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(LEFT TO RIGHT) MARY JANE, EYE ON THE PRIZE, EMPTY POOLS AND SOME COOL REFRESHMENTS. COPING STRATEGY. HEIDI, SIGN OF THE TIMES.

We are driving down Interstate 15. It's hot as hell, and I am following a 1987 Chevy Celebrity full of skater chicks. The bumper sticker on the back of their car reads, "For those about to skate, we salute you!"

After 45 minutes and a few wrong turns, we end up in a neighborhood recently distraught by the San Diego fires. The Chevy Celebrity makes its way through a wealthy suburban neighborhood where the fires were picky, leaving some homes unscathed and others ravished.

POOL SKATERS

photos Grodesky

Rose Bern, the leader of the "backyard pool skater crew," parks her car next to an empty lot. Only a fence surrounding an ash-filled swimming pool remains. I can see eyes light up amongst Rose and her fellow skaters: Jeneene Chatawsky, Elena Hullis, Heidi Fitzgerald and Mary Jane Parish. The dirty bowl of concrete looks like heaven to these five ladies.

Just beyond the fence, however, there is an older gentleman cleaning



"I love that grinding noise on the pool coping, that sound of metal scratching cement."



out debris. He looks like the owner of the lot.

"Oh s#S@! f%#&!!!!" I hear muffled under a few breaths. It is a Saturday afternoon and people are out cleaning up the ruins. It's not the best day to skate pools, but then again, when is? The girls come up with a few plans. They can bring their buckets and brooms they have in their cars and clean the guy's pool and then ask if they can skate it. Or, there's another empty pool on an adjacent lot. They can hop a fence and see what they can get away with before the cops show up.

The owner was friendly, but was not about to let five girls skate the only piece left of his million-dollar home. He informed us that cops will be called if wheels even touch the concrete. Just then, the Superior Court Justice of San Diego pulled up in his Lexus. Time to go.

The girls are annoyed, but getting

turned down is part of the process. "Pools are only on for so long," said Rose, who is dressed in navy Dickies shorts and a PBR T-shirt that reveals some ink. "To go out and search for pools is like searching for a needle in a haystack. Then, when you find one, you might only get it for 15 minutes. Either the neighbors get pissed or the cops eventually show up."

All this effort seems insane to me, and I feel like I am tagging along and holding these hardcore girls back. I tell Rose if she hops fences normally to skate pools, I'll follow. But as it is, we have three cars total, and it's a general rule to only take one car when going out on such a mission so as not to make a scene. The other car-full of girls ride in an older Blue Nissan white top-per truck, and we stand out like sore thumbs in this wealthy suburban community.

For 45 more minutes, we drive

around and snoop over fences, beyond the tops of walls, even looking through people's windows in hopes of finding a partially or fully-drained concrete swimming pool. We find a few jacuzzis, but no pools. Our gaslights simultaneously start to glow, so we decide to stop and fill up. A few of the girls grab food at Carl's Jr., and I get a chance to speak with them.

"This is what my mom does looking for garage sales," said Elena Hullis, referring to our quest. Elena, who is tall with light brown hair and is dressed in jeans and a blue tank, is in her late twenties. She works part time as a nanny and valets cars for half the year in San Diego just so she can spend the rest of her free time skateboarding. For the second half of the year, Elena divides her time in Northern California, where her boyfriend is, and works at Woodward Skate Camp in Pennsylvania. She took up skate-



(ABOVE) SKATER MOBILE, DETROIT STEEL COMBING BURNT-OUT SAN DIEGO. (RIGHT) HEIDI MAKING THE NOISE SHE LOVES.

boarding when she was 14, after seeing a kid at camp skateboard for the talent show. Elena started with skating street and progressed to skating bowls, then ramps, then “real backyard pools.”

Like Elena, the other girls progressed to skating backyard pools, similarly, starting with street and making the gradual transition.

“Is it normal to drive all day searching for pools even though you may never even find one?” I ask, bewildered by this strange phenomenon that appears both time consuming and frustrating.

“It’s the hunt! And it makes it all the more rewarding when you do find one,” said Elena. “It’s kind of therapeutic.”

It must be, or people wouldn’t have been doing it since the mid ‘60s. In the pre-skatepark days, the Dogtown and Zephyr Crew were regularly draining pools. The history of pool skating as a whole is fuzzy. What is even more nebulous is the history of females who skate backyard pools. Peggi Oki of Santa Barbara is documented in Dogtown as the sole female skater charging concrete in the mid ‘70s.

There is no real authority on who the first girls to skate pools were, but the group I am with now are pioneers of their era. Rose Bern says she only knows of a dozen or so girls who regularly do what they do to skate pools.

