



TONY HAWK INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Tony Hawk, Skater
August 31, 2023
Interviewed by Ari Fishman
Total Running Time: 27 minutes and 21 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

TONY HAWK:

There's no way anyone in those in that era of early skating, early 80s, would say I had natural ability. I promise you that. It's written in print in Thrasher Magazine. I think the quote was, he looks like a mosquito flying around trying to land on something. I don't think that was the best compliment.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories

Tony Hawk

Skater

Skateboarding's Living Legend

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ARI FISHMAN:

You. Going back to, you know, the late 70s when you kind of started skating. Was there a moment that triggered you to be like, that's what I want to do.



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TONY HAWK:

Oh, yeah. I went to the very first time I went to a skate park. I had got it. I had a skateboard. I learned to ride through my neighborhood as transportation in 1977 78, and then when I was ten years old in 1978, I went to the skate park for the first time, and I saw people flying. And and that was the moment I was like, I want to, I want to fly. I want to do whatever it takes to get to that. I want to do that, and I'm here for it. I was very young when I started skating. I was very small, very skinny. I got made fun of a lot. And I mean, I was bullied endlessly in school because I was so small. So I looked like I was two grades behind the actual grade I was in. I tried to play sports, but I didn't really fit in. I did okay like I did okay in basketball. I did okay in baseball. I never felt like I was truly progressing at those sports. I just didn't because we were sort of expected to. When I found skating, I quit Little League. I no longer signed up for basketball, and I spent every moment I could outside of school at that skate park. Every time I skated, I learned something new. And and these are sometimes just minimal techniques, but I felt like I was always on this path progression. And I loved it. And. The sense of validation that gave me was something that is like, I can't, I can't even explain to people because. I didn't get validation elsewhere. I didn't get it from. From a team. I didn't get it from a, um, from a league. I didn't get it from. From a crowd. I got it from within.

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ARI FISHMAN:

And was there a specific person or people that you kind of like? I know Bones Brigade was kind of like this.

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TONY HAWK:

Um, I would think that probably one of my early inspirations was Steve Caballero, because he was he was small, he was older than me, but he was my size. And I saw a photo of him in a magazine, and he was wearing elbow pads on his knees. And I, I identify with that because I had the same issue, that I couldn't find knee pads small enough, so I had to wear elbow pads, and he was flying out of a pool. And I thought, not, not thought like, I can do that thought. I want to do that. You know, it wasn't it wasn't something where it was like a competitive nature. It was more like, he's smaller, he can fly. Maybe I can fly too. And it kept me fired up.

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ARI FISHMAN:

So this is like kind of the beginning of tricks and especially tricks in the air and that sort of thing. Can you talk about just like your mindset when it came to like failure, discipline, determination and especially like embracing pain in that discipline?

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TONY HAWK:

Um, well, I was always very determined, even when I wasn't skating. That was my my mom's version of saying he's very difficult. She just that was very determined. That was her nice way of saying it. Um, and I channeled all that determination into my skating. So when I set out to learn a trick, I would



obsess on it. I mean, it was it was truly obsessive. And for the most part, I figured out all these things that that I had dreamed of and. But it was. It was just. It was more about the repetition. Um, and it was more about the not giving up. I mean, I did get hurt along the way, and probably there was a moment where I got hurt. I got a pretty bad injury early on and, um, knocked my teeth out. Uh, I got a concussion and. It didn't deter me at all. I mean, I remember. I remember being in the hospital and thinking, oh, I know I did when I did wrong, and I got to adjust my feet and figure that out. I don't think that's the usual line of thinking for a 10 or 11 year old that's in the hospital. Um, but. I was, I was obsessed and and I was willing to push through the pain. I was I was absolutely. I don't want to get hurt, but I'm willing to get hurt.

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ARI FISHMAN:

Around that time. Also, your career is really taking off. Uh, but you're feeling a lot of alienation from the kids in your school and also some of the kids in the skate scene. You're kind of getting it from different angles. Can you just talk about that and how that kind of motivated you?

