

# BABY ON BOARD (FIGURATIVELY SPEAKING)

TEENAGE SPORTS PRODIGIES ARE SO OVER THE HILL.

JUST ASK THE GRADE-SCHOOLER ALEXIS ROLAND, SNOWBOARDING'S DEFINITION OF PRECOCIOUS.

BY **JOSH DEAN**

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→ *I'M LEXI," SHE SAYS, ASSERTING THE obvious and offering a tiny hand. It is almost weightless, this hand, bony and delicate like something made by Fabergé. Alexis Roland, better known as Lexi, is on spring break at the beach in California. Not the kind of beach you typically visit on spring break, but rather a beach on the south shore of Lake Tahoe — which, until very recently, was covered in a crust of ice. Nonetheless, it's a fine little vacation: a freakishly talented pint-size snowboarder riding some of America's most picturesque terrain, while men with video cameras tag along to shoot a movie.*

Lexi is not yet at a point where she can ride her snowboard full time. There is grade school, for instance, where she is in her third year of Spanish immersion. ("Estoy en segundo grado," she says.) But already, at age 8, she has chosen a career path: to do the kinds of things on a snowboard that grown women don't tend to do, let alone little girls. It hasn't even



**AFTER THIS, SPELLING HOMEWORK** Lexi Roland vacationing near Lake Tahoe.



been four years since her dad, Shawn, put her on a board, and already she's redefining what is possible for a pipsqueak (her word, not mine) on a snowboard.

What's left of the snow is clumped in dirty piles, and the film crew has scraped together enough to make a crude jump so that Lexi can soar from the steep front yard of a fancy lakefront house over a fence and down to the beach. By professional-snowboarder standards it's a fairly simple jump — maybe eight feet high — but considering that it is an absolute wisp of a person preparing to make the leap, well, it's plenty hairy.

Dan Moses, a partner in First Tracks Productions, makes the sort of movies that people sometimes call "snowboard porn." (That would be footage of riders executing tricks to a soundtrack of popular music, typically hip-hop or indie rock.) He and his business partner, Anthony Cupaiuolo, first met Lexi last year, when she was 7. She appeared in a 60-second clip in their film "Hello, My Name Is," and they consider it the movie's most popular segment.

"Last year was a novelty," Moses says. "This year is a little more serious." He looks up at Lexi as she assumes a ready position at the top of the sloped yard. This is her second attempt at a relatively simple trick called a 180 with an "indie grab." She flubbed her first landing, more because of a lack of snow than a failure of execution.

"Battle stations, people!" Lexi yells. She's wearing pink pants, a pink cap, pink gloves and a pink-and-white Minnesota Wild hockey jersey that dangles to her knees. Her dark blond hair spills out from under a black helmet.

Lexi's board is about three and a half feet long, and it's custom made; if it had wheels you would swear it was a skateboard. She and her dad decided that the regular kids' board provided by Burton Snowboards (her primary sponsor) wasn't light or flexible enough, so the company designed something better suited to Lexi's frame.

"Dum-da-da-dum," she cries. Then: "Three, two, one — blast off!" The pink figure slides down the hill, pops off the jump and sails into the air. Hanging over the frozen beach, Lexi makes a precise 180-degree spin while grabbing her board with one hand, then lands with a crash in the snow.

"Dad, I'm getting kinda sore," she says, as Shawn — a burly and affable 34-year-old with a goatee who wears baggy shorts in all weather, "as long as it's over 30 degrees" — picks her up and lifts her over the fence, depositing her on the snowy hill. "One more and then we eat," she continues. "Aren't you guys hungry?"

Lexi repeats the trick and slides to a smooth and flawless stop. "You can't end on a bad note!" she says.

A photographer shows her the back of his camera, where an image of her, frozen midjump, is on the screen. Her form is perfect; if you didn't know who it was in the frame, you'd think you were looking at a fully grown professional.

"Wow!" she squeals. "That's high!"

"Sometimes I get scared," she says, tromping toward the car. "Even pros get scared, you know?" She pauses at a long wooden stair rail that leads from the parking lot down to the beach — Lexi sliding down rails is one of the things the crew would like to capture on film.

