

THE MEGATHHEORY OF EVOLUTION

BOB BURNQUIST IS ON A QUEST TO GO BIGGER AND SCARIER THAN ANY ATHLETE HAS EVER THOUGHT POSSIBLE—WHILE ALSO RUNNING AN ORGANIC FARM AND CHOOSING SMOOTHIES OVER RED BULL. HE CALLS THIS PROGRESS. BEHOLD THE ENLIGHTENED LIFE (AND FAR-OUT DREAMS) OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST SKATEBOARDER. BY JOSH DEAN



A full-page photograph of a man standing on a concrete skateboard ramp. He is wearing a grey long-sleeved button-down shirt with two chest pockets, blue jeans, and black sunglasses. He is holding a skateboard with white wheels in his right hand. The background shows a steep, brush-covered hill under a clear sky. The ramp has some green-painted metal railings.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRIS
MCPHERSON

Bob Burnquist
on his backyard
mega-ramp in
San Diego's
North County

BOB BURNQUIST

IS A PROFESSIONAL SKATEBOARDER,
BUT TO LET THAT BE HIS DEFINITION
IS A LITTLE REDUCTIVE.

The 32-year-old resident of Vista, California, is, by many tangible measures and especially by metaphysical ones, probably the best all-around skateboarder in the world, able to win X Games gold medals on the halfpipe or lay down eye-popping street segments for videos, as well as to consistently redefine what is considered possible in his sport. He might do this by riding completely around the inner circumference of a metal pipe (which includes skating *upside down*) or riding inside a pipe with a gap (which requires *jumping upside down*) or doing these tricks—or any of his tricks—switch (meaning backwards), or especially by doing the kinds of things he does on the infamous mega-ramp, a 360-foot-long, 75-foot-high plywood leviathan that has pushed skateboarding into terrifying new territory since appearing on the scene in 2003.

There are only three mega-ramps on earth. One is in storage and comes out for the X Games' "big-air" events, which Bob has won the past two years. Another is in Brazil, where Bob was born and lived until age 18. He built that one for a 2008 contest that he co-produced via his Encinitas, California-based production company, Zoobamboo Entertainment, and also won. It aired live on Brazil's TV Globo, to an audience of millions. The third mega-ramp is in Bob's backyard.

Bob didn't invent the mega-ramp; that honor goes to his pal Danny Way, a professional skater who jumped the Great Wall of China a few years back. The mega-ramp is a difficult contraption to envision until you've seen it in person, but imagine a wooden ski jump leading to the biggest kicker you can possibly conjure, one so tall and steep that your average professional skateboarder gets jittery just peering over its edge. The most basic jump goes something like this: You roll in from a platform about the height of a five-story building, reach 40 or 50 miles per hour on the 180-foot approach, then launch over a 50-foot gap—there's trapeze netting if you don't make it—land on a downslope, and zip toward a 30-foot-high quarterpipe that propels you another 15 to 25 feet into the air. You'll need to land back on the near-vertical face of that quarterpipe, and not on the deck up top or the flat bottom below, either of which spells almost certain injury.

You might recall this was the fate of Australian skater Jake Brown, who took a well-documented fall during the 2007 X Games.

Jake wobbled slightly after landing a 720 (his first ever on the mega-ramp), which threw off his timing on the quarterpipe. Accidentally pushing himself away from the ramp as he went airborne, he fluttered and dropped 45 feet to the wood deck below, landing so hard that both of his shoes popped off. Bob, who was waiting his turn to go, thought his friend was "dead, paralyzed, in pieces. I was screaming, crying, freaking out," he says. Jake lay still for eight minutes, then suddenly, miraculously stood up and walked away (with a broken wrist, mild concussion, and bruised liver and lungs), and Bob thought, *Oh, shit, I'm next. OK, Jake, this is for you.* And he rode on down the ramp and won gold.

At this point, Bob can navigate the mega-ramp with ease, regular or switch. He can spin (many times), land just over the gap on a short platform known as a manual pad, perform a quick trick, then continue on toward the quarterpipe, where he might fly up and grind the soccer goalpost he sometimes places atop the deck, just for kicks. He can do a front flip over the gap, which no one else has even attempted.

