

The Man



Behind the Medal

Ross Powers reflects on winning the gold, growing up in Vermont and why he plans to stay here

Twenty-one year old Michael Nevin of Manchester sat down recently with his friend Ross Powers—who just happens to be the Olympic Gold Medal Halfpipe Champ—to talk snowboarding and a few other things. This is the second time Nevin has 'interviewed' Powers. The first was for Nevin's publication *The Journal*, which he describes as an "open book," in which people in the snowboard/skateboard/music/art arenas can communicate with each other. This time for *STRATTON Magazine*, Nevin's mission was to do an unconventional interview with the local star for all the rest of us. Continue reading to see what unfolded in their casual conversation.

THE MAN BEHIND THE MEDAL

Just after eight AM on March 22, an exhausted Ross Powers sits in Partridge in a Pantry, a deli at the base of Stratton Mountain. It is only a short time after Ross won the Gold Medal in Salt Lake City and the first day after the U.S. Open in which he finished eighth in the Halfpipe. It's obvious that the post-medal celebrations, appearances, and media invasion of his life have caught up with him. Yet he keeps on kicking. Between bites of an egg and cheese sandwich, Ross is signing contracts with his agent, talking with representatives of the Ross Powers Foundation and fielding autograph-hunters.

Meanwhile, approximately sixty kids and a couple of camera-toting

parents await the Olympic champ in front of the main base lodge. At nine AM the second annual Ross Powers Snowboard Camp is to begin.

Throughout the day unexpected representatives of the media appear out of nowhere. A writer for *Outside Magazine* skis after Ross looking to "discover what this whole snowboarding thing is about." During lunch a five-person Fox News camera crew arrives in search of an exclusive interview with "The Man." Naturally, everyone wants a picture with him. He always consents.

At the end of the day Ross and I talk about everything from his first turns on a



Ross Powers with young snowboarder Luke Mitrami Photo by Hubert Schriebl

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Fourth grader Ross at the U.S. Open.
Photo by Hubert Schriebl

snowboard to his life as a public figure. He says he hopes things will settle down now so he can rest a little. "The U.S. Open marks the end of the season," he explains. Like most times Ross and I catch up, I realize that the end always marks the beginning of something new for him. But before anything new can come up and sweep him away again, I asked him to take me back to where it all began.

MN: So you grew up in Londonderry, right?

RP: I was born in Bennington but lived in South Londonderry for pretty much my whole life.

MN: What were you doing before snowboarding?

RP: Before snowboarding, little league, soccer, and sometimes swimming classes...later I got into riding bikes and skateboarding.

MN: Skateboarding before snowboarding?

RP: Yeah, I was really young when I was skateboarding. I started snowboarding when I was in third grade. I was skateboarding in second grade, maybe even earlier.

MN: What do you remember most about growing up in Vermont?

RP: We lived right by the Londonderry Inn. My friend Charlie Cavanaugh and I were basically just doing sports. We'd meet up and go swimming or biking.

MN: How did you start snowboarding?

RP: I was seven years old. On Christmas Day my mom gave me and my brother a board to share.

MN: What board was that?

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RP: A Burton Elite 130. I remember going to Bromley Mountain on Christmas day. My mom had to work. It was pouring rain, but I rode the whole day. I remember everyone looking out the lodge window and laughing because I kept crashing. I guess they thought I would never be any good at it.

MN: When you started you were one of the only snowboarders on the mountain?

RP: Yeah, there were only a couple of people with snowboards. Some of the lift operators had boards and a couple instructors, but that was about it. Back then you had to be certified to go on certain trails...snowboarding has grown a lot since then.

MN: People today don't realize how restricted it was back then. The equipment was so primitive: rubber bindings, flat tails, edges that were made in pieces.

