

Shaun White opens up

Snowboarding's biggest star on the young fame, the Olympics and a Winter X three-peat.

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By: Michelle Hurni

Winter X Games producer Steve Lawrence has known **Shaun White** since the superstar was an 11-year-old skating at the famed Encinitas YMCA. Tony Hawk introduced the two, and their relationship has grown. So when the pair sat down together in November for an ESPN feature, an honest conversation ensued. The interview was later animated by animation company Titmouse Inc., but it was White who really brought it to life.

Being the 2006 Winter Olympics gold medalist has its perks. White flies all over the world to snowboard. The 23-year-old has been a 1K frequent flier since he was 12. He is one of the most famous athletes in the world — he seemingly has it all. Sometimes, though, he just would like to have a normal life.

The Kid

A promising snowboarder from an early age, White was caught in the middle of two worlds. He didn't fit in with kids his age or the much older snowboarders he was riding with and competing against. At age 13, "Future Boy" already was riding at a professional level, and he says he just wanted to be "one of the guys who does well at the events." But his snowboarding was being scrutinized; some people claimed he scored high because he was given "kid points." But he couldn't change the fact that he was a kid, and one much younger than the rest of the field. He says it was "lonely and strange."

He had dreams, though. He had to be the best. "I wanted it so badly, it consumed my world," he says. "I ran full speed at it. I liked that I was going to be the one at the event with the new tricks. It all happened so fast."

By his midteens, White already had made it big. He had the world at his disposal. "I couldn't have cared less," he says about the growing fame. "I just wanted to snowboard." He credits his parents with keeping him grounded. For one thing, they didn't make alcohol a big deal. Booze flowed freely after comps, and White just sat back and watched the mayhem overtake his fellow snowboarders. They showed up to ride hungover while he would come in fresh off a good night's sleep and win. "I'm glad for my parents steering me in the right direction and not sheltering me from it," he says.

Torino and Superstardom

Up until the 2006 Olympics, White was his own man, the "Flying Tomato," an individual. In the months leading up to Torino, he had to shed his identity and become a member of the U.S. team. In Italy, the members did everything as a group, from wearing the same clothes to sleeping, eating and training together. Even with all the camaraderie, things were different for White. "There's a strange separation between me and the other guys," he observes.

For White, the Olympics were different from other contests; everyone had their game faces on. And after he won the gold, he says, his family "exploded." He hadn't realized how nervous they were for him. By his own admission, he couldn't fit his head through the door, but his family brought him back down to earth. His IMG management team (including brother Jesse) had his back, keeping him true to himself.

White scored a ride home from Italy on an NBC plane. He landed in New York City and shot a cover for Rolling Stone. The next day, he was at a Knicks game sitting next to Regis Philbin. Morning-show interviews followed. He was 19 at the time. "I felt at that moment that I was just starting," he says.

Soaking It All In

After winning gold and having his face splashed over the world, White had a new problem: He was recognized everywhere. The first time he went to the grocery store after the Olympics (to buy ice cream), he got stuck for an hour signing autographs and taking pictures with fans. At dinner with his family, someone is always there, asking for an autograph. He can't even fill up his car with gas without being spotted — once by a busload of girls' soccer players.

The world saw him as the charismatic teenager who had the world at his feet, and he had a blast. "How can you not have fun with all the attention?" he asks.

His approach allows him to have fun, even with all the fame that comes with the gold medal. He is the most prolific halfpipe snowboarder on the planet. He's got the newest and best tricks. He's earned every award available: Winter X SuperPipe gold? Try four of them, two more than anyone else. An ESPY? Make that three. Talk shows, magazines, documentaries? Triple check. But still, he laughs at himself and calls himself "half human, half beast," but "only because I like the word 'beast.'"

The Here and Now

In 2006, White did the unthinkable: He scored the perfect season. He won every event he entered in both superpipe and slopestyle. He had the same goal for 2010, but it was dashed in January when he was beaten at the third Grand Prix stop, at Mammoth Mountain, Calif., by Danny Davis. The perfect season is history (for this year, anyway), but there's still Winter X Games and the Olympics, and White has moved on to the next goal. He wants to get the first Snowboard SuperPipe three-peat at Winter X and follow it up by defending his halfpipe gold at the Winter Olympics.

White found his first Olympic experience overwhelming, and he says he held back a little in its aftermath. For 2010, he says, "I want to perform well," that he wants to do all the weird things he didn't do last time. Or, as he clarifies, "The free spirit thing."

What's in a Name

Now known the world over, White is under a microscope. "Having all eyes on me at all times is hard to deal with, but it's great," he says. "It feels like you've already accomplished something. It's already predetermined that you're going to do well. You can get support in ways that would normally put pressure on." He embraces that position -- after all, he's been there since he was 8 years old.

Some say there's a "Shaun White factor" in the judging, and White agrees. But he argues it makes it more difficult for him to win, not the other way around. He makes difficult tricks look easy, but he dedicates his life to that. As far as the judges go, he says they expect a lot from him and they know when he's not pushing himself. He might have the best run of the day, but if it's not his best, they'll dock him for it. He has to work for gold.

And he's happy to do so. He has to be the best.

Lawrence and White talked for more than an hour, and the shoot lasted half a day. At the end of it all, Lawrence, White and a small crew had dinner at a quiet Italian joint on Sunset. Nice and relaxed. A little later, White drove back to his new L.A. home. It was an early night. A normal life. At least for one day.

The animation of White's interview will air during the Winter X Games. Titmouse Inc. drew all over the raw footage of the interview and created a unique product. Titmouse's work can be seen on Adult Swim, the Cartoon Network's adult cartoon show. The company also has done work on "Metalocalypse," "Guitar Hero" games and Black Panther comics.



Christian Pondella/Shazamm/ESPN Images

White with his ninth gold medal after his WX13 SuperPipe win.



Nate Abbott/SHAZAMM/ESPN IMAGES

White's perfect season may be ruined, but don't count out an almost perfect season.



Alisa Mokler Harper

The eye of the Shaun.