Tony Hawk says he is "glad" the mega-ramp wasn't around when he was competing, and that it "has tested the human limits of riding a skateboard." Of Bob, Tony says, "Besides creating tricks previously thought impossible, he's taking existing moves and doing them at dangerous heights and over frightful distances." He's also unique, Tony says, because "his motivation is progression; not fame or fortune."

That's not to say, of course, that Bob won't compete. He shows up at competitions, mostly because his sponsors encourage it, and he tends to win: So far he's taken home 15 X Games medals (including six golds), was last year's World Cup of Skateboarding vert skater of the year, and was again the favorite in the big-air event at the 2009 X Games. But what actually drives Bob is something else: He's an athletic freak with a creative mind who's treating his sport more like a blend of math problem and art project. Bob Burnquist wakes up most every morning with one question on his mind: What else can I do?

TO OBSERVE BOB is to watch a man who seems to have just left yoga class. He's a walking noodle—six foot two and 180 pounds of skinny limbs, with close-cropped black

hair. Danny Way, Bob's close friend and only true rival (or perhaps the only human crazy enough to want to be), says he has "cat genetics" and calls him Gumby. It appears as if soft pretzels have replaced his bones.

It's a warm spring afternoon when I visit Bob at his spread in the arid foothills of the San Marcos Mountains, in San Diego's North County. Rancho Bob Burnquist, or Rancho Burnquisto, as it's come to be known, is 12 acres and has many amalgamated parts: The first thing you see is Bob's traditional vertical ramp and bowl, where he shoots film segments and practices for events. Around it are what he calls his "monuments," little-used or retired specialty ramps cooked up for one-off tricks like the loop-de-loop or the corkscrew. Not far past them is a nice stucco house with two adjoining cabanas, one for his office and gym and another for his toys, including a stack of surfboards, numerous skydiving rigs, and literally hundreds of skateboard decks. There's a small pool and patio, a plot of organic vegetables, a paddock for livestock, and, on a large, scrubby parcel at the rear of the property, the mega-ramp.

The rancho is hilly and lush with vegetation. It's not easy to tour by foot, so Bob climbs aboard his two-seat Yamaha Rhino utility vehicle. There's a subtle unkemptness to the place—pieces of old ramps and deteriorating gym mats are lying around, along with some unexplained dogs. Only one, Dois, an Australian shepherd mix bearing the scars of 14 puncture wounds (the work of local coyotes), belongs to Bob. "There's also a cat around here somewhere," he says.

Bob maneuvers around a manure pile—courtesy of Rio, the family horse—and toward a stand of banana trees, where we find his wife, Veronica, 40, a beautiful blond physical therapist from Brazil. The two have a one-year-old daughter, Jasmyn, and each has a daughter from a previous relationship, Bob's being nine-year-old Lotus, whose mother is the pro skater Jen O'Brien.

At the rancho, Bob has re-created a little slice of São Paulo, where he grew up middle-class and bilingual, the son of an American father and a Brazilian mother. The whole family is here, in fact, though his parents are divorced. There's a Brazilian nanny, a yurt for his dad, Dean. His sister Rebecca shares a house up the road with their mom, Dora, who paints and sculpts and makes mosaics. ("I can live with my dad," Bob says, "but my mom ...") Dora's work is all over the rancho, including several oversize paintings of Bob in action that dominate the living room.

He gives Veronica a kiss and asks me to move to the Rhino's dusty bed to make room as we all drive out to visit Rio and his



Burnquist throwing a switch 180 over the mega-ramp's 50-foot gap

BOB CAN IMAGINE A CORKSCREW LAUNCH INTO A MEGA-RAMP, AND MAYBE EVEN A DOUBLE LOOP, LIKE A REAL-LIFE VERSION OF WHAT KIDS BUILD FOR MATCHBOX CARS. IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE? "I DON'T KNOW," HE ANSWERS. "I THINK IT IS."

paddock-mates, two goats and a chicken. Bob and Veronica chatter briefly in Portuguese (she's still learning English) about the moringa-based organic soap made by a woman who rents a cabana on the property. "It's an amazing material," he tells me. "When I had my wisdom teeth out, I put some powder on my teeth and woke up so much better."

