



**Blast from the past**

# The original halfpipe heroes

*Thirty years ago this month, the UK's first ever halfpipe snowboarding contest was held in a makeshift pipe at the Cairngorm Mountain ski area. Malcolm Jack talks to the man who made it happen and the man who won it (sort of)*

It was a landmark moment in British snowsport history that birthed a major international competition that still takes place every year. But to call the crucible of the first ever British half-pipe snowboarding championship a "halfpipe", as such, would be a bit of an overstatement. "It was more like a large ditch," remembers event co-organiser Eddie Spearing with a grin, 30 years on.

On the morning of Sunday, 24 March, 1991 beneath unexpectedly clear blue skies on a shallow slope in the Cairngorm Mountain ski area, a piste basher shoved two long mounds of snow around two metres high into parallel lines roughly 50 metres long and six metres apart, leaving a flat-bottomed gully in between. Competition officials and riders and their friends alike swarmed in and did the rest of the sculpting, mostly by hand.

"It was impossible to make the whole length perfect," explains Spearing, who was a galvanizing figure in the early British snowboarding movement, "so the riders would find where they wanted to hit, and them and their buddies would sculpt that section. And then they'd go across and they'd sculpt another section, and so on. And that," he adds, "was the first British half-pipe."

Around 70 people were present, among the competitors a mixture of British and international professionals and keen amateurs. Helmets and other safety gear weren't exactly mandatory. One team, a rebellious gaggle from up around Aberdeen by the name Gnat's Chuff, hit the ditch wearing purple dressing gowns – their signature attire for reasons nobody can seem to remember (Aviemore-based Tony Brown, founder of Britain's first snowboard



**Left: Simon Smith in the pipe at Cairngorm**  
Photograph: Tony Brown

**Above: Report from the contest in Snowboard UK magazine.**  
Photograph: Colin Heggie



**"The parties that weekend were, to quote a report in Snowboard UK magazine, 'raging'"**

shop and school The Snowboard Academy, recalls competing at another event with a colander duct-taped to his head).

The big international brands dominated the line-up – Nidecker, Nitro, Kemper, Sims – but at least one or two competitors proudly rode prototype boards made by fledgling local firm the Acid Snowboard Company, Britain's first native snowboard makers. Bankrolled by a considerable Highlands and Islands Development Board grant the "Acid boys," as they were known, were famed not just for their skilful craft but also for the wild, public-funds subsidised parties they threw at their Laggan Bridge farm HQ.

There was minor controversy late in the day after Alan Innes was crowned freestyle halfpipe winner only to see his one-point victory disputed by runner-up Mark Webster. It seemed that score counting had been done inaccurately in haste in order



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to make an STV News bulletin. A recount delivered a joint result. "I still just call myself the first ever British halfpipe champion," Innes laughs three decades later. Long since retired from the halfpipe – "at 52 you know it's gonna hurt if you don't land it" – Innes today works as a magician and children's entertainer. He's surely the only person ever to have won honours in both freestyle snowboarding and the Ron Gordon Cup for Card Magic.

The 1991 British Open Snowboarding Championships at Cairngorm may not have witnessed the kinds of gravity-defying big airs you'll see being performed today by slick superstars in perfectly formed tubes against a backdrop of crisp alpine landscapes. But the maverick, eccentric, DIY and faintly anarchic story of the first British halfpipe and the people who made it happen in many ways encapsulates the spirit of the early British – and, indeed, global – snowboarding movement.

Snowboarding began as an unruly snowsport revolution that knocked ski-slope traditionalists on their backsides, and it gave rise to a multi-billion-pound industry enjoyed by tens of millions of people today, not to mention an array of lucrative competitions staged at glamorous resorts around the world. Among these is the modern successor of the 1991 British Open Championship, the British Snowboard and Freeski Championships, or The BRITS, which is held every year in the Swiss Alps at LAAX.

Surprisingly, given its place in snowboarding history, next to no record of the Cairngorm event exists anywhere, either online or offline. Beyond the fond, if slightly fuzzy memories of those present – the afterparties that weekend were, to quote a Snowboard UK magazine report, "raging" – the only hard evidence of the competition is a leather-bound folder of papers, magazine clippings and photographs which Spearing has dug out at his home in Wanaka, New Zealand, where he has lived since 2002. Over Skype, he holds up the original results sheet printed on an old dot matrix printer.

Like a lot of people on the early scene, Spearing drifted into snowboarding from a skateboarding background, before becoming involved with the founding of the British Snowboarding Association (BSA), which he chaired from 1988 until 2004. Around the same time, he co-founded Snowboard UK, the country's first dedicated snowboarding magazine. "We'd leave the magazine office in Worcester at like five o'clock on a Friday," he recalls, "then drive up to Scotland and spend the whole weekend at Cairngorm or Glenshee. We'd do that a lot."

