

theBENmates
interview

*when february 2010 rolls around, ben mates will be the first
australian male half-pipe snowboarder to have qualified for
two winter olympic games. and this time round he did it on
his own terms and with his own green. put that in ya crack
pipe and smoke it. he has spent the past four years free of
any restrictions, focusing on hunting down the olympic
standard zaft pipes and elite-level competition that would
provide him the means to qualify for vancouver 2010. in doing
so the south coast local has succeeded whilst flipping the bird
at the sports establishment that seemingly did not want
anything to do with him. there is no doubt mates is
antiauthoritarian. a 'fuck em if they can't take a joke' kind of
guy. it is a refreshing attitude. anarchist athlete founder
jason harding caught up with ben via email just before he
drops in and throws down at the 2010 o-show.*

words

jason harding

images

andrew fawcett

mike weyerhaeuser

c laurila



Training Camp, Perisher Blue Australia 2009. Image Andrew Fawcett.

JH: So Ben, you just qualified for your second consecutive Winter Olympic Games. The first Australian male halfpipe rider to ever pull that off. How fucken cool is that. I hear you are at some private resort training at the moment. Sounds like a bit of a pamper package to me, complete with massages, manicures, the works. Where is your head at right now and how is your preparation heading into the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver?

BM: Yea I'm pretty stoked to have managed to qualify for my second Winter Olympics, It's something I worked really hard for and I always knew I could do it. I am currently Training at Otsego Resort in Michigan USA, it is a private ski hill so the hill is fairly uncrowded which has made for some great training. The resort has provided everything we need with a 22 foot pipe, 22ft spine into a huge air bag to practice our tricks. They also have great food and have provided us with some fun activities to keep us occupied when we are off the hill like skeet shooting, ice fishing and plenty of rides on ski doo's. It's been great riding with the other Aussies Nate and Holly and the coach Andrew Burton has definitely helped my riding over the past week. I'm feeling pretty good heading into Vancouver.

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JH: That is one of the best training set ups I have ever heard of you guys having access to. All-time. Talk to me about the air bag. What's it made of? How does it work? I have come across a few lately. There is no doubt they have been a factor in the recent and very rapid progression in pipe tricks. Is it a 'Katal' landing pad where you can ride out of it or is it one of those ones where you throw down your trick and land flat?

BM: Yeah the bag has been fun. I have only used it for a few days. The bag can still be dangerous so I definitely respected the bag and didn't just throw myself silly. The bag is made of some kind of heavy plastic. It's just a flat bag so you land on top.

JH: It sounds like you guys have a great team environment going. I figure for much of your 2009 qualification year you would not have had access to that sort of support. Is it good to be part of a team unit heading into a major event like the Olympic Games?



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LG FIS World Cup, Bardonecchia Italy 2009. Image C. Laurila. www.jdpimages.com

BM: Yeah well it's been great riding with Nate and Holly. Something I definitely haven't got a chance to do over the last couple of years. So it's definitely been pushing my riding and also the help of Andrew Burton has been a huge bonus. I haven't had a coach for the past 4 years so any kind of support I get at the moment is much appreciated.

JH: What is it like having Burto as a coach? You two were half-pipe team mates in Torino and have ridden, trained and competed against each other for years. Is he running a military style coaching campaign or is he giving you some room to do your own thing?

BM: Well I didn't know what to expect with Andrew with myself not being on the national team, he didn't have to help me out at all. But from the first day I've been at the resort in Otsego he has provided valuable input into my riding. I have been pretty impressed as to how good of a coach he actually is.

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come vancouver I'll make sure I do the best run
I possibly can***

JH: Want to give ya sponsors a plug?

BM: Well to be honest I wouldn't be where I am right now if it wasn't the support of The North Face, Smith Optics and Rhythm Snowboard shop. These companies have backed me for the past 4 years and I'm super stoked to have them on board.

JH: Tell me how the sponsor thing works when you compete at the Games? Are you allowed to have your personal sponsors' logos on any of your boards and outerwear or are you provided with a whole new set of gear from the Australian team's official sponsor?

BM: The Olympics do have pretty strict rules when it comes to logos and stickers. We are not allowed any sticker logo's on our boards or helmets. Our goggles have to be custom made to correct logo sizes, and we are only allowed to wear the Australian Team Sponsor's Outerwear in Karbon. Boards boots and bindings, as far as I know there are no restrictions on size of logos on those items.



Training Camp, Perisher Blue Australia 2009. Image ©Andrew Fawcett.

JH: I remember hanging out with you guys for a month or so just prior to the 2006 Winter Olympics. It was a seriously intense time and your Olympic qualification came down to the last World Cup competition in Leysin, Switzerland. During the domestic and international seasons in 2009 it looked as though you were on top of your game and you seemed to qualify easier. Are you feeling more relaxed and with a stronger sense of control over your Olympic preparation this time around?