Nothing about this scene—or any of Bob's life, really—is what you'd expect from a skateboarder. The same goes for his business interests away from the sport, most of which fall under the umbrella of an amorphous venture called Burnquist Organics, which even he struggles to define. This would include farming here on the rancho, which has been stalled commercially since his organic restaurant, Melodia, closed, but he's in talks to begin providing produce to local branches of Chipotle Mexican restaurants. He plans to

kick off a line of organic products with an energy bar later this year. You'll also soon find a Burnquist Organics logo on a number of Bob-approved products, including the first Oakley shades made with recycled materials; a bamboo Flip skate deck (still in testing stages); an iPath all-hemp skate shoe; a Brazilian line of hemp-and-organic-cotton Hurley clothing; and a foam-free Keahana surfboard.

In the adrenalized world of the X Games, where athletes tend to be tattooed, caffeinated, and more concerned with their style of footwear than their carbon footprint, Bob is an anomaly. The green projects, along with his New Agey tendencies—he's a follower of the nonsectarian Christian Spiritism movement and is prone to stoner speechifying about "fluidic rhythms"—have led to a perception among fans that

he's a vegetarian. He's not. But he does enjoy smoothies and drive a Prius. He also refuses to take sponsorship dollars from any product he doesn't feel comfortable with, most notably the buzz-drink labels—Red Bull, Monster Energy—that are the ubiquitous cash cows of action sports. ("I hate that stuff," he says.) Instead he gravitates toward deals that satisfy his inner hippie: Stonyfield Farm, Sambazon açai-based beverages, and Toyota, which in 2005 made Bob its first athlete paired specifically with the Prius. (He was the company's first action-sports athlete.)

There are plenty of other professional athletes speaking out on global warming and sustainability, but few, if any, have actually managed to enact real change in their sport. Bob co-founded the Action Sports Environmental Council in 2001 and, in 2007, took his skateboard to the Capitol to lobby Congress about climate change—becoming, if you're a fan of useless minutiae, the first person to ride a skateboard inside those hallowed halls. That same year, he gathered major action-sport brands for the industry's first conference on how to go green. It was at his behest that the X Games shifted to Forest Stewardship **continued on page 100**

Council—certified wood for its ramps and then donated that wood after the event to build skate parks in blighted neighborhoods like Compton. His current pet project is Bob Burnquist's Global Cooling Challenge, an environmental-education program for middle- and high-school students.

Bob is fortunate to exist in the moment when an athlete can translate activism into dollars and not simply into the occasional box of complimentary granola bars. He'll lecture for 15 minutes on the hypocrisy of Kobe Bryant shilling for fast food while acknowledging "it's easy for me to say that, because I can afford to be choosy." Bob won't indulge me in the issue of his finances, but it's safe to say his annual income is well into the six figures.

As we putter the Rhino back toward the vert bowl, Bob spies Dora outside her studio. I ask her what she thinks of her son's version of art—all the ramps and jumps and stunts. "I think it's crazy," she says. "I don't watch. But I hear, because people call me."

Bob didn't warn her about his most dangerous stunt ever, in 2006, when he flew off a ramp built on the rim of the Grand Canyon, grinded a rail over the precipice, then BASE-jumped 1,600 feet to the bottom. But Dora's a mom; she knew.

"It was terrible," she says, but she's more bemused than concerned. "Lotus is still scared today."

"She's not scared," Bob says, pulling me away. "Of course she was worried. She'd say, 'My dad likes to jump off cliffs. He's crazy.'"