By 1991 the BSA felt confident enough to stage its inaugural, two-day flagship championship at Cairngorm, over the weekend of 23-24 March. Typically, the Scottish weather didn't seem keen to play along. "The first day, the slalom day, it was a howling horizontal snow gale," Spearing remembers. "When it came to the halfpipe we really didn't know if we were going to even get to go ahead." As such, nobody had any compunctions about staying out drinking until 2am (not that they would have anyway).

Then on Sunday morning "idyllic conditions" suddenly reigned, and hangovers had to be hastily shaken off. The halfpipe was fashioned, and by midday riders were dropping in excitedly from left and right. "The practice period saw the most



**Main:** Stewart Duncan in the pipe.

**Above:** Steve Crampton of Team Gnat's Chuff rocking a high-performance purple dressing gown.

Photographs: Tony Brown



**"I was on Blue Peter, teaching of all people John Leslie how to snowboard"**

outrageous air," reads the Snowboard UK report. "Rusty Russel was in orbit. Simon Smith was pulling McTwists at height."

The field was whittled down to 12, then the joint winners crowned based on their best scores from two runs (following that hasty recount). With the light fading, everyone grabbed their boards and trudged up to drop off the Headwall in celebration of a great day. Well, almost everyone. "Muggins here was left cleaning up," grumbles Spearing. "You can see me in the background of one of the photos, the guy wandering around with the black plastic bag, picking up all the rubbish."

Rough and ready as the competition may sound, it's important to bear in mind that the first ever snowboarding competition on a man-made halfpipe had taken place

only eight years earlier at Soda Springs, California. It wasn't until 1992 that the Pipe Dragon was invented in Colorado – a snow-grooming machine with a giant curved arm that made uniform pipe construction possible.

Improvisation and, shall we say, nonconformity, were defining characteristics of the early snowboard scene. To borrow a surfing analogy, the riders had caught a wave, living for the now, conscious that it might collapse at any moment.

"In the UK, maybe not even a thousand people were snowboarding at that time," Spearing estimates. "It was on the fringes of the mainstream, but as a bit of a joke, a bit of a toy, something that wasn't going to hang around for very long. It wasn't considered important. The skiers didn't want snowboarders around because they were considered dangerous and bad. Snowboarders didn't come from a ski background; they came from a skateboard background or a surfing or windsurfing background. They didn't understand how snow worked or the etiquette of being on snow. There was a lot of early dislike of snowboarders."

"Of course, that just fed into what snowboarding was, which was a sport for outsiders. It wasn't accepted. It was very countercultural."

Alan Innes, joint winner of the 1991 British halfpipe event (or just "winner" if you listen to him), went on to become an unlikely minor TV ambassador for snowboarding. "I was an A-list star of the day," he jokes. "Myself and three other guys, we did You Bet! at an indoor slope in Telford. The challenge was, we had to go down a slope, off a jump and put basketballs into baskets. We walked away with a You Bet Trophy." Innes's trophy cabinet is nothing if not eclectic.

"And I was on Blue Peter," he adds,

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"teaching of all people John Leslie how to snowboard."

Snowboarding would of course come in from the cold over the ensuing decade to become the defining adrenaline activity of the 1990s. As big brands and a blizzard of sponsorship money blew in it rapidly became highly professionalised. In 1998, at Nagano in Japan, snowboarding made its debut at the Winter Olympics – much to the dismay of Spearing who, with good reason, feared it was being co-opted by the skiing establishment. After an ignominious start – snowboarding's first Olympic gold medallist, Canadian Ross Rebagliati, was disqualified for marijuana use – today it is one of the competition's most popular events.

Spearing went on to organise many more British snowboarding championships, but not at Cairngorm. In 1992, the competition moved to Avoriaz in the French Alps, and it has remained on the continent all but permanently since. "It was a bitter pill to swallow," Spearing explains, "but if we wanted it to be the best competition, it just couldn't happen in Scotland, because the conditions were a lottery."

"We had people whose level of competence was really increasing, and yet they had to

come all the way back to the UK to ride in a competition where there might not even be snow. At the same time, EasyJet and so on were just beginning to occur. Why bother going to Scotland to go snowboarding, if you can get on a cheap flight to France? Why not just take the competition to where the competitors all were? That way we could guarantee snow and turn it into a week-long event."

The British Open would return to Cairngorm just once, in terrible weather in 2002, by which point it had grown much beyond the collapsing BSA's grasp. "It had gotten bigger and bigger over the intervening 10 years," says Spearing. "It got real big. We needed outside help."

The BRITS championship of today is organised by the national governing body GB Snowsport. There is no handmade halfpipe; riders do not wear dressing gowns, nor colanders on their heads.

The anarchy of the early British snowboarding movement may be long gone, but the memories and the friendships live on. "At the time you're just doing what you do," reflects Spearing, wistfully. "It's only in hindsight you realise something was important. I feel really lucky to have been there at that time and place." ★



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