BM: Yeah I guess last time my riding was a little bit all over the place. I definitely wasn't ready for the busy schedule of Olympic qualifying and it showed in my results. I didn't qualify for the Torino Olympics until the very last event and last run. My main goal for 2009 was to be ready from the first Olympic qualifying event. I wanted to make sure that I got the job done a lot earlier this time, which is exactly what I did. I even managed to skip the last qualifying event in Austria because I was placed so well. It definitely wasn't an easy road but I think I handled the qualifying process pretty well.

JH: What were your best results over the last year or so?

BM: I definitely started 2009 a lot better than I had expected with a 2nd place at the World Cup in Guji Japan. I had some solid top 20's in the Qualifying events, with a 14th in Bardonecchia Italy, 17th in Quebec Canada, 17th in Valmanlenco Italy and a 19th in Sass Fee Switzerland. I guess the result I was most pleased with was the 25th in Cypress at the test event. The event was heavily stacked with everyone who will be at the games. It gave me an idea of where my riding is at, and showed me I'm definitely capable of a top 20 finish in Vancouver.

JH: Are you at a point right now where you are happy with your riding?

BM: Probably not. I still don't think I have hit my potential. With my focus on the last year qualifying for the games, it means I didn't have as much time to learn new tricks as I would have hoped. But come Vancouver I'll make sure I do the best run I possibly can.



M.Weyerhaeuser/JDP©2009

LG FIS World Cup, British Columbia 2009. Image M. Weyerhaeuser. www.jdpimages.com

JH: Talk to me about your Olympic half-pipe run. Is it set in stone and just being refined or are you using the training camp and air bag over the final month to learn something new before the Games?

BM: There is definitely a few tricks I need to fine tune before the games, backside 900 is something that needs work along with my front side corked 1080 that I hope to have at the games. I have a run planned already so now it's about putting that into practice over the next few weeks.

JH: What was your initial reaction when you witnessed the 'double cork' integrated into elite-level half-pipe competition back in NZ 2009?

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BM: Yeah I actually went up to Cardrona to watch Nate in the final. I had heard rumours about double corks. Obviously double corks had been done before though, that's what everyone doesn't realise. Mike Michalchuck was the first to do them and that was years ago. But yeah I wasn't ready for what I saw at Cardrona that day. Snowboarding in one day jumped to whole new level. It was great to see Nate throwing doubles alongside the big dogs as well.

JH: Do you reckon Shaun pulled it out his bag too early being around 6 months out from the Olympics? Has it given everyone a chance to catch up?

BM: Well it wasn't Shaun who did the first doubles that day it was Louie Vito. Everyone seems to think it was Shaun. They may have started the doubles a little too early, as now a lot of riders have followed so there will be some serious competition for the Americans come Vancouver.



LG FIS World Cup, Gujo Japan 2009. Image M. Weyerhaeuser. www.jdpimages.com

the Australian resorts have to start providing better halfpipe facilities for our young riders.

JH: Of course they still have to stick em in Olympic competition but how many of those bad boys do you think will be needed to take the gold in Vancouver?

BM: I would say you will see at least 3 double corks in one run for the person who wins the gold. If you're not throwing doubles then I don't think you will get on the podium.

JH: In the lead up to the 2006 Winter Olympics, you were part of the national snowboard program run by the Olympic Winter Institute of Australia (OWIA) and the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS). When did you decide to ditch the support of the OWIA and AIS and run an independent program in your pursuit to be the first Australian half-pipe snowboarder to compete in two consecutive Winter Olympics?

BM: It wasn't my choice to do my own thing that's not what everyone realises. I wanted to be back on the national program, but for some reason they were not interested in supporting me. I haven't really complained about it. I just put my head down and worked super hard on my snowboarding and it showed in results. They are 100 times better than what they were before the last Olympics. My goal was to get the qualifying for the Olympics done early and I did that. For me it's always been about getting to the Olympics not about winning every event I enter.

JH: How gnarly was it on your wallet chasing events around the globe without the financial support the OWIA could have provided? Have ya got a stack of maxed out credit cards?

BM: Well when I'm back in Aus I work a 40 hour week like everyone else, whether it was working as a courier driver in Sydney or in Monster Sports in Jindabyne. I also had huge support from my four main sponsors; The North Face, Smith Optics, Rhythm Snowboard Shop and my Management team, NON STANDARD MEDIA. I wouldn't be where I am right now if it wasn't for them.

JH: I hear Western Australia is a good place to hide out from the banks chasing credit card debt. Sick surf and you can camp out in the bush or behind the dunes wherever you want.

