

by Mica James



ELEMENT SKATEBOARDS

Elemental Awareness

How much good can a skateboard company do? A whole lot, it turns out, if your name is Element and you've been leading the field since 1998. But it's not just a question of size. It's more a question of soul. And the soul in question belongs to Element founder, Johnny Schillereff.

In a sense, Element's past mirrors the dysfunction of Schillereff's youth—somewhat unfocused and tortured but headed for a happy ending. Buffeted by the ever-shifting winds of a trend-following industry yet strengthened by many trials by fire, Element has emerged as a bedrock brand in an industry that is often crippled by flightiness, in-fighting and, often, in-your-face dysfunction.

Skateboarding was the only thing that held Schillereff's world together when he was young and a 1992 epiphany of sorts inspired by the music of Bob Marley and the wisdom of Dan Millman's book, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, led to a vision for Element: be a force for good, make a difference in a positive way, and do it all by giving back to the skateboarding community.

It's that vision, fueled by Schillereff's passion to succeed and unwillingness to compromise his values that has led Element to radically change the landscape of skateboarding. Element leads by example and has racked up a lot of firsts: first company to offer health and dental insurance to team riders, first to acknowledge girl power in skateboarding by releasing a girls' clothing line, first to form a non-profit organization dedicated to help youth grow from their involvement with skateboarding.

It's this last that may be Element's most enduring legacy. Founded in 2003 by Schillereff and best friends, Todd Larson and Mike Kershner, Elemental Awareness is a non-profit that works for kids through skateboarding and wilderness survival skills.

While wilderness therapy isn't new, Elemental Awareness forges new ground by introducing underprivileged youth to the ancient teachings of the Apache Scouts at the yearly Element YMCA Skate Camp in California. Mentored by Tom Brown Jr., arguably the world's most accomplished tracker and survivalist, Larson and Kershner interweave teachings on respect for the earth and her creatures with practical skills such as building primitive debris shelters, creating friction fires, and carving traps and snares.

The connection between skateboarding and wilderness survival may appear tenuous but Kershner explains that both activities reveal the hidden potential of your immediate environment and invite creative expression. To a skateboarder, a bench is much more than simply a place to park your butt. "You can tail slide it, nose grind it, do tricks over it. A skater knows all the different gradients of concrete, the different textures of fiberglass and how they grind and slide," he says. The skater isn't trying to change the bench. He takes what his environment offers and gets creative.

It's the same for a wilderness survivalist. A humble cedar tree presents unlimited possibilities: inner bark for cordage, outer bark for baskets, heartwood for fire making, branches for animal snares, leaves for tea, for camouflaging scent while tracking and for smudging debris shelters, and so much more.

Loving to skate opens kids to a new way of looking at their urban environment. Through Elemental Awareness' wilderness skills courses, they begin to recognize the same potential for creative self-expression in nature. By realizing the connection between the two activities, all of a sudden, their world expands dramatically and the principles honed through skateboarding can be applied to other aspects of their lives.

The result is greater motivation, self-esteem, awareness and belief in their ability to accomplish any goal. "Both activities teach self-discipline, because you're responsible for your own progress," says Kershner. "You're going to choose to progress as long as you choose to push yourself and choose to grow. Choosing to become proficient at anything in life—from a backside tail slider to bow drill—teaches that you can become proficient in anything else that you want."

Ultimately, our lives are created by the choices that we make. Schillereff, through Element and Elemental Awareness, has chosen to make a difference in the world by empowering youth to make informed and inspired choices. Skateboarding, it turns out, can indeed lead to an enlightened way of being. **H**

Resources:

www.elementawareness.org
www.skatecamp.org
www.trackerschool.com