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TONY HAWK:

Um, yes. When I really got into skating and I was starting to do well in competition and starting to sort of rise through the ranks, um, I wasn't well liked by the skate community because my style was so, uh, trick based. They call me a circus freak. And my actual classmates, like people I grew up with. None of them skated anymore. Ice skating went through a little phase of



popularity, and then it was gone. It was like everyone grew out of it. But I didn't. And I just kept skating. So when I would come to school with a skateboard, they were like, you still skate? Like how? Eat. Are you too old? I was almost 14. Um. In fact, I used to like when I first, when I in my first year of ninth grade, as a freshman, I used to hide my skateboard in the bushes before class because I was caught walking around school with it. I would get harassed. In the meanwhile, I'm flying to Florida and entering competitions and actually winning money and signing autographs and then coming back to the school hallways. And I was a ghost. It was a you know, I didn't I didn't really. I wasn't looking for fanfare or accolades or anything, but. But that was a weird paradox to be living in.

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ARI FISHMAN:

And how much do you think your progression was from just like grinding and being determined, and how much was just a natural ability?

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TONY HAWK:

Oh, it was absolutely my commitment to getting better and putting in the work. I mean, that's there's there's no. Overstating how important the time is the time you put into it. Um, and I was willing to be at the skate park from the time school got out till the time they closed. Not willing to, I wanted to. There was one skate park in our town. You had to pay to use it. You had to wear full pads. So I would leave school, get picked up by my mom or dad, and then put



my pads on in the car because I was not going to waste an ounce of time with checking in or putting my pads on once I got to the park.

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ARI FISHMAN:

And at this time, this is kind of like the beginning of the resurgence of skating, right? You know, early 80s and just like you talked about a little bit, but just like your relationship with Thrasher Magazine that they obviously had like a big part in this resurgence. You got named skater of the year. So maybe it's talk about your relationship with them. And it was like ups and downs.

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TONY HAWK:

Sure. Well was some strange irony, but skateboarding as small as it was, was very divided. Um, there was uh, there was a sort of camp that said, oh, it's all about style. And then there was another camp that said, it's all about tricks. And I, I was all about doing tricks. I loved all of skateboarding, but it was weird to be sort of segregated when we we have this small community as it is, how can we be at war? And then I'm not even consider that cool. So I'm like an outcast in this outcast activity. And that was very isolating. And so when I would read criticisms in places like Thrasher Magazine, that definitely was not on my side. Like I was not a fan because I was all about tricks and they loved Krishna. So he was all flair and all style and all and big areas. And I love Christian too. Um, I just couldn't skate like him. And so they would bash me in the magazine and. It was. It was hard to accept, but at the same time, it just it just made me want to try harder. So. You know, I guess the silver lining was



that it motivated me and it motivated me to be more well-rounded in my style. But I can't recommend that as a motivator to most people. You know, criticism, like hard criticism in print. It's not cool.

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ARI FISHMAN:

While your career's taking off. It's sort of at the same time that home video cameras came into play. And so that kind of changed the landscape of this sport.

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TONY HAWK:

Well, we we grew up in that era, the first era of home video. So. Before, like in the early, early days, especially my early days of skating. No one had a camera. No one had, you know, only news or only news stations had video cameras. And then they would come maybe cover an event. And that was it. And then slowly people started to get VCRs, home video cameras, and then when the home video camera became affordable, suddenly skate videos were all over the place and people were making their own skate videos. Companies were making cohesive skate videos of their whole team. I was in the bonds brigade, so I was in the bones rigging videos. They were one of the first ones ever. And. That changed the landscape in terms of showing skating and skaters in their more natural form instead of just in competition. Because competition as great as it was, it's a conservative form of skating. It's you're doing you're doing stuff that you know, you're going to make videos allowed us to try stuff over and over until we got it. And so that was a different level of skating and a



different, a different way to show it. Um, I was thankful because I was mostly about doing tricks. And then suddenly I had a venue and I had a way to capture these tricks because some of the checks were too hard to do in competition. They were too risky. Um, and I think that was probably one of the, my biggest this in terms of recognition was being in those videos.

