

TELEVISION

EXTREME  **SPORTS**



**Dudes
vs.
Nature**

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in 1977, Johnny Rotten brayed "God save the Queen/ She ain't no human being/
There is no future/ In England's dreeeeming," and punk was born.

In 1996, John Lydon, who used to be Johnny Rotten, is lending his unmistakable voice to an American TV commercial for Mountain Dew, the specimen-yellow soft drink that's positioning itself as the official beverage of extreme sports culture. You know extreme sports -- that's where all those non-jock white boys (and some girls, too) attain jock status by doing flippy things on mountain bikes or dropping out of

planes to surf down a ski slope or hanging by their toes from bungee cords. On the Mountain Dew ad, Lydon cackles his way through a warp-speed version of "Route 66" while a subjective-angle camera rockets down a winding road. And punk rolls over in its grave.

Or does it? The Sex Pistols were basically a larking piece of performance art, devilish provocateurs rather than message-bearing idealists (like the Clash). Lydon gave society the finger, and with his other hand pocketed the dough. Now he's back, and not a moment too soon, to mock the perpetual gullibility of the ad-saturated masses. Extreme sports, or alternative sports as they're sometimes called, are supposed to be "punk" to traditional sports' bloated arena rock. But even Lydon, who probably has never hefted a sporting implement in his life, can see through this delusion.

Punk was grounded in do-it-yourself simplicity -- a pawnshop guitar, two chords, a few safety pins and you had a band. Teenagers skateboarding in front of your local Starbucks are punk, but there's nothing remotely punk about the bulk of extreme sports. Heavy on expensive, logo-plastered gear, extreme sports are about as accessible to the average person as the Rolling Stones' lighting and sound system are to your neighborhood garage band. They're just another indulgence for the overprivileged.

Look at the event lineup for the [1996 ESPN X Games](#) which the cable sports network is televising June 24-30 (not coincidentally, this is ESPN's slowest time of the year, with no pro and college hoops, hockey or football to count on). Billed as "the world's largest alternative sports extravaganza," the X Games will offer \$300,000 in prize money in nine categories: Barefoot water-ski jumping, bicycle stunt, bungee jumping, sport climbing, inline skating, street luge, skateboarding, skysurfing, team endurance and wakeboarding.

Barefoot water-ski jumping (essentially, water skiing without skis) requires a speedboat and a lake. Skysurfing, in which a surfer jumps out of an airplane with his or her feet strapped to a specialized surfboard, not only requires a plane but a video cameraperson jumping too, because the event is judged on the "performance of the surfer as well as the quality of the video." Wakeboarding (performing tricks and stunts on a small surfboard in the wake of a boat) -- again, you need a boat. Street luge -- you need a specialized skateboard and, ideally, a permit to close city streets to traffic. Bungee jumping -- yeah, right. Clearly, these are not sports that just any kid with a pair of sneakers, a ball and a lot of desire can participate in. But "extreme" sounds a lot, like, *radder* than "elitist," doesn't it?

Perusing the X Games schedule, two things become clear: These aren't sports so much as circus stunt mutations of old-style daredevil/rebel sports like surfing and ski

jumping, and there's an almost fetishistic emphasis on danger, speed and grievous bodily injury.

"Shoeless kamikaze skiers break the sanity barrier racing toward a slick ramp at over 40 mph, flying inverted 90 to 100 feet and landing upright," trumpets the X Games' blurb for barefoot water-ski jumping. A report on last year's X Games reads like a casualty list. One barefoot water skier used Crazy Glue to close a cut on his foot so he could stay in the competition. During the Team Endurance event (kayaking, whitewater rafting, swimming, climbing and biking a long-distance course), "Team Semper Fidelis was disqualified...when team member Keith Gaffney had to drop out due to severe cellulitis in his hands and feet," while "Team Hisardut Survival wrapped their canoe around a rock and had to be rescued by the Maine Warden Service, no doubt an embarrassment for the two Israeli combat instructors, a martial arts instructor, a US Naval officer and a search and rescue instructor." (What, no Robert Bly?)

There's also a breathless retelling of the legendary early years of street luge. One "Bloody Sunday" in the early '70s, "a gravity-powered vehicle went out of control on California's Signal Hill. . . and veered into a crowd of spectators. The rumor was that somebody died and somebody else was hurt." (Oddly, though, the December 1995 death of world champion skysurfer Rob Harris while filming a Mountain Dew ad in Canada rates only one rather emotionless sentence in the "History of Skysurfing" section.)

Sure, there are plenty of non-extreme sports that involve risk and pushing your body past the limit. But extreme sports' glorification of risk and injury seems pretty arrogant and (there's no kind way to say this) stupid. As Beavis and Butt-head might say as they watch at home, "Splat! Awesome! Heh-heh-heh-heh!"