BOB KEEPS A SPIRAL-BOUND notebook of dreams in his home office. It's full of ideas for ramps and bowls and pools, some in bizarre geometric shapes cooked up by him and Danny Way, who's also his bandmate in the indie-rock group Escalera (Danny on guitar and Bob on drums) and the only other person who understands his twisted vision. Both Bob and Danny operate outside the established professional paths of street and vert skating. Most pros are street skaters, because it's easier to learn; all you need is some blacktop. Vert skaters require expensive ramps, which means sponsors, which means pressure to win competitions. Bob and Danny participate in these competitions and demos, but they spend much of their time one-upping each other with outlandish stunts. Danny is most famous for jumping the Great Wall, in 2005, and for dropping from the top of the 82-foot-tall guitar at Las Vegas's Hard Rock Cafe a year later. Last November, he set the Guinness land-speed record for a towed skateboard, reaching 74 miles per hour while being pulled behind a vehicle driven by pro skater and MTV star

Rob Dyrdek in the California desert.

It was skateboarding's improvisational nature that drew Bob to begin with. His dad gave him his first board at 11, when severe asthma kept him from excelling at soccer. Bob was immediately drawn to the "whole individual thing" of skating. "Whatever I did was on my own merit—if I fell, it was my fault," he says. Young Bob quickly became obsessed; he was winning competitions in Brazil by his early teens, but he remained off the radar in the U.S. until 1995, when, at 18, he won the Slam City Jam, in Vancouver. In 1997, he won his first X Games medal, a bronze on the vert ramp, and was *Thrasher* magazine's skater of the year. He moved to the rancho in 1999.

Bob plops into a rolling chair at the desk in his office cabana and walks me through his notebook. He stops first at early scrawls of the 2006 Grand Canyon trick. It was just a wild notion until the producer of the Discovery Channel series *Stunt Junkies* called. Bob explained his concept and the producer howled, "I love it!"

"That one was on paper for six months," Bob says. "Sometimes ideas are in here for a couple years."

He flips onward, past one sketch for a jump over a Boeing 747 affixed with a rail, and another for a 100-foot drop off a statue in São Paulo that would best Danny's Hard Rock Cafe height. "I'm extending the offer to Danny to come with me so it's not like I'm breaking his record," he says.

As Bob tells it, he's lucky to have Danny around. Without a competitor talented enough to attempt such maniacal pursuits, his rarefied airspace could get very lonely. "When I make stuff, I call him and say, 'Dude, you know what I just did?'"

He switches over to his iMac and spools up clips of his upcoming, three-years-in-the-making part in the Flip Skateboards video *Extremely Sorry*. Bob obsesses over videos like these because they maintain his credibility in the skate world, which might otherwise regard him as a stunt guy who cashes in at the X Games once a year and then retreats to his ranch to roll around in flaxseed. The film segments—shot on the mega-ramp or in pools and skate parks around the world—are mind-blowing even to jaded pros. In one sequence, he launches across the 50-foot gap, lands on the manual pad, kickflips his board 180 degrees *while going 50 miles per hour*, then drops in toward the quarterpipe—all without breaking rhythm.

Bob's riding is so "technical"—the word used over and over (and over) to describe him—that to show it to someone with an untrained eye, like me, he actually has to slow down the tape. Chris Stiepok, general manager of the X Games, says that Bob's

subtlety, his emphasis on absurd intricacies, is almost impossible for a casual fan to appreciate. It's one reason Bob may never be as well known as Tony Hawk. "You would see [Bob's] run and you wouldn't be terribly impressed. And then somebody would say, 'By the way, he just did that switch.' The things that he's able to do from a technical standpoint are really what makes him spectacular."

Bob dials up a video of his loop-with-gap trick on YouTube. We watch him roll up and around the inside of a pipe, jump inverted across a gap at the top, and speed down the other side. The video has, at last count, 1.6 million views. I point out a comment that reads, "You are clearly an idiot."

"I love the comments," he says, laughing. "They're the best. A lot of 'em—like in the case of the Grand Canyon—say, 'All right, why? I don't see any reason.'"

"Someone always answers for me. 'Why not?'"

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, it's possible to find some pro skating on Bob's mega-ramp or, just as likely, quivering in its shadow. North County is home to many of the biggest brands in action sports—Hurley, DC Shoes, Quiksilver—and also its biggest stars, including Way, Hawk, Shaun White, and dozens of other skaters, BMX riders, and motocross stars, many of whom can't resist the gravitational pull of the monster that lurks behind Bob Burnquist's house. It's like having the Maverick's surf break in your backyard.

