

downhill demons

Q: What's got four wheels, one helmet and bombs hills at alarming speeds?
 A: A slalom skateboarder. WORDS // KATE MARTIN

SHE'S GOING SO FAST, HER HELMET MORPHED.

OLD SCHOOL STYLE. JUDI >

A blast from the past

An old school style of skateboarding is making a comeback. You won't see any ollies, kickflips or nose grinds in this sport – it has roots in slalom skiing, where skiers must move quickly around gates placed along a downhill course. Slalom skating was popular in the '70s but the scene fizzled out when the more aggressive style of skating took over. Now it's regaining popularity, with competitions held all over the world. In April this year the first women's pro slalom event in over 25 years was held in California. New comers were up against seasoned pros who are stoked to see its comeback.

It's all downhill from here

In a slalom skateboarding race, cones are placed at intervals along a course, and skaters must manoeuvre around each cone in a zigzag pattern without disturbing or missing any. The winner is the skateboarder who does this in the fastest time, without disturbing any cones. Slalom races are run either against other racers (head to head) or against the clock. The course is usually set up downhill, the steepness depending on the level of the riders. There are often bales of hay placed at difficult corners to soften the impact for riders who come off.

New School

14-year-old Californian Lauren Howard started slalom skating almost two years ago. After watching the 2001 Slalom World Championships Lauren decided she'd had enough of being a spectator and took up the sport herself. Already Lauren is winning competitions around the world, her most recent victory being in Switzerland for the Women's Giant Slalom. With sponsors Etnies behind her,

Lauren is leading a new wave of chicks into an old school sport, but is inspired by the women who took it up the first time round. "Judi totally inspires me," says Lauren. "I feel very lucky to know her and skate with her – she's always helping me out. I probably wouldn't skate half as well if I didn't have Judi or any of the other women to compete and race with." This little ripper says slalom skating is a versatile sport that's easy to get into. "A lot of girls my age like snowboarding and surfing – slalom has a lot in common with both sports. If there is no snow or surf, you go skating!" The only drawback is that you can't skate when it rains. Although Lauren's seen a few nasty stacks, she's never had one herself, and says most of the people who do get injured aren't wearing enough protective gear. But basically, Lauren rates slalom skating because, "You are surrounded by awesome and encouraging people, and you get to go so fast!"

Old School

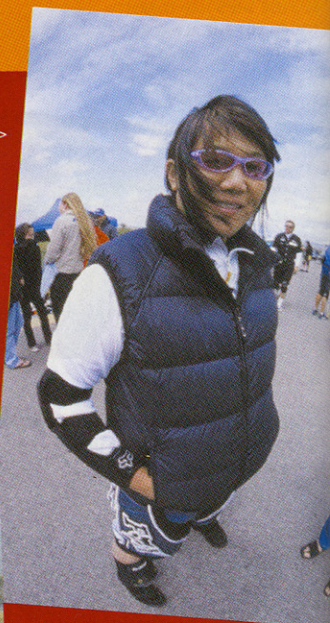
Judi Oyama started skating in the late 70's and competed in her first slalom race at age 15. After that race she picked up six sponsors, including Vans and Independent. These days Judi is 43 and a mother of two, but don't think that it's slowed her down. She's just as stoked on slalom now as she was back then. She recently helped organise the first women's pro comp in 25 years, and won it too! The new equipment and some new enthusiasts have got Judi amped all over again. "I enjoy the adrenalin rush, the nervous feeling you get at the top of the hill, wondering if you're going to make a clean run. I like the exercise, meeting new people and getting to see all my

skate friends for a session." So how is slalom different to normal skating? "It's a different set of skills," says Judi. "Speed, technique, endurance and strategy. You have to think about the hill, pavement quality, speed and stopping distance at the bottom of the run. You have to look ahead several cones in advance to get through the course. Body position and weight distribution are important too." As for the new breed of



YOUNG GUN, LAUREN

slalom skaters taking to the hills, Judi is all for a little extra competition. "It's great to see all the new kids getting into it. Last year a 15-year-old won the men's open class at the World Championships. Lauren and her brother Dylan are rippers, as well as Kei Benko, whose mother was my old team-mate back in the day. It's amazing how much they improve at each race and how much they enjoy it. They all have the biggest smiles and just have the best time." ★



Fast Facts

Slalom skateboarding requires speed, technique, endurance and strategy. You need to have confidence in your ability to judge speed and distance and knowing how to foot brake (slow down) is a must.

Experienced riders reach speeds approaching 48kph.

Slalom is not huge over here, but if you're keen ask your local skate shop where you could get a slalom set-up. It will cost a few hundred bucks for new deck, trucks and wheels.

FOR MORE INFO ON THIS AWESOME SPORT CHECK OUT WWW.SILVERFISHLONGBOARDING.COM OR WWW.SLALOMSKATEBOARDER.COM