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ARI FISHMAN:

And so shortly after you decided to start a business. What inspired you transitioned into being an entrepreneur while you were also being a pro skater at that same time?

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TONY HAWK:

Well, I started a company in 1992 because I thought my my years and my days of being a pro skater were coming to an end because I was I was 24 and I was a vert skater, and so I was considered old and I was doing an outdated discipline. So I wanted to be in the skateboard world because I loved it so much. And I just decided, you know what? I have a good eye for talent. Um, I feel like I could create a team and a an esthetic and do my own thing. And so I started birdhouse. It was risky because skateboarding was at a lull in popularity. Very few people were buying skateboards. There were very few skate shops, even fewer skate parks. And I didn't care. I was just I was just happy to still be in the mix and be in the industry. And so birdhouse is now on our going on 30 plus years and, um, I never quit skating and I managed to. I



managed to stay competitive and still have a career. So, um, I was living the dream. I still am.

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ARI FISHMAN:

Let's talk about when things really kind of blew up in a commercial way. And the X-Games was a big turning point for that.

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TONY HAWK:

Um, I think that, uh, once the X games found its rhythm in the years, like 97, 99 kids were taking a great interest in skating and, um, even even people that don't skate were starting to appreciate it more. And so things got a little bigger. There were more opportunities for us as pros. Uh, there was a commercialization, in a sense, of skating, where suddenly you saw it. You saw it in movies, you saw it in commercials. You you saw it in print, in print ads. And you saw some of us as pros being asked to do endorsements. It was wild. It was exciting. Um, but at some point, it was hard to maintain that authenticity through all those. Um, all those successes and opportunities. Um, and to be honest, I got a little caught up in some of it and, and did some. Some promotions that that I was not that excited about that were mostly regrettable. I mean, it wasn't that I was tainting skateboarding or diminishing skateboarding, but it just it didn't really fit. And when I got the chance to work on a video game, I made sure that in my contract I had final approval over anything. Um, in terms of the skating, in terms of the music, in terms of the look, uh, the skaters, how I'm represented, how skateboarding



represented. And it was a lot to fight for. Like I was not in a position to be making those demands, but I'm thankful the Activision at the time agreed to all that. And when the video game finally came out, it was everything I'd hoped that it could be in more. Um, and I thought it represented skateboarding well. It was authentic, it was hardcore, and it represented all of skateboarding. Not just my style or not just me. Um, and the music and the art and the call and the the fashion. And so, um, once it came out, I was expecting it to be well-received by skaters and maybe inspire skaters to buy a game console or PlayStation. That was, to me, the market success. That was it, because skateboarding wasn't that. I mean, yes, it was on the rise, but it wasn't that popular and home video games were just starting to come into play. So there weren't many success stories there. Um, and so we didn't we didn't have a lot of expectation, which was awesome, because once it came out and then started doing well and getting good reviews, they started talking about a second one, and that one got even better reviews. And so suddenly we had a franchise and it was wild. It was. It changed my life completely.

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ARI FISHMAN:

The 900 at the X games, I mean, it's such like an iconic moment. I mean, obviously in that moment, there was so much determination. It felt like something so much bigger than landing a trick. But maybe it was just landing the trick for.

