Grind King. “There was a lot going on. There was a lot of energy,” he explains. “The street skating scene was coming up, and I was exposed to a lot of good sessions through the contests and demos.”

In 1989, at the age of 16, he snagged his first published shot. Spike Jonze’s image of Iguchi doing a feeble grind on a flat bar landed in *TransWorld Skateboarding*. “It was the first time I ever worked with a photographer, and he was super fun to be out with,” Bryan explains. “We ended up shooting at night with a flash on a loading dock. To get the picture, he laid under the rail in a super sketchy spot so if I bailed he would have taken a board to the head. I guess he trusted me on that one.” [Ed. Note: Jonze has gone on to a prolific, multifaceted career that includes writing and/or directing films like *Being John Malkovich*, (1999), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Where the Wild Things Are* (2009).]

Eventually, Bryan’s interest in skating and surfing led him to the snow. In high school, a friend told him about snowboarding and introduced him to the seminal shred film *All Quiet on the Western Front*. “These guys were doing these huge airs. Damian [Sanders] was doing huge backflips off of massive cliffs at Tahoe. It was just nuts—it was crazy style. I just thought it looked like a blast.”

A trip to Mt. Pinos soon confirmed his initial suspicions about snowboarding—and provided a brutal introduction to it. “The first time I went, I ditched school and broke my wrist. It was such a bummer,” Bryan reveals. “It was the toughest thing to call my mom to tell her I skipped school and got hurt.” Sensing his disappointment, she let her son join his friends for a trip back to the mountain the next day. “That day, with a broken arm, I was still able to go ride and hit a little jump,” he explains. “I fell in love with the sport.”

Throughout high school, Bryan became further immersed in skating, surfing and snowboarding. For Christmas when he was 16, his mother gave him a trip to Aspen with the travel company L.A. Ski and Sun Tours. The trip introduced Bryan to riding powder and large mountains. “It was a little different than the local mountains of Big Bear,” he offers. “I got a real taste of winter.” The travel company came to sponsor Iguchi, allowing him to hop on buses bound for places like Tahoe, Snowbird, Brighton and Jackson Hole.

big bear and beyond

AFTER GRADUATING FROM HIGH SCHOOL and attending a semester of junior college, Iguchi moved to Big Bear in late 1991. Rob Dafoe, who at the time was both a pro rider and the manager of the mountain’s terrain parks, provided Iguchi with a job and a couch on which to crash. Resorts were just starting to experiment with parks, and Big Bear was at the forefront of this movement. While improving the quality of their features, resorts also improved the caliber of riding that was possible. “It was a huge part of the progression of snowboarding,” Bryan explains. “Big Bear wasn’t very terrain rich. There weren’t many features and things to hit. We were kind of limited. With the invention of snowboard parks we were able to build whatever we could think of, so we could really hone our tricks and learn new ones.”

That winter, Iguchi entered his first pro contest, a halfpipe competition at Big Bear. “I paid the entry fee, which was a big hit on my life savings at that point,” he says. “I ended up breaking a binding my first run and didn’t even qualify. I was so bummed. The next day I went out and just sessioned the halfpipe, blowing off steam.” Tim Pogue, Burton’s team manager at the time, approached Bryan. “He gave me his business card and told me to give him a call in a couple of weeks because he was going to be on the road, but he wanted to help me out,” Iguchi explains. “I didn’t know what to think about that.”

After giving Pogue a call, Bryan joined the Burton team. “It was kind of a crazy beginning,” he confesses. “I wasn’t sure if I was sponsored or not and then all of a sudden a huge box just showed up. Everything I needed to snowboard was in it—boots, boards bindings, and outerwear. All of a sudden I was totally kitted.” Soon, Burton also paid his entry fees and some of his expenses en route to contests.

He often hit the road with his friend and fellow pro Neal





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WILLIE MCMILLON, BLUEBIRD FOUNDER AND JACKSON NATIVE.

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[photo] Turning back the clock on Togwotee Pass in the Absaroka Mountains, Wyo. with the Tetons lit up in the background. [John Layshock]

Drake, who was then riding for Sims. At a World Championship halfpipe event at Breckenridge, Burton introduced Iguchi to Mack Dawg, “I said ‘later’ to my friend Neal, jumped in the car with Mack Dawg, and we traveled the rest of the season and filmed *The Hard, The Hungry, and The Homeless*,” he explains. By showcasing an abundance of jibbing and riders with skate-influenced styles, the film helped usher in new-school riding. Iguchi was one of its clear leaders.