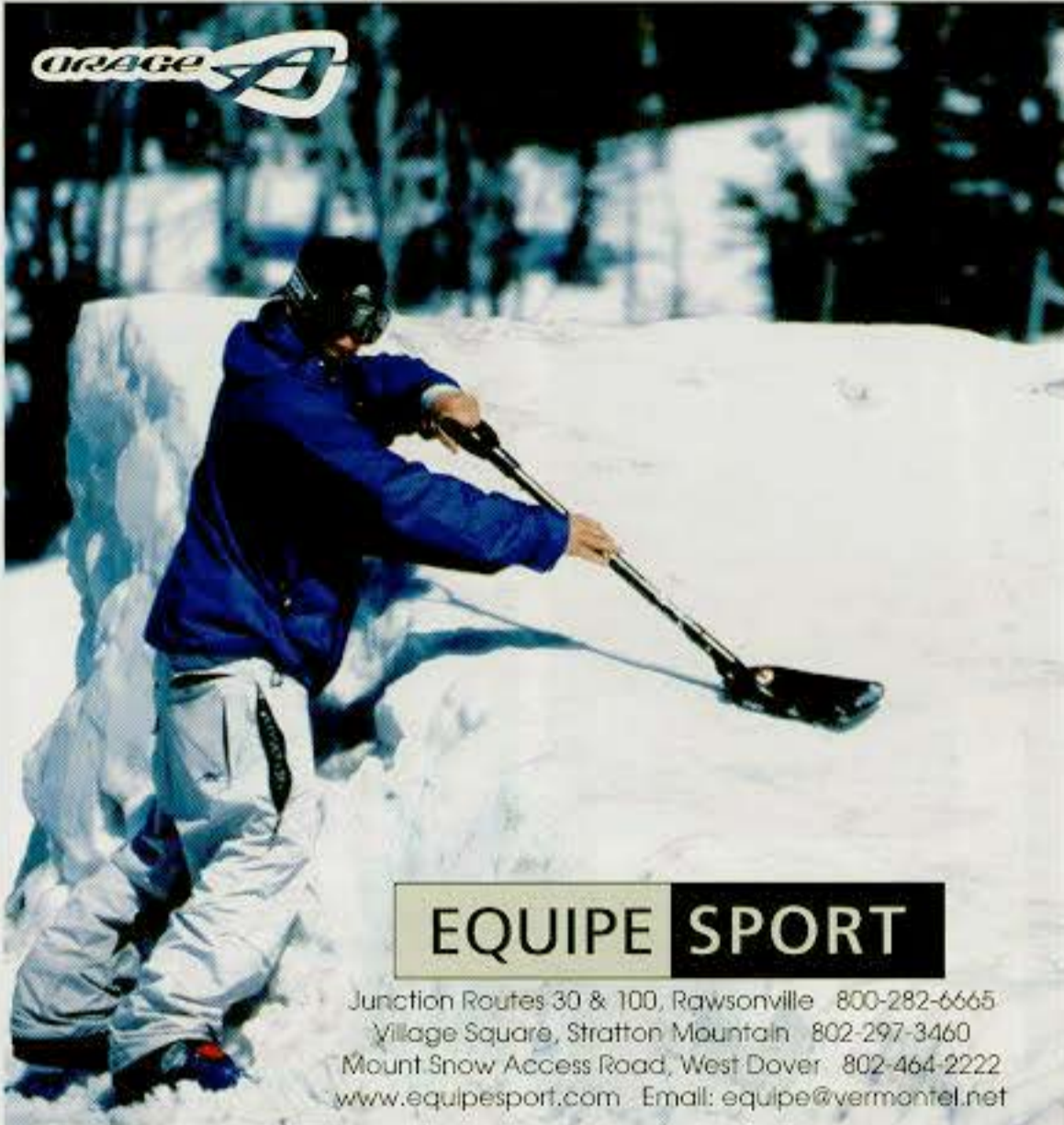
RP: Back then the boards were super

I remember everyone looking out the lodge window and laughing because I kept crashing. I guess they thought I would never be any good at it.

stiff and pointy. They didn't have kick tails. My first board had a fish tail (a design later deemed unpractical because you couldn't ride the snowboard backwards. All fish tails were flat). Kids these days can learn so much faster, the equipment is much better. There are so many good riders to look up to, and the schools are running good programs.

MN: I remember when the JISP (Junior Instructional Ski Program) program was only for skiing.

RP: Yeah, when I first started riding



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Aspiring Olympians pay close attention to the champ

they didn't have that. It started a few years later though.

MN: When did you start competing?
RP: I started competing in the Green Mountain Series when I was nine years old. Suzie Rueck was running it. I think I was in fourth or fifth grade when I went to Nationals. That was my first time out West.

