



Rise and shine: Skaters and BMXers at Camp Woodward PA launch from cabin life to Olympics



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When freestyle BMX legend-turned-Team USA Olympic head coach Ryan Nyquist graduated high school in Los Gatos, California, in 1997, he drove 2,800 miles east from the heartland of action sports to a place where icons from Tony Hawk and Dave Mirra to Nyjah Huston have made a pilgrimage or honed their skills: rural Central Pennsylvania.

“It was like, ‘I’m here.’ This is everything I wanted out of BMX, was to make it to that place,” remembered Nyquist, then already a pro who’d competed in the X Games. “To finally get there and walk into that building, it was like I was living in those magazines and those videos I was watching.”

Founded by All-American Penn State University gymnast Edward Isabelle as a gymnastics camp in 1970 and tucked into the hills of Amish Country,

Camp Woodward PA has grown far beyond its Centre County roots.

Among the most renowned training grounds of its kind, its confines now consist of 21 indoor and outdoor parks, ramps, bowls and courses on 75 acres 40 minutes east of State College.

Each year, it hosts summer camps for athletes ages 7-17 of all skill levels in disciplines at the intersection of self-expression, athletics and daring: street and vert skateboarding, BMX, in-line skating, scooter riding and parkour.

Each five- to seven-day camp at the 800-capacity site averages about 300 kids, who learn directly from and interact with high-profile professionals such as Nyquist and skaters Jamie Foy, Ryan Sheckler and Lizzie Armanto.

“For some of these kids, it’s the first time they’re skating and they don’t know how to fall,” said Armanto. “And in skating, you fall a bunch of times. So when you fall, you get back up.

“To learn a new trick, you have to believe in yourself. And so you’re teaching self-confidence, you’re teaching resilience. If you can apply those things to the rest of your life, you can do anything. You can change the world.”

Utilizing the camp’s beginner-oriented progression center as well as foam pits, foam-packed “resi” ramps and grouping of riders of similar skill together, the pros don’t push beyond ability.

“We have it down to a pretty good science as far as where to start them out,” said Nyquist, now in his third year as a program advisor.

“It can be really intimidating, especially when there’s people that are more advanced,” Armanto said. “A lot of people that are beginning feel like they don’t want to get in the way, but it’s like, ‘Hey, this is your time, too, and you deserve to be here just as much as anyone else.’”

Olympic training ground

Since skateboarding and BMX freestyle were added to the Olympic lineup in 2016, the original of Woodward’s eight locations (in California, Oregon, Colorado, Utah and Vermont) has also served as a training and scouting hub for teams from Great Britain, Australia, France and the United States.

Nine of the 18 action sports medalists at the 2024 Paris Olympics and 36 qualifiers were current or former campers or visiting pros at Woodward facilities, according to officials.

“Every young rider's dream is to go to Woodward. And you eventually get to go, and it's usually one of the best experiences in the world,” said BMXer Perris Benegas, a 2024 Olympic silver medalist in BMX freestyle for Team USA and a former visiting pro.

Benegas’ Paris goal was redemption, having just missed out a medal in Tokyo before tearing ligaments in her knee. Post-injury, she struggled with a 360-degree spin in her 2024 run, playing it safe as she rebuilt her confidence at Woodward West.

“She was there in the foam pit working on her 360s, working on dropping her shoulder so that way she could come in nose first and land smooth,” Nyquist said. “That 100% contributed to her success in Paris.”

Benegas agreed.

“We as riders tend to have our own process for learning or unlocking tricks,” she said. “What Woodward did for that process was offer a very safe and top-level environment to progress at the rate that was comfortable to me.”

The result was Olympic hardware.

“I put everything I have into these athletes. Their goals are my goals,” said Nyquist. “So when they achieve them — I was bouncing around with the assistant coach Rob Darden, [we were] pulling on each other’s shirts, bouncing in unison — like so stoked.”

2024 street skating silver and bronze medalists Jagger Eaton and Nyjah Huston have also spent time at Woodward’s facilities. Women’s park skating silver medalist Kocona Hiraki of Japan, is a former camper. And Great Britain’s Kieran Reilly took home a silver in BMX Freestyle after training at Camp Woodward PA in April.

“Traveling out to Woodward earlier this year was great for a change of pace,” said Reilly. “The camp has a solid training area with foam and resi,

which I used to learn some new tricks and perfect those I had been working on.”

“Woodward is a bucket list spot for anyone in action sports. Having grown up watching pros travel to ride the facility it was, first of all, really cool to finally experience it. But the whole vibe and atmosphere there was supportive and progressive because you’re surrounded by like-minded individuals.”

Finding the next generation

Nyquist’s focus spans from an Olympic rider spinning through the air down to the ground level. Among the kids he helps find their footing and style every day, his eyes are also always peeled for the next generation of competitors.