That season also marked the start of a 10-year run of heavy competing, as Bryan traveled the globe for halfpipe, slopestyle and big-air contests. When not riding the contest circuit, he also filmed for Mack Dawg, Standard, Absinthe, Fall Line and Volcom, seizing opportunities as they became available. From these years, he counts filming for Volcom’s *Alive We Ride* and *The Garden* among his fondest memories. “It was snowboarding at its purest—just traveling around with a group of friends. All the guys from Volcom would go—Richard Wolcott, Troy Eckert, [and we would meet up with] guys like Jamie, Terje, and Mike Parillo,” Iguchi recalls. “We were just kind of drifting around. We didn’t really have a set plan. We were just discovering things.”

While traveling, Bryan also began to embrace his interest in art. “It was always a part of my life, but I had so much down time on all of these trips,” he explains. “That’s really when I started to enjoy painting. I could really zone out and just get into something and get a sense of satisfaction after finishing a painting.” Consequently, Iguchi progressed not only as a rider, but as an artist.

a shift in perspective

AFTER NEARLY A DECADE of traveling the contest circuit, Bryan was able to ride throughout the Northwest, Canada and New Zealand with Craig Kelly. He admired Craig’s approach to the mountains and the intimate knowledge he had of them, which Bryan realized he lacked. “I saw myself as a professional snowboarder who didn’t know anything about the mountains, and I wanted to learn. There was endless terrain to be ridden, but you had to have the knowledge to be able to do it safely,” he explains. With a desire to acquire this knowledge and find new challenges, Iguchi decided to leave Southern California for Jackson, Wyoming. The Tetons had left a lasting impression on him after he first visited Jackson Hole in high school. “I’ll never forget pulling up to the Village after that 24-hour bus ride. I could see where the mountain started with the tram and where it ended, but it was just divided by cliff bands—huge, crazy terrain. It was impressive. I was blown away by it.” Although they knew no one in Jackson, Iguchi and Tim Ramirez, the same friend who first introduced him to snowboarding, moved there in 1995. “We had a really good winter and I never left,” he says.

According to Bryan, his first year in Jackson was “like being the new kid in town.” With time, however, local riders came to understand his passion and appreciate his humility. He spent his days exploring the Tetons with riders like Lance Pitman, Mike Armstrong, and Adam and Brodie Dowell. Like Iguchi, these riders had an affinity for exploring natural terrain and pushing freestyle riding onto a bigger canvas. “I saw it pretty clearly—there

[art] "Dark Ice." As seen on the 2014 Jones Mountain Twin splitboard. [Bryan Iguchi]



was a possibility for progression that wasn't dictated by man-made jumps. It was about being able to read and ride terrain," Iguchi explains.

Although Bryan was confident in his progression, it was occurring far outside the parks and pipes on which the snowboard industry was fixated. Within a few years of moving to Jackson, Oakley and Burton—with whom he recently had a pro model—dropped him. Although his paychecks nearly disappeared, Iguchi accepted the consequences of his move. "I was in a different place in my life. I was confident that I was doing the right thing," he explains. "I believed that this was the lifestyle for me. Regardless of whether I was a professional snowboarder, I was still going to ride every day."

While most professional riders spent their days showing up at resorts to ride manicured features, Bryan began exploring the vast backcountry of the Teton, the Absarokas, the Snake Rivers and the other mountain ranges that surround Jackson. "I think it was a lot of dues being paid to be honest," he explains. "I spent a lot of time on the trails, looking at maps, getting lost and freezing. You would get up to one ridge, look off and see five more, and then you would have to go look at those." In addition to studying the terrain, he came to carefully study the weather, working to understand the natural processes that led to deep days.

As Bryan focused more and more on riding the terrain in his backyard, the snowboard industry focused less and less on him. A handful of companies continued to support him, including Illuminati, a Jackson-based board company founded by Pitman. He also worked to make ends meet by rolling sushi when not shredding. Yet those who knew Iguchi—and especially those who saw him riding in his new habitat—understood his vision. "He's the symbol of truth in snowboarding," explains Bluebird founder Willie McMillon, who grew up in Jackson. "He left the riffraff in order to pursue his own path."

With time, Iguchi came to serve as a mentor to younger riders. One such rider was Travis Rice, whom he started to invite into the backcountry. "I was lucky enough to get taken under 'Guch's wing late in my high-school years, and it really opened my eyes," Rice explains. Iguchi remembers one session in 2001 that occurred right before Travis headed to prom. After watching him throw backside rodeos on a quarterpipe, "I knew he was going to be one of the best riders in the world," says Bryan. A few days later, Rice kicked off a three-year run as the MVP of *Snowboarder's* Superpark.