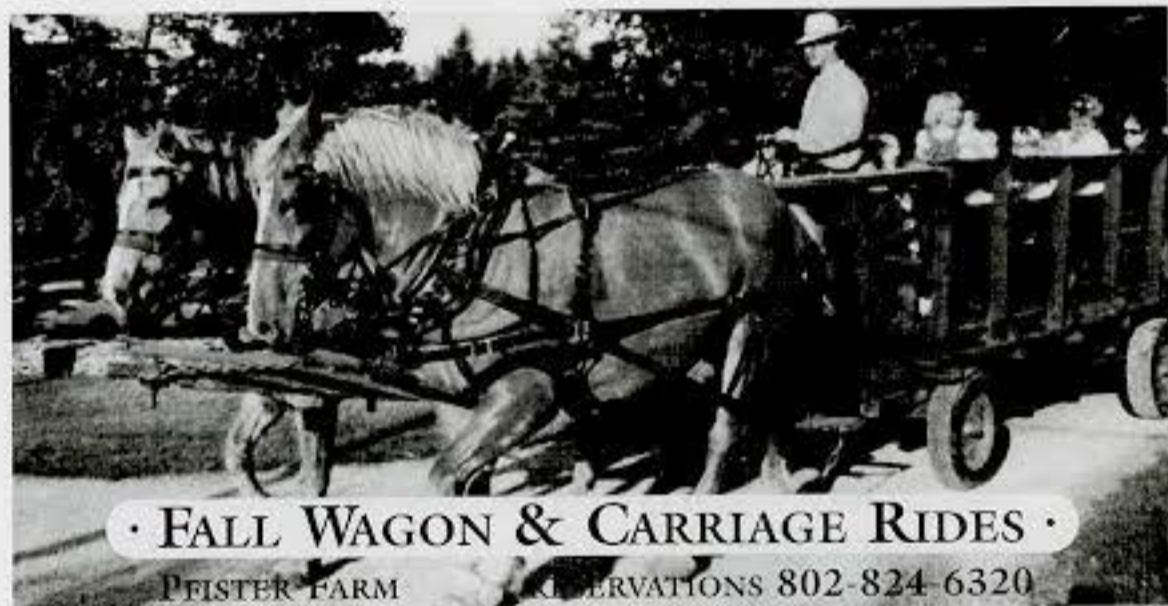
MN: You were racing then, weren't you?

RP: Back then I was doing it all: Slalom, GS, Halfpipe. Barely any mountains had halfpipes back then, so I was pretty much a racer. I remember thinking I was a better racer than halfpipe rider. I went out to the Nationals one year thinking that maybe I could pull it off with racing, but I ended up winning the halfpipe. Once that happened I made the U.S. Team and started traveling the world. That's when I switched from racing to halfpipe. I still tried to race some, but it was crazy to travel with so much stuff. I'm glad it worked out that way.

MN: You were fifteen at the time, right? How old were the other guys on the team?

RP: A lot of the guys were in their twenties.

MN: Did being the young guy on the team help your riding?



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RP: Yeah, riding with Lael Gregory and all the other guys at that level was great.

MN: When did you first compete in the U.S. Open?

RP: I was in fourth grade and competed both in halfpipe and racing. It was pretty cool because my teacher brought the whole fourth grade class up to watch me ride.

MN: The U.S. Open was small back then.

RP: Yeah, now the Open has six days of events with the qualifying and everything. Back then it was only two.

MN: These days you see a lot of guys like Johan Olofson, Craig Kelly and Terje, pro-snowboarders who were heavy into competing but got away from it all to focus on freeriding. (Freeriding, for the uninitiated, is about snowboarding outside the manmade terrain of halfpipes and snowboard parks. Snowboarding off cliffs, riding in powder and generally taking what nature offers far from the masses and the corporate, commercial side of snowboarding.) Do you see yourself going that route eventually?

RP: I really hope so. I've been doing contests for so long now. Hopefully I'll be able to ride for myself a little more, think about filming for a video part

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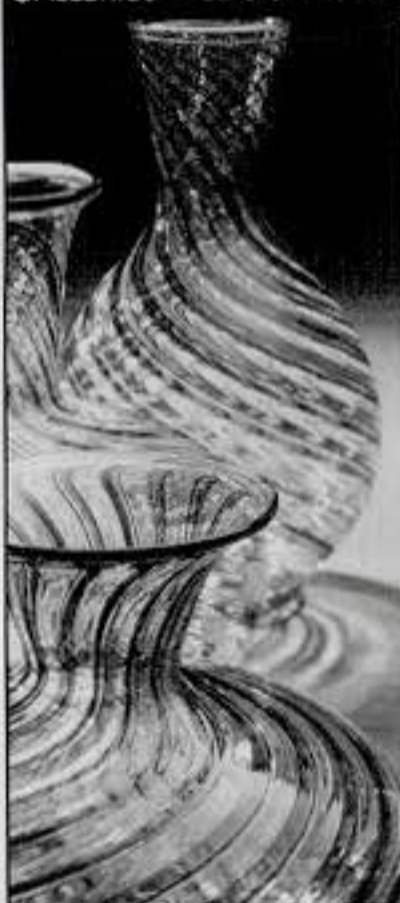
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and just have fun with it. I'll still do contests but not as many. At least not as crazy a schedule as this year.