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TONY HAWK:



Yeah. Well, uh, 900 is the is obviously a trick I'm known for, and it's a two and a half spin in the air. I started trying it in 1987, um, on a ramp in France that I was. I was skating because we were there for a summer camp for five weeks. Uh, it was a miserable failure of an attempt, but. But I had the idea because I'd been doing seven 20s pretty regularly by that point, and I started trying and actively a few years later, once the ramps got better and I had more confidence with my spinning, and then through the mid 90s, I would sort of revisit it and I would try it. I would try it pretty, um, I would, I would be very determined to make it every time. And then when I finally started to try to land them, I got hurt a couple times. Um, and so then I would back off and sometimes come back to it for a bit, get hurt, back off. Um, but in all honesty, I was kind of done with it because I tried it like I gave it everything I had, and I broke my rib, um, because I was leaning too far forward when I landed. I mean, like, I landed my skateboard on the ramp and then just fell into the flat bottom, and I was like, I guess that's it. I can't do it. Um, and then when the X-Games came around, they had a best trick event, 1999, which was kind of just an afterthought. Best trick event back then was just sort of a sideshow. And it's 20 minutes of of some of the top skaters bailing, missing tricks, and then maybe 2 or 3 make something and they get the medals and that's it. And we move on. And we had we had done events like that in the past, and I usually did pretty well, but it just no one really cared. And so in this instance, I had an idea for a trick that I had done once before. It was a very old 720. I had made that once in my life. I made that trick early on in the event, so I still had time to spare. I didn't have anything else planned because I thought that that's going to take me the entire, uh, time frame. And so the announcer was kind of poking me, saying, what about one of those nine hundreds? And I was



like, dude, I've given 900 everything I have, but why not? Because it's a big crowd. It is a spectacle even when you fall. So I tried a couple. And after about my third one, I realized, like, I've got the right amount of speed here. I've got the right amount of spin. Maybe I could try to throw it down again. And. And if I get hurt. So what? Like, if I'm ever going to get hurt again. This is the time and place I thought I wanted to, but I was definitely willing to take it. And then after about 6 or 7 attempts, I got serious about trying to make it because I started spotting my landing and that was rare for me to spot my landing. Usually when I was spinning it, it was blind and I was just going on using the force to one to to figure out where the wall is. But this time I was spinning so fast that I could see my landing zone. So I started putting them down and when I finally committed to one, I fell forward again, the way that I had gotten hurt. But I didn't get hurt. And that was probably the moment where I knew I could do it. Because when I went back up the ramp to try it again, I shifted my weight to my back foot mid spin, and then I fell backwards and it was like split the difference and I made the next one.

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ARI FISHMAN:

And when we were going through those repetitions, did you know, like, at some point I'm going to make this happen today?

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TONY HAWK:

I knew I was going to make it happen or I was going to get severely injured. Because it wasn't going to be me quitting. I guess I'm not saying like I was



definitely going to, you know, kill myself doing it. No, I knew that I was going to get hurt enough that it wasn't going to allow me to try again. Exhaustion was not going to be the exit.

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ARI FISHMAN:

Do you ever reach that point when you're getting competition where you're not even thinking about what you're doing? Like it's just coming naturally to you?

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TONY HAWK:

Um, yeah. In my earlier days, sharing my peaked is I think nowadays I'm much more, um, I'm much more aware of the of the risks and the, and that my body is not going to react as quickly as it used to. So, um, that has shifted. But, uh, back in the day, for sure, I would obsess on my routine to the point where it became boring for me. And when it became boring, I knew that I was in good shape. Like, I think that's the mistake people think. Is that what came easy? Because you just had this natural talent? I didn't, I worked at it, and I worked at it so hard that it became mundane and easy, but still fun.

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ARI FISHMAN:

Um, skateboarding was about breaking the rules and reinventing another reality, essentially. And it's that whole punk philosophy where it's like this defiance to build something else, and there's some liberation in that. It's a



kind of reinventing whatever it thinks is the norm. How did it affect your mental growth and your personal growth in that same way that skating affected the rest of the culture?