The mega-ramp's arrival was a seminal moment in skating history. Danny Way had spent a year building the behemoth in secret, with funding from DC Shoes (co-founded by his brother, Damon), at a remote camp in the California desert known as Point X. He told no one what he was up to and then introduced the ramp to the world in the 2003 film *The DC Video*. Stiepok remembers being at the Winter X Games in Aspen when someone burst into his office clutching the DVD. "There it was in all its glory," he recalls. "It was one of those moments where you think, I can't believe what I'm seeing here."

When Bob saw the footage, his head practically exploded. As explained in the 2005 skate film *The Reality of Bob Burnquist*, he couldn't fathom that his friend had concocted the monster in secret and was "just out there skating it alone." As Bob put it, "Not that many people have that kind of motivation." He immediately rang Danny and said, "I gotta skate this thing." Then he headed to the desert, became the second man to master the mega, and, by the time he'd come back down to earth—physically and otherwise—thought, *I need one of these*.

Today that prototype ramp is dismantled, and Danny and Bob together own "Mega

Ramp LLC,” which holds the trademark and builds ramps for various events. Bob built his version for the rancho in 2006 for a reported \$280,000 (paid for largely by Oakley and Hurley), using roughly 400 sheets of plywood. Because of the topography, where a hillside backs the roll-in, you can climb a few stairs to the top, whereas the X Games ramp is accessed via the Staples Center elevator. Bob’s is also the only mega-ramp that stays up between competitions, making it a frequent destination for film crews, who have to knock on his door to ask permission to ride it. Recently, the motocross star Travis Pastrana backflipped a Big Wheel over the 70-foot gap for his MTV show, *Nitro Circus*.

The street skater Pat Duffy had a less pleasant experience in 2006. Duffy, a highly regarded pro, cleared the 50-foot gap but then lost control as he approached the top of the quarterpipe. He sailed into the air, his legs spinning in place like the Road Runner’s as he dropped 30 feet to the deck. As Duffy would later describe it, his femur “jackhammered” his tibia, breaking the bone in three places. Up to that point, Bob says, “Street skaters called all the time.” But for a while after that, “all calls just stopped.”

Nonetheless, people remain curious. While I’m at the rancho, Bob’s friend and fellow pro Pierre-Luc Gagnon, or PLG, pops by with some fresh meat: a street skater known as Lizard King (Mike Plumb to his relatives), who’s wiry and abundantly tattooed, with a raspy smoker’s voice and the bug eyes of a man who gets amped for a living.

Bob greets them in the driveway and tells PLG to take Lizard out to the ramp “just to see what he’s getting into.”

Minutes later, Lizard King comes back looking as if he’s seen a ghost. He can’t stop pacing. “I’m not even over there looking at it and I’m having a heart attack,” he says.

“Exactly—because you know what you’re about to do,” says Bob.

PLG and Bob discuss a trick Bob’s been working on; I can’t begin to follow the jargon, but Lizard King hangs on their every word. “You guys are fucking out of your minds,” he squeals. “I don’t get how you are like the most mellow people I’ve ever met, because you’re total fucking nutcases.”

Lizard King snatches a bag of pads from PLG’s Mercedes and comes back. “I’ve never been more intimidated by anything in my entire life,” he says, then exhales deeply.

“I wanna get you psyched,” Bob says. “I’ll go out there with you.”

And so Bob, wearing no pads or helmet, performs step one of mega-ramp desensitization: the crash landing. He tears down the roll-in, sails off the kicker, and ditches the board over the gap, landing on his butt and

sliding to a stop on the transition. Then, because he can’t just leave it at that—bad karma, dude—he hops in the Rhino and rides back to the top, rolls in again, jumps, lands, and grinds the coping of the quarterpipe, just because. When he’s in the air, you can hear the hiss of his wheels, spinning so fast it seems they might fly off.

Lizard King practically collapses. Here he is, terrified, and Bob has casually dropped in as if this were a backyard pool, wearing nothing but jeans and a T-shirt.

“Fuck it, dude,” Lizard yells, rolling toward the edge. “Live life.”