“If I can find the next up-and-coming kid or the next Olympian at camp, oh yeah, guaranteed I’m waiting for the parents to pick them up and exchanging contact details,” said Nyquist with a laugh.

“In person, seeing how a rider kind of handles themselves is huge. And for me, I look at everything. It’s not just how good of tricks you do, but what kind of person are you? Are you open to any kind of coaching or even criticism? ... And there’s no better way of doing that and identifying that talent than being there in person, having those opportunities to hang out with them.”

A few current Woodward riders, such as 17-year-old Jake Rutkowitz of Pennsylvania, 9-year-old Huck Kurinsky of Ohio and 15-year-old Keir Sirlin of Utah, who recently placed first at her debut international competition, already have his attention.

“There’s a couple riders that I’m 100% positive that, if that’s the direction they want to go, they could be Olympians in 2028,” said Nyquist. “I think that (Sirlin) could literally be the future of women’s BMX freestyle, if she chooses to. She has a skill set and she has that determination.”

When asked about Team USA’s chances to defend home court in 2028 in Los Angeles, Nyquist was succinct:

“The future’s bright, man,” he said with a smile. “It’s very bright.”

Progression

But rather than a path to a medal, most kids end up taking away something different from camp.

‘[Woodward] breeds progression. It breeds creativity. It provides that environment that people feel safe to be themselves in and to be able to thrive in,’ Nyquist said. “You can show up here and have zero skills. You could have never touched a bike or a board and come here and had the most amazing summer ever.”

That goes beyond the board or the bike.

“The best rider is going to be comfortable in their own skin. They’re going to be comfortable in their own bike or skateboard. That kind of creativity is everywhere here at camp, and sometimes it’s easy to find, and sometimes they need a little guidance,” he said. “And so I find that’s my role here is not only to just identify the talent, but help them kind of identify themselves.

“This community is arms wide open when it comes to that stuff. It’s all about what can you do that might be a little bit different? What can you do that might be different from everybody else? And that’s a special thing that I love about action sports.”

Woodward PA general manager Lisa Pham, a snowboarder from Nebraska who arrived as a medical professional, agrees.

“There was just such this warmth. And this community, they rally, they rally behind each other so much,” she said of her first time at the camp. “The camaraderie that comes in a skate park, or on a ski hill or some dirt jumps, it’s just amazing.”

And the vibes live on.

“I have parents of kids that when they drop their son or daughter off, they come up to me and they’re like, ‘Hey, you may not remember this, but in 1999 I was a camper here, and you sat with me at the cafeteria and we talked about the X Games.’ And I’m like, ‘This is wild dude,’” said Nyquist.

“That’s what Woodward does. It creates this generational kind of informational wealth and opportunities and experiences that get passed

down from generation to generation.”

Pham sees daily growth.

“It is so crazy how much a child can change in a 24/7 residential camp,” said Pham. “I see it day in and day out and in so many ways, their confidence, their social skills, their skill set within the sport.”

But for all the progression it provides, Woodward took a step back to reevaluate in recent years.

In 2022, the camp’s parent company, POWDR, folded the gymnastics and cheer divisions at all locations to focus on action sports.

The closure followed two lawsuits related to [inappropriate conduct](#) by a former gymnastics coach dating back to 2016 and 2018 under a former general manager. Last month, POWDR settled one suit for \$8 million.

Camp leadership has since created the Woodward [Women’s Advisory Council](#), which both Pham and Armanto sit on with other professional women, to focus on aiding girls making their way through the still male-dominated world of action sports.

“Skating in general, it takes a lot of courage. Even for when I started, [my hometown] skate park wasn't the most female-friendly place,” said Armanto.

“I just remember I really wanted to be there to skate and I just focused on that. And having a place like Woodward is so instrumental and having that space, it’s so cool to see. I wish I had more of that growing up, but I’m happy it’s here now.”

The council focuses on everything from policy changes to programming, such as implementing all-girl skate sessions.

“The girl sessions are a totally different vibe than when it’s everyone,” said Armanto. “It’s like, ‘You go.’ ‘No, you go, you go.’ Everyone’s just so polite. It’s very welcoming and just super sweet. And they’re all cheering each other on.”

As skate and BMX culture embraces a greater number of female pros, and as 14-year-old Australian Arisa Trew recently became the first woman to

land a 900-degree rotation (at Woodward West), Pham hopes to continue to see progress.

“I'm hoping that with the amazing women on this board, that we can make it more entry level and make it more appealing and make it more acceptable for all girls to come into Woodward camp, or action sports.

“I don't care if it's Woodward Camp or not,” she said. “I don't want them to look up and always see male figures.”

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