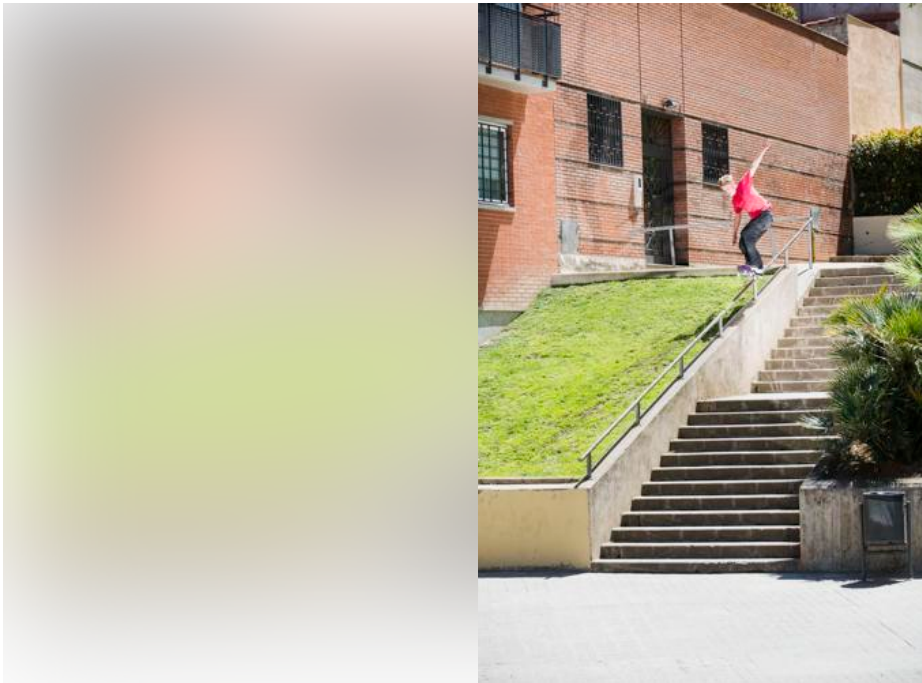


CENTERPIECE

Nashville skateboarder Jake Wooten turns pro during wild year

By Josh Ewers Main Street Nashville

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Gallatin native Jake Wooten is a pro skateboarder and is still ascending.

Courtesy / Eric Pizzle

A Gallatin native, skateboarder Jake Wooten crushed the odds a long time ago, and now he's reaping the rewards of his hard work with recognition from the collective skating consciousness during a whirlwind year.

This spring, at 21 years old, Wooten turned pro and received his pro skateboard model from storied outfit Santa Cruz, becoming one of just a handful of pro skaters to ever come out of the Nashville area in an industry that makes sure amateur talents really want it before flipping the money switch.

"I always hoped it would happen. I tried to take the right steps to make it happen. I skated all the time. I skated everywhere," said the humble and level-headed Wooten. "But you never know when it's going to happen in skateboarding."

In 2021, he's experienced the highs of skating makeshift skateparks at Exit/In and a New Orleans airport and of releasing an insane video that's put him on the short list for Thrasher Magazine's coveted Skater of the Year Award. Then there was the low of losing a close friend.

But for one beautiful, celebratory moment during a planned apartment ambush by his many friends, family and peers, turning pro allowed him to enjoy the view from atop the mountain.

“It just kind of signifies that all that hard work and all those years of pumping back and forth to the skatepark and crying because my shins got whacked or breaking bones, it was all worth it,” Wooten said. “Ever since I was little, that was my dream, to be a pro skateboarder one day. I’m very thankful to have made it.”

Early life

Wooten has overcome much more than a few broken bones to get here. First, there was the broken and abusive home where his biological parents struggled with addiction.

At that time, like many in his situation, the energetic youth showed a propensity for behavioral problems and bad grades.

“My biological father, he was a very, very angry person, about everything,” Wooten remembered. “In my memories, he was very angry all the time. The way he talked to people was very degrading, condescending.”

At age 8, he and his sister were removed from his parents’ house after his biological mother was arrested for public intoxication and his father had become scarce.

His Uncle Phillip Brown and Aunt Sharron Brown took him in full time, but by then, they’d already been consistently making a point to be in his life.

In their home, he found structure, discipline and compassion.

“It was a totally different regiment around the house than I was used to. I kind of just did whatever I wanted to when I was real little,” Wooten said. “My mom let us do literally anything we wanted. We could stay out as late as we want. It didn’t matter.

“I go over there and it was like Communist Russia or something,” Wooten said with a good-natured laugh.

And long before he’d ever come to live with them, his uncle had been seeking something on which Wooten could focus his energy.

“My uncle really realized I needed some type of outlet to get out all my anger and all these things I had because I was such a hyperactive kid and I had a lot of issues from being with my parents,” Wooten said. “And luckily, he knew medication wasn’t the route he wanted to take me. He didn’t want me to be subdued or some drone.”

During an attempt to get him into motocross at Tony Hawk’s Boom Boom Huck Jam, the 4-year-old Wooten instead found himself awestruck by the aerial displays of Tony Hawk and Danny Way.

It was a moment that changed his life.

“It’s the same feeling to this day, man. It doesn’t matter if I’m having the worst day ever or what’s wrong in my life or what’s bothering me. I can always just go and grab my board, set my phone down and go skate for a minute, even if it’s just flat ground,” Wooten said. “Everything is just gone.”

The grueling, never-ending art suited him well.

“It wasn’t like a set practice time, or set tricks I had to do, or anything like that. It was just my own expression, and there was no one to be angry at besides myself. There was no one to blame but myself,” Wooten said. “I can’t blame the skatepark. I can’t blame my board. I can’t blame the other skateboarders. At the end of the day, it’s just you, so I think that taught me a lot of accountability and helped kind of raise me in a sense.”