“We live to skate,” said Heidi Fitzgerald, the most seasoned skater and only professional of the group.

When she was younger she says there were never other girls with her skating backyard pools, except pro Cara Beth Burnside every now and then.

Heidi is the oldest of the crew and still skates professionally, but she also has a job doing inventory for small businesses. She has dark hair and has full-sleeve tattoos on both arms. Growing up with a dad in the military, Heidi moved around a lot, but took up skating in Texas where she learned at

“She wrote descriptions of all the houses surrounding it (the pool) from the air, and when she came out, we searched all day for it.”

pools since there were no skate parks. In more than 15 years, Heidi’s skated hundreds of backyard pools, especially around times of natural disasters when pools were abandoned after homes were demolished. “In 1994 after the San Fernando Valley Earthquake, I skated 13 pools in one day!” she said.

Mary Jane, the youngest one of the group at 21 years old was getting antsy by this point. “I just want to f&#in skate!” she said. Rose Bern refers to MJ as an “Hessian” — a heavy metal, dirty skater. She is dressed in a black Slayer T-shirt with holes all over it, her jeans


are splattered with old paint, her black Vans are tattered and she is drinking PBR from a brown paper bag. Her friends call her a vagabond because she sleeps on friends’ couches and travels around just so she can skate. Rose said she is also a certified framer at Micheal’s.

Rose, the organizer of the trip, gets a phone call on her cell and lets us know the “Pala Pool” is on. We drive another 45 minutes somewhere inland of San Diego to the Pala Indian Reservation where there’s a “permission pool,” a well-known (amongst skaters) drained pool that the owner lets people skate as long as they keep it clean.

The pool is located at an old dairy farm, and there is a silo in the background. A sign by the pool reads, “NO TRASH, NO GRAFITTI, NO FIRE, SKATEBOARDS ONLY.”

When the ladies arrive, there are a few guys already skating, but they let the girls have the pool to themselves for a while. Rose brings a small boom box out of her car and blasts the Descendents through the small speakers. She is thin, but has a muscular frame and is first to charge the concrete bowl. She carves up and down over the drain holes, and over the sludge embedded on the pool walls from years of build up. Her face is intense and she is totally in her element pushing herself with each turn, letting her wheels go over the pool coping.

Everyone cheers her on and starts



"You're not supposed to skate it. Usually you are trespassing, and your heart's beating fast."

screaming. Even though we are surrounded by farmland on an isolated Indian reservation, their energy is electrifying. These girls are passionate and damn good at what they do.

In between turns, I talk to the girls about the lengths they've gone to skate pool. Elena Hullis said her friend, Kim Peterson, once saw an empty pool while flying out of Long Beach airport. "She wrote descriptions of all the houses surrounding it from the air, and when she came out, we searched all day for it."

Rose said she's skated over a dozen pools she's drained herself. One time, in Las Vegas, she bucketed a pool filled to her knees using only an orange pumpkin Halloween candy holder. Last Easter, she saw a partially-drained pool by the beach in Cardiff. Figuring it was a nice present to her, she hopped the fence, cleaned the pool, and skated for an hour, just in time to pass the cops on her way out.

Why do they go through this trouble when there are skate parks today that have man-made-to-skate pools that can be located in the phone book?

"Skating a pool is like skating something sacred," said Rose. "You're not supposed to skate it. Usually you are trespassing, and your heart's beating fast." Rose adds that skate parks nowadays have so

many rules, wear pads, helmets, no cussing, no herb, no brown paper bags or PBR.

"At pools you can do whatever you want and be whoever you are." Rose later tells me she is a single mom and has a five-year old daughter who also skates. Rose works hard at her job in optical retail to support her family, but this is her escape. "This is my way of living on the edge," she says.

Jeneene Chatowsky feels similarly. With blond hair pulled back in a ponytail underneath a trucker hat, she is the novice, having only been skating for two years. She is in school full time but dates a pro skater, so she's improved quickly enough to keep up with the rest of the girls. "Without skating, my life would be boring," she said.

As we are talking, Mary Jane drops into the deep end of the pool, a huge feat considering you can't see the bottom from the take off. She is wearing a pirate patch over her right eye and her black hair is flying behind her face. The ladies are hooting and hollering.

"I love that sound!" said Heidi Fitzgerald, watching on with Rose as the other girls drop in at the deep end and hit their trucks against the pool coping. "I love that grinding noise on the pool coping. That sound of metal scratching cement!"

"That's our common goal," said Rose. "Find 'em and grind 'em." ❁