MN: The schedule is intense!

RP: Yeah, leading up to the Grand Prix and the Olympics it felt like I didn't really get to snowboard anymore. There was just tons of media. Wherever I go people want me to make appearances.

MN: The media has been a lot more focused on snowboarding since the Olympics.

RP: It's been a lot heavier on all of us. People are calling my mom at work (in the Bromley kitchen where she has been a longtime institution) and hassling her. Just now, when we were up in the restaurant some random guy called on the kitchen phone asking if I was there. He wanted to shoot some footage or something. Yeah, it's crazy. Usually I don't mind doing it though. One time in Utah I had to get up at four in the morning to do an interview for the east coast *Today Show*, but I think it will all mellow out soon.

MN: At the finals in the Open this year a 1080 seemed like a stock trick. (A 1080 is three 360 degree turns made in the air: 1080 degrees.) What does it take to maintain pro status these days?

RP: Yeah, these days guys are throwing 1080's like they're nothing. What separates riders is the amplitude. You have to go huge, you have to do at least a 900. I mean Marco did a 1440. It's crazy how much the riding has changed. The superpipe has helped a lot though. (A superpipe is the updated version of the halfpipe. It is constructed with a Super Pipe Dragon which carves masses of snow into perfectly smooth twenty-foot-high canyons.)

MN: How big is it possible to go now that there's the super pipe?

RP: I don't know. The air I did at the Olympics was the biggest I've gone.

MN: How big was that?

RP: I don't know. People have said

The usual Powers big air

anywhere from sixteen to twenty feet. If I could guess I would say eighteen.

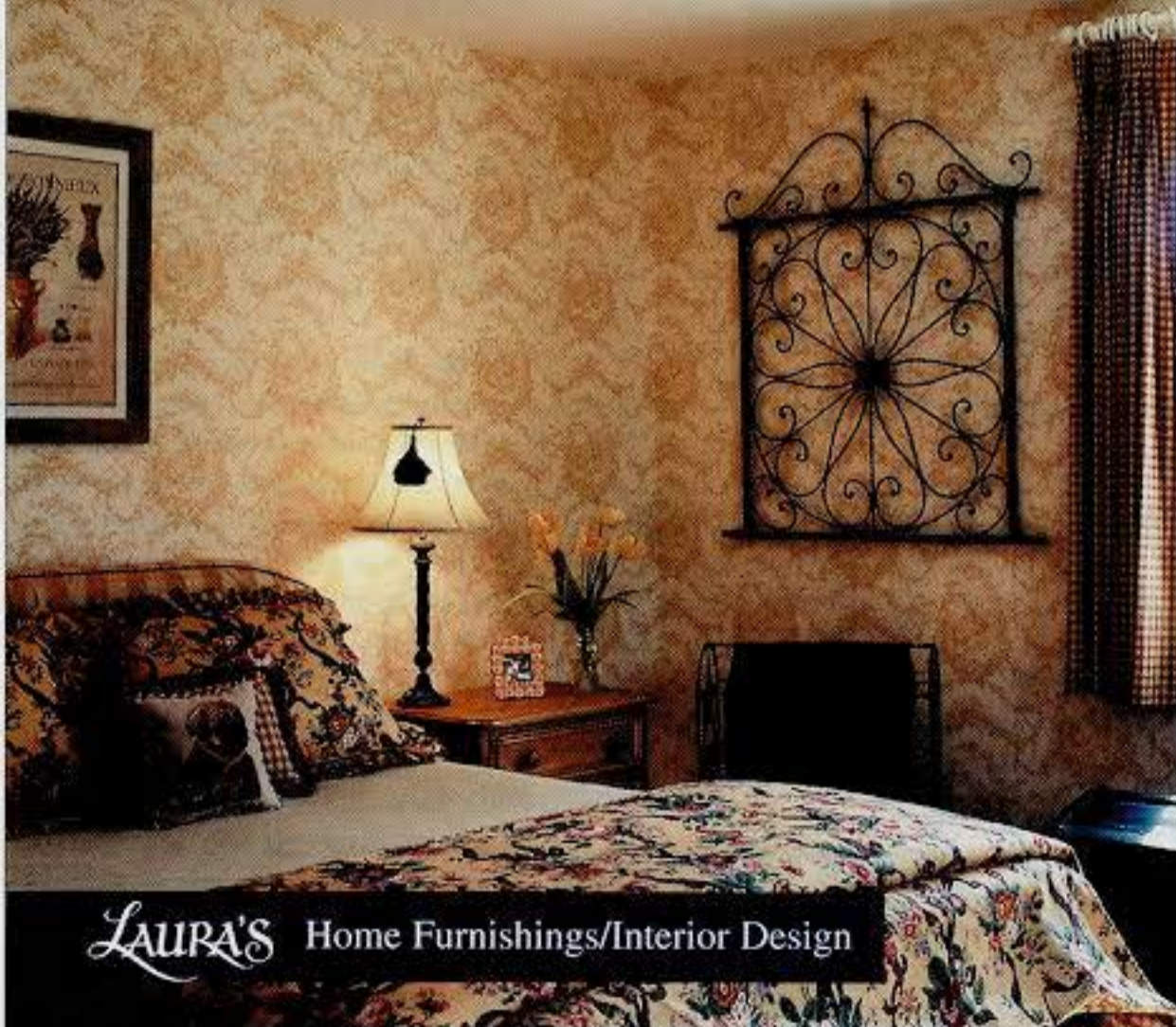
MN: Can you talk a little about the Ross Powers Foundation?