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TONY HAWK:

Well, I would say it helped me realize that I can approach my adult life being a parent, having other obligations and other careers in ways that most people don't. Because I learned that I could be successful at skateboarding, which was the most unlikely path to success when I was a kid. No one was rich and famous from skateboarding. No one, um, the best skateboarders in the world had to find jobs when they turned 18. And as I progressed through it, I realized that I had a career and that I can chase other opportunities because of my success at skateboarding, but ones that fit within the skateboarding framework and. I love it. I mean, I just, you know, I feel. It's like I became autonomous where I can do all these other things, as long as I'm willing to put in the work for them and still skate at my leisure and still. Still do it for a living. I mean, I'm 55 and I'm a professional skateboarder. Like it's wild. I didn't think I'd be able to be a pro skater aged 20.

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ARI FISHMAN:

At some point, family became more important priority to you. If you just talk about how that, you know, sort of shifted for you.

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TONY HAWK:

Oh, yeah. Well, through my years of wild success that I never really dreamed of, I got a little caught up in it, and I was chasing every opportunity. I was traveling a lot and not present for my family. And at some point I realized my priorities need to shift. And I definitely learned to say no to a lot of requests in terms of financial or otherwise. Um, that would just take up my time and monopolize my mindset. And so, um, I would say about ten years ago, I made a very concerted effort to just be more available to my kids. And my relationships have blossomed since then with my family. And my wife. And I have this really great relationship, and it's like I never imagined I could have the best of both worlds. I thought that naively, that I had to commit myself fully to skateboarding to make that successful, and I don't. And the happiness is exponential now.

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ARI FISHMAN:

I think a lot of people see skateboarding as either kids that are pissing off security guards or big events like the Olympics or X games, but it was this culture that defined the culture at large or others through design, music, fashion. Like, there's this whole world that came from skateboarding. Tell me how you define skateboarding culture in relation to popular culture and how that influenced, you know, the landscape.

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TONY HAWK:



Um, well, I would say at its most basic, skateboarding is a, an art form, a lifestyle and a sport. And depending on what interests you in all of those elements is, is what you'll lean into. Um, many people don't like the idea that it's a sport because they got into it, because they didn't. They didn't like competitive sports, they didn't like team sports even. And they found a community. And this, this way of being active that was more artistic, but not about being compared to others. So I understand that, um, on the other end of that, it is a sport. It's in the Olympics. We, you know, I, I started competing, I was I was first recognized as a skater with skills because I was competing. So that element exists too. And it's and it's valid. Um, but so much has come from skateboarding in terms of the culture because it required a very unique perspective to start skating. In the early days, it wasn't tried and true, it wasn't popular. It set you apart from anyone your age because it wasn't cool. And so if you chose to be a skater, you had to do it with confidence. You had to do it truly because you loved it, not because you were trying to fit in. No one fit. We skated because we didn't fit in. We were the misfits. There were a lot of other influences that were happening with skateboarding because of that element, because. We were not mainstream. We weren't listening to the radio. You know, I'm also. Radio was a thing. Um, but we weren't. You know, we're listening to the mainstream music and what was popular, we were, if nothing else, creating it, creating our own sound because there was a sound that was very much parallel to what we were doing in terms of the attitude, the aggression, the anti status quo. And there was a soundtrack that went to that. There was a fashion that was functional but also offbeat and a way of carrying yourself where it's like, I don't care about fitting in. I want to do this because I love it and what it brings to me, what it brings to my sense of self and



confidence and, um. And what it brings to me mentally. I mean, that's why I chose skateboarding. I finally found something that. That spoke to me that that I felt a sense of accomplishment with and that I could do at my own pace, in my own style, and not have to listen to a coach. But still have a sense of community that was supportive. I have been skateboarding for 45 years and I have seen it evolve constantly, and now we are in, uh, uh, an era of skating where it's much more accessible. It's much more international. Kids are starting earlier. Um, let's put it this way. I just saw a girl do a kickflip 540 on a vert ramp, and she's ten years old. I. I didn't invent that trick until I was 26. And I had been skating for 16 years. She's doing it at the age that I started skating. As a foundational trick to build upon. That's how far we are. That's how far we've come.

END TC: 00:27:21:00