His first attempt isn’t pretty, but he has gusto. There are many whoops and hollers and “Holy shits!” as he rockets down the roll-in, up the launch, and through the air, dropping his board and flying along like someone leaping off a bridge into a lake. He lands awkwardly but safely on his knee pads and slides to the base of the quarterpipe.

“I love you, Bob!” he howls as Bob and I walk back toward the house. “This is the funnest thing I’ve ever done in my life! Thank you for building this!”

About an hour later, Bob’s phone buzzes. It’s a text from PLG: Lizard nailed it. “He’s got the right mentality,” Bob says. “Or the wrong one, depending how you look at it.”

BOB’S LOVE OF FLYING is not specific to skateboarding. He’s had his pilot’s license for years, has completed more than 500 skydives and 14 BASE jumps, and has recently begun to experiment with the wingsuit, which is essentially the architecture of a flying squirrel applied to humans.

You don’t have to tell Bob that he can be a walking (skating, jumping) contradiction. He’s well aware. “I skydive, I fly, I travel to skate. There’s no way I’m carbon-neutral. Look at all the wood I use.” He says this from the helm of his hybrid Toyota Highlander, en route to a small airport where we’re picking up a rented Cessna for an afternoon flight. “What I do is live my life, do my thing, and try to make progress toward something,” he adds. “I do more than the average guy, but I definitely need to do more.”

Bob does most of his flying out of a small airstrip close to Lotus’s school. We hop into a vintage white Cessna with blue stripes and he fires the old bird up. He’s in an abundantly pocketed vest that holds a flashlight, his asthma medication, energy bars, maps, flares, and a hydration reservoir—basically everything he’d need to survive if he were to crash-land in the wilderness. We roll onto the runway and, just like that, are airborne.

It is sub-prime central below; the ghosts of stillborn developments haunt the landscape. Some are half built, and you can see the lines of tract-home plots slowly being

reclaimed by the land. There are many empty driveways. “It’s good for us,” Bob says. “Lots of pools.”

We head south and bank over the former site of Point X, where Danny designed the mega-ramp, then Bob loops back and aims the plane toward the Pacific, which glimmers in the distance. He points out—visible from God knows how many miles out—his very own private monster. “Mega-ramp at 12 o’clock,” he says. “Pretty cool, right? I love flying over it.”

As we buzz past the rancho, Bob talks about some of his latest notions. He might like to skate-jump from one skyscraper to another, then launch off the second and BASE-jump to the street below. He can also imagine a corkscrew launch into a mega-ramp, and maybe even a double loop, like a real-life version of what kids build for Matchbox cars.

Is that even possible?

“I don’t know,” he answers. “I think it is.”

That same question has long been a motivating force for other fringe athletes, including freeskier Shane McConkey, who died in Italy’s Dolomites in March while filming a stunt combining skiing and BASE jumping in a wingsuit.

“We all know what we’re getting into,” Bob says when the subject is broached. “You live with that much risk so you can have that much fun. I can guarantee you Shane experienced some stuff that no human will experience. That’s progression. We can’t hold back progression, and we can’t hold back evolution. We keep going, and we don’t know how to say no.”

Watching Bob smoothly pilot the plane, I’m struck by how much he reminds me of Philippe Petit, the eccentric French tightrope walker who casually strolled back and forth between the World Trade Center towers in 1974. Physically, they’re analogs—living Plastic Men—and they share a disarming calm, what Danny Way calls Bob’s “Zen, one-with-ramp mode.”

Bob tells me he hasn’t seen *Man on Wire*, the documentary about Petit’s Twin Towers walk, so I explain that what stood out to me most wasn’t the guy’s courage or the physical completion of the feat but that he stopped in the middle, on the wire, thousands of feet above Manhattan, savoring the moment with a smile, as if he didn’t want it to end.

“That’s it,” Bob says. “That’s what he lives for. If I had time, I’d be smiling in the middle of the air, too.”

He thinks for a moment. “Actually, I am, but you’d have to hit pause to see me.”

JOSH DEAN WROTE ABOUT ANDY RODDICK IN JULY 2008.