RP: I started the foundation about a year and a half ago. It all started with this kid whose father passed away. I'd grown up riding with him. One day I got a call from Scott Palmer (the Stratton Mountain School snowboard coach) asking if I could donate money for this kid to go to SMS. I did that and my agent heard about it and threw me the idea of starting a foundation. So far the foundation has helped a couple kids with snowboarding. It's good because I grew up with so many talented kids, and they let it slide away. Funding was the reason in a few of the cases. So the foundation tries to make a difference there, I guess.

MN: Do you have much interaction with the kids that are helped by the foundation?



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RP: With most of them I do. We've helped a couple that I don't really know. It's funny because a couple of the kids we've helped out, I've been seeing in the finals at a few contests.

MN: You're living on Stratton now even though most east coast pros have moved out west. Why did you decide to stay?

RP: I've always been based out of Vermont. My family and friends are here. Last year I spent more time at Mammoth (Mammoth Mountain, CA) than I did here, but I still want to live here.

He is characteristically unassuming and feels he has something he wants to give back to all his fans and supporters

MN: What has snowboarding given you outside of the riding itself?

RP: Lately I've been doing a bunch of appearances. I've gotten to do cool things like see a NASCAR race. I was on David Letterman, I played in a celebrity bowl-a-thon with the New York Knicks...I think you have to do it all while it lasts.

MN: Last year there were around twenty kids at your camp. This year there are about seventy.

RP: Yeah, the camp's a great time to go out and meet all those little kids.

MN: They were stoked today.

RP: Yeah, they like the whole package of the camp. They were all psyched to ride and then we have a pizza party and one kid wins a new board. It's fun, and they also get to have world class riders like Ron (Chiodi) and Luke (Wynen) as instructors.

As I left Ross's room, I couldn't

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help but wonder if that lucky kid with the new snowboard would fill Ross's shoes some day down the road. He'll have to catch all the air he can in the upcoming years though. Ross was already somewhat of a legend when I met him eight or nine years ago—he was only 15.

On the way out of Ross's hotel I spotted the reporter who had been following him around all day. He had arranged to drive with Ross that evening to the Snowboarder World Quarterpipe Championships in New Hampshire. It looked like our local hero would be under surveillance once

again. But Ross doesn't seem to mind being tracked around the globe via television, newspaper and magazine articles. He is characteristically unassuming and feels he has something he wants to give back to all his fans and supporters. Ross does follow one thing though—snow. So long as the powder keeps covering Stratton, we know he'll be back. But then again, as he says, Vermont is home. He'll always be back. ♡

Michael Nevin is a photography major at Montserrat College of Art in Beverly, MA. Currently, he is in his junior year overseas at school in Germany.

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