***I'll be sending it very large when I drop into the
halfpipe gold medal or not!***



M.Weyerhaeuser/JDP©2009

LG FIS World Cup, Sungwoo Korea 2009. Image M. Weyerhaeuser. www.jdpimages.com

BM: Yea it could be a plan, would be great to catch up with Russel Coight and do a road trip.

JH: How much did you love the beep test during your dry-land training camps at the AIS?

BM: I can't say I looked forward to it, but I'm always up for a challenge. It was always great trying to outrun Burto and Mitch. Was always good trying to beat your personnel best also.

I'll have to stick the men at work's, 'I come from the land down under'. I ran with that at the 2006 olympics and well no other song will get me more pumped than that

JH: Remember the bike sprint test? How fricken good was that?

BM: Well yea that's something I certainly didn't look forward too, riding a bike till you have not one bit of energy left isn't something I'll plan to do each week.

JH: Fun times! Seriously though, with the performance levels being where they are right now, do you think pro snowboarders need to undertake some sort of routine dry-land fitness training to be successful and maintain a competitive career?

BM: Yea I think fitness will be a huge part of snowboarding over the next few years, especially working on core muscles. I've worked hard on my fitness over the last few years and definitely think it has helped my snowboarding.



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LG FIS World Cup, Gujo Japan 2009. Image M. Weyerhaeuser. www.jdpimages.com



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JH: Any ideas on how the OWIA and AIS could improve their programs to enhance their assistance to Australian snowboarding in general and to improve rider/ athlete retention rates?

BM: Well I hope that no athlete has to go through what I have over the past 3 years again, if an athlete is constantly getting top 20 results on world cup competitions and has a huge possibility of qualifying for an Olympics then they should be able to get some kind of support. I think especially Australian snowboarding, we need to put more effort in developing Aussie juniors, there just seems to not be many young kids getting into the halfpipe these days which is disappointing. The Australian resorts have to start providing better halfpipe facilities for our young riders.

JH: What song will be pumping through the headphones as you prepare for competition around lunch time on the 17th February 2010?

BM: Well I've been thinking about that lately and I'll have to stick the Men at Work, I come from the land down under. I ran with that at the 2006 Olympics and well no other song will get me more pumped than that.

JH: What will the volume button be set on?

BM: Well hopefully the cypress speakers will be going nuts; I want the crowd to get into it also.

JH: Do you ride in competition with your headphones going?

BM: I actually only have small speakers on the inside of my jacket, its perfect for on chairlifts or before I drop. I don't ride with head phones as I like to hear my surroundings when I drop into the pipe.



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LG FIS World Cup, Bardonecchia Italy 2009. Image C. Laurila. www.jdpimages.com

***It's an awesome feeling being able to represent
Australia at an Olympic Games***

JH: There are going to be plenty of frothing young Aussie grommets glued to the TV watching you lay down your runs in during the Olympics. Have you got any advice for em on how to pursue and make the most of a career as an Australian pro snowboarder?

BM: I definitely think for myself when I first started just have fun with your snowboarding when you're still young, don't get caught up with the competitive side of snowboarding till your more experienced. I think too many parents these days are pushing their kids to compete at a far too young age. Believe in Yourself.

JH: Two consecutive Winter Olympics as an Australian half-pipe snowboarder, will you attempt three and head to Sochi Russia in 2014?

BM: Well I'm definitely not saying no. Too be honest I am so proud of being able to compete at one Olympics let alone going to two. It's an awesome feeling being able to represent Australia at an Olympic games. Being an Olympian is something that no one will ever take away from me.

JH: Where will you bail to after the 2010 Olympics? Need snowboard boots or thongs?

BM: Definitely thongs. I'm planning on a few weeks of surfing in Bali. It's been a long hard road and definitely looking forward to a couple of weeks off.

JH: By the way, heard you were given the key to Michigan. Tried to open any doors with it?

BM: HAHA yea that was awesome, although we only got a certificate from the mayor. I totally wanted a key but it was still pretty awesome to think how appreciated we were.

JH: Good luck with the rest of your Olympic preparation Matsey.

BM: Thanks Jason, I'll be sending it very large when I drop into the halfpipe gold medal or not!

Acknowledgments: Interview conducted via email from January 15th to February 2nd 2010. Cheers to thank Benny for taking the time out to answer my questions whilst he was on the road so close to the Olympics. Hope he kicks arse when he drops in around lunch time at the Winter Olympics on February 17th 2010. A big thanks to Andrew Fawcett for always being willing to provide quality images of Aussie snowboarders for my poindexter-like journal articles and random rider interviews. I would also like to thank Mike Weyerhaeuser from JDP IMAGES for allowing me to use some of the sick shots he had of Ben competing around the globe. If you have got this far, there are some websites below that might interest you.

JH, 3rd February 2010.

www.benmates.com

www.jdpimages.com

www.anarchistathlete.com