Extreme sports haven't exactly taken over the airwaves. The only place you can see them with any regularity is on programming-desperate ESPN2 (popularly known as "The Deuce") and on "MTV Sports," a weekly half-hour show hosted by the deeply annoying Dan Cortese. The spacily smiling, tanned, suburban-grungy Cortese, who was the Burger King Guy a few years ago and then the co-star of NBC's short-lived remake of "Route 66," is the Kahuna of extreme sports dudes -- at least in terms of wardrobe.

On a recent edition of "MTV Sports," Cortese wore an outfit that was as complicated as one of Madonna's creations from her "Desperately Seeking Susan" days -- white do-rag under a baseball cap turned backwards, black wraparound shades, black sleeveless mesh T shirt from the All Star Cafe (the sports equivalent of Planet Hollywood) over a white sleeveless undershirt, black baggy All Star Cafe jam shorts,

tiny black socks, important-looking medium-top basketball shoes. He looked like a slacker beach bum who'd slept in his clothes, except you knew that there was nothing random about what he was wearing. The combo was as specific and regimented in its way as any sports team uniform.

Like everything else on MTV, "MTV Sports" is mostly commercials broken up by little snippets of content. Some of the series' recurring sponsors are Reebok, Rollerblade, Bell helmets ("Courage for your head") and Ruby Red Squirt (apparently, neon-colored soft drinks with vaguely gross names like Squirt and Dew are trying to pass themselves off to extreme sports viewers as the anti-Gatorade). Say what you will about the corruption of pro sports by advertising; extreme sports is as corporate driven as any major league team or TV sportscast.

Indeed, it's in commercials that extreme sports has made its biggest TV impact so far. American viewers were first introduced to skysurfing via a 1991 "Life is Short, Play Hard" commercial for Reebok. Screaming thrash-punk music, dizzying camerawork and young buff creatures popping stunts on mountain bikes or free-falling out of airplanes are the rule in ads for everything from the Volkswagen Jetta to Naya water to, of course, Mountain Dew -- the non-Lydon ads feature four flannel-shirted Cortese wannabes called The Dew Dudes.

Advertisers love the extreme philosophy -- that strange combination of nihilism and naivete -- because it's straight out of the textbooks. The promise of ultimate freedom and independence masks an appeal to pure self-indulgence. The subtext of extreme ads (and extreme sports) is this: The laws of nature do not apply to *me*. Or, as Reebok puts it, "This is my planet."

There's a Coors beer ad running now in which attractive twentysomethings are depicted as giants playing softball on a dwarfed Rocky Mountains, and it perfectly captures the extreme 'tude. The notion that the natural world is your playground (so go ahead and litter it with beer cans and trample it with off-road vehicles) is a flat-out rejection of the traditional outdoor enthusiast/environmentalist idea about our relationship to nature. The point in extreme culture is not to be one with nature, but to master it, to deny it.

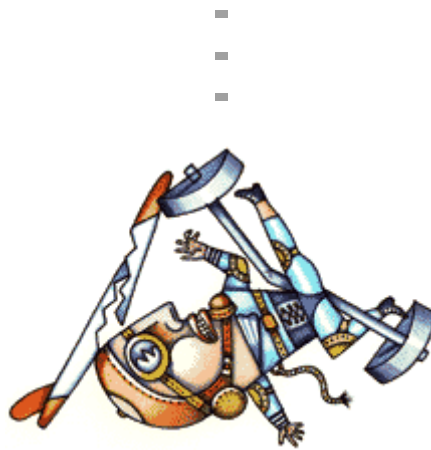
It's a curiously old-fashioned, un-rad notion from frontier days, when men and women pressed westward, regarding nature as the enemy (and it was), and proceeded to shape the earth to suit their needs and whims. The irony of course is that, today, the frontier is gone, and there's less and less open space in which to play and roam.

Extreme sports, which uses both the man-made world, like bridges and city streets, and the physical one, including the very sky itself, as its playing field, could be seen

as a punk-defiant gesture toward urbanization and technology -- if the extreme phenomenon didn't depend so much on technology to perfect those aerodynamic skysurfing boards 'n' stuff.

The extreme sportsters' attempts to change the proportions of a world in which people are increasingly powerless and small is not without poignance, though. This is the generation that grew up on Spielberg, video games and cyberspace -- in their imaginations and egos, if not in actuality, *anything* is possible.

But with extreme sports, they've turned reality into a gigantic video game -- and they're the little dots trapped inside it.



Do you find Extreme Sports and the Mountain Dew Dudes extremely irritating? Vent in [Table Talk](#).

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