Although Rice originally gained recognition for his park riding, his approach to natural terrain is what Iguchi admires the most. "Everything I envisioned was pretty much translated by Travis Rice. Everything I

[photo] Iguchi popping pillows in his Teton backyard. [Danny Zapalac]



[photo] Nathaniel Murphy and Bryan Iguchi hike a narrow ridge to an end-of-the-day line in the Jackson, Wyo. backcountry. [Jeff Hawe]

envisioned snowboarding could be, Travis has pretty much materialized.” Perhaps due to this shared vision, Iguchi joined Rice in a number of his film projects with Curt Morgan and Brain Farm, including *The Community Project* and *That’s It, That’s All*.

Travis is quick to praise Bryan and express his gratitude. “He helped further the legitimacy of professional snowboarders being able to have careers outside of the contest grind,” Rice explains. “And throughout the past decade he has continued to take up-and-comers out into the forest and teach them the ropes and respect needed to make backcountry riding sustainable. He wants to share the mountains and the knowledge that comes with traversing through them safely.” Rice also emphasizes that Iguchi has taught him much about humility and a commitment to positivity. It’s no wonder that Rice and others refer to Bryan as a “Happy Panda.”

the spotlight shifts...again

AS RIDERS LIKE Rice further demonstrated the potential for riding natural terrain, the snowboard industry increasingly embraced backcountry riding. The spotlight began shining on Iguchi once again. And those who knew Bryan felt he was finally attaining the recognition he deserved. “‘Guch is one of the most humble and talented human beings I have ever had the pleasure of knowing,” explains Wyoming-based pro Mark Carter. “He can predict the weather better than most meteorologists, read the snowpack and be a medic if you break yourself—not a bad guy to have in your crew. It’s amazing to watch him slay the mountains at such a high level.”

The renewed focus on Iguchi has provided him with additional opportunities. This past year, he was as busy as ever. Bryan spent time in Innsbruck for the 20th anniversary of the Air and Style contest, where he sessioned a stadium kicker for the first time in more than a decade. After the contest, Iguchi traveled to Arlberg to ride with Jamie Lynn. When back in Wyoming, he worked on projects with Brain Farm, Volcom and Teton Gravity Research.

For several years, Jeremy Jones had been trying to film a Grand Teton segment, but issues with weather and snow stability continually plagued his efforts. This past winter, however, he and Iguchi dropped the peak’s Otter Body. For the past 15 years, Iguchi had studied this line from his window. “You really have to be on it with the right crew,” he explains.



[photo] Yellowstone, Wyo. [Jeff Hawe]

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“All the conditions have to be just right. It could be a once in a lifetime run to be honest.” With the assistance of Exum Mountain Guides’ Zahan Billimoria and Brendan O’Neill, the crew made its descent of the Otter Body on a cold March day that followed a recent storm.

“On every aspect change we would assess the snowpack and make sure we were confident before we dropped in because once you are in, there’s no going back,” Bryan says. “It’s a really committing line and pretty much you fall, you die. You have to be completely confident that the snow will be stable. Luckily, the stars aligned and we got a great day.” And although Guch doesn’t drop lines like the Otter Body every day, his seasons continue to be filled with many great days in the backcountry—and increasingly on missions powered by his own two feet.

the art of living

WHEN NOT RIDING, Iguchi keeps busy spending time with his family. Summer also affords the opportunity to focus more heavily on his painting and drawing. His art is often an extension of his love for the mountains. Using wood panels, acrylics, spray paint, paint pens, and fire, he captures familiar landscapes and imagines new ones. “The mountains have good lines and shapes. [I’m interested in] the symmetry and balance.” Others share

this interest, as Bryan’s work resonates especially well with fellow riders. Consequently, his art can be found in Jackson’s Asymbol Gallery, as well as on products by Jones, Union and Mountain Approach.

While the mountains provide the canvas for Iguchi’s riding and the subject matter for his art, they have also taught him about life. “Mountains are amazing teachers,” Bryan offers. “I feel like they have taught me so much about myself and that hard work pays off.”

His colleagues agree. “He is forever a student of life who pays attention to lessons and goes the distance on his homework,” explains Rice.

“You know what I think his greatest contribution to snowboarding is?” asks photographer Jeff Curley. “He showed that there’s a longevity in snowboarding when you fall in love with the mountains versus falling in love with your career as a snowboarder.”

Billy Anderson echoes these sentiments. He rode alongside Iguchi in *The Garden* and other films before spending more than a decade shaping Volcom’s snowboarding program. He doesn’t see Bryan slowing down any time soon. “To be honest,” says Anderson, “I think some of ‘Guch’s best years are still ahead of him.” **K**