After the move, Wooten’s behavioral issues slowed to an eventual halt and he became a straight A student for the rest of an academic career that also saw him placed into his school’s gifted program.

And so from the mountaintop, his uncle and aunt are massive.

“My uncle is who facilitated me being able to do all this stuff, my aunt allowing my uncle to let me,” Wooten said with a laugh, recalling countless morning trips to the skatepark before it got crowded and out-of-state trips to compete, film or network.

“He’s been with me for the entirety of my ride, and for him to be here and for him to experience that moment meant just as much for me to experience it,” Wooten said.

Pro debut

Wooten’s pro debut video release made waves on the national scene for an impressive stylistic combination of aggressive speed and mesmerizing control, drawing from similarly minded idols like Grant Taylor and Raven Tershy.

“The world is our canvas as skateboarders and we kind of paint it. Everybody paints it differently,” Wooten said. “It’s all up to you what you want to do. That’s the best part about skating: individualistic expression.”

And nothing displayed how far his style and ability had come since his early, more competition-focused days than the mid-May digital release of that video for storied skate-purist board outfit Santa Cruz.

His performance has generated ample Skater of the Year buzz on a body of work encompassing 2½ years of slams and triumphs filming around the world in places like Argentina, Australia, Los Angeles and Oregon.

At iconic Portland DIY skate spot Burnside Skatepark, he nabbed his “ender,” flooring skate fans with a mind-boggling 360 Blunt Stall up a muraled concrete cavern wall while surrounded by peers.

“I knew immediately when I got there I liked that big wall. I liked the way it looked. I liked the way it felt. ... I had that trick in mind, but I didn’t really think it’d be possible because I had only tried it on smaller ramps and I had never gotten it before,” Wooten said.

“Finally, on my third or fourth try, I got into it perfectly and popped out front side and almost landed it. I kicked out.”

But possible was all Wooten had needed.

“Two and a half hours later, everyone else has gotten their tricks and they’re all sitting down, chilling, having a beer, and I’m over there sweating my butt off, drenched,” Wooten said.

When Wooten finally rolled away from the trick, he let his momentum carry him up off his board exhausted and landed

on the top of the opposite quarter pipe, falling to the surface with a wide smile.

“I’m grateful. I’m very thankful to everybody that helped make that part happen, traveled with me, had lunch with me, drove me around in the van, filmed me, shot a photo of me,” Wooten said.

But through the highs, there have been sobering lows to contend with, too.

As much as 2020 and 2021 have meant to Wooten professionally, it hasn’t been an easy time.

Wooten recently lost several friends in the Nashville scene and, in January, he lost his best friend, the massively talented Santa Cruz skater Henry Gartland, who died at the age of 22.

“We were just best homies. That was my best (expletive) friend,” Wooten said.

It was as unexpected a development as any Wooten had experienced.

“He passed away and it was a shock. None of us knew how to take it or what was going on,” Wooten said. “We know now there was a lot more going on than we ever could have.”

The aftermath would reveal that skateboarders were far from immune to concerns affecting more mainstream sports and that Gartland’s death had been a suicide.

“Brain injuries are real. We have to create more awareness about brain injuries in skateboarding, things that can make people feel that kind of way,” Wooten said.

Fittingly, Wooten’s legendary debut video part begins with footage of Wooten ollieing over Gartland with two simple words in black and white: “Henry Forever.”

“We went everywhere together. We traveled the world. We went to Australia together, Argentina, Oregon, all these Santa Cruz trips, Tampa, Atlanta. I wouldn’t trade those memories for the world,” Wooten said. “I’m thankful I got to meet such a nice guy, an amazing dude, such a pure-hearted friend.”

Makeshift skateparks

Beyond the end credits, the ever-motivated Wooten has kept after it with sponsor Red Bull, which this spring unexpectedly asked him if he’d want to skate Exit/In.

“I was like ‘Well, yeah. But what are you talking about? How am I going to skate Exit/In?’ “ said Wooten, who remembered family tales of seeing iconic artists at the music venue.

“Sure enough, Red Bull always has a dope outlook on those kind of things and can figure out some sick stuff to put in nooks and crannies,” he said, detailing the makeshift park. “It was a rad little session.”

During the manic session, Nashville act The Cadillac Three shot a video for “Bridges,” but the day had a larger purpose.

“Skateboarding is a big mesh point for music and culture, and it was just cool to be able to shine a light on a place that had been struggling through COVID, to show that it’s still here and drive some publicity to it,” Wooten said.

Though Wooten's name is ascending as rapidly as anyone on four wheels, giving back with his skills remains a priority. This year he also found time to bring around a mobile skatepark for local skaters while parks were shuttered.

"Along with all the people who have loved me, supported me or thought highly enough of me to try to get me here to a position to where I can do for myself and do for others, skateboarding has given me everything I have in my life," Wooten said. "I feel like I just need to give everything I have back, in a sense.

"This is all just extra," he said, motioning to his San Diego apartment. "At the end of the day, it's me and my skateboard, family, food, shelter and water."

The future

When asked about his goals, Wooten rattles off a list of dreams both humble and huge a mile long: from buying his family a house in Florida to getting a full Thrasher interview and cover, and from simply hoping his Subaru makes it though 2021 to one day winning Skater of the Year.

With six months left in what has been a truly unpredictable year for Tennessee's most talented young skater, you can count on Wooten continuing to work. He has another video with Red Bull on the way at the end of the year.

"One thing I love so much about skateboarding is you never learn it. You're constantly learning," Wooten said. "There's never a peak or a cap."

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