"I'll do this one later."



**SHE AIN'T HEAVY, SHE'S MY WUNDERKIND** Shawn and Lexi in their backyard terrain park in Minnesota.

## BACK HOME OUTSIDE MINNEAPOLIS,

Lexi Roland has her own terrain park, built by her dad. Its features include boxes, rails and a streetlight laid on its side that, in Shawn's estimation, is "pretty sweet." Shawn makes his own snow, using a machine provided by one of Lexi's sponsors. This year, he used so much water that an inspector stopped by. "Dude wanted to know if we had a leak," Shawn says. When it's not cold enough to make snow, he drives his trailer over to the local hockey rink and collects the ice shavings. Before he got the snow machine, he made snow with a homemade cannon that combined compressed air and pressurized water, and he hopes someday soon to make a cryogenic snowmaker that uses liquid nitrogen and carbon dioxide. That way, he says cheerfully, "you can make snow at 90 degrees."

Lexi shares the yard with Ethan, her brother, and Poco, the Chihuahua, who hates snow. "That's his worst enemy," Lexi says. "His second-worst enemy is the flashlight." (There are also two ferrets in the family, but they stay inside.) Ethan is 7 and has a mohawk. He snowboards but isn't as keen on it as Lexi, and Shawn and his wife, Erika, don't want to pressure him. Instead, the Rolands bought him a drum set. "Maybe that can be his thing," says Shawn, who works as a freelance marketing consultant. Mama Roland is the primary breadwinner; she does corporate fundraising and pretty much leaves the snowboard coaching to her husband.

"I miss Poco and the ferrets," Lexi says, as we drive around Lake Tahoe scouting terrain. "But my brother, he's annoying sometimes." She elbows me in the ribs and jabs at my notebook. "Write another thing here: my dad thinks I talk a lot."

In Minnesota, the Rolands frequent the Hyland Ski and Snowboard Area, a bruise on the landscape with a whopping 175 feet of vertical drop. It's about 3 minutes away by car or 20 minutes on foot, and Shawn and Lexi go almost every day after school. At Hyland, she runs with what Shawn calls "her posse," a gaggle of preteen boys that includes Lexi's closest friend, Willie Borm, a 10-year-old freestyle skier who can land 1080's (three complete rotations) and took seventh in the under-18 division at the 2008 Junior Olympics. "It's cool to have another kid on the same level," Shawn says. "And to have another family to hang around with."

*Josh Dean, an editor at Play, last wrote for the magazine about the Moto Grand Prix racer Nicky Hayden.*

Shawn never set out to raise a snowboarding phenom, he says; it was a total accident. A native of Washington State, he grew so bored during the endless, frigid Minnesota winters that he decided the family needed something they could all do together. The solution: snowboarding.

It was almost immediately clear that Lexi had a gift for riding, and by the time she was 6, Shawn was posting videos of her on YouTube. He edited her greatest hits into a highlight reel that he sent to potential sponsors, including Burton. Today she's the top girl on Burton's team of junior snowboarders (the only such team in the industry), a collection of 13 miniprodigies known as the Smalls who also serve as technical advisers and models for Burton's burgeoning line of kids' clothing and gear.

At this stage, there's almost no money to be made by the Rolands. Burton pays its riders a small stipend for travel, but the Smalls — beholden as they are to schools and parents — are barely a blip on the radar and are known mostly as a novelty. Other than the Olympic gold medalist Shaun White, first noticed at about the same age, there is little precedent for a preteen snowboarder. And given that the sport is still dominated by males at the professional level, a preadolescent female pro is virtually unheard of. "When I put her videos up three years ago I couldn't find another kid on snow under 12," Shawn says. Today, there are several, but none approaching Lexi's level of development.

It's tempting to imagine Shawn as a Sports Dad, one of those overbearing parents willing to sacrifice his child's youth for fame, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't half-expect to find that. In reality, though, he's a sweet and mellow guy, an overgrown boarder bum who just happened to raise a girl who loves snowboarding more than he does.

René Hansen, a Norwegian who oversees Burton's team of pros and who has worked with White since he was not much bigger than Lexi (and "would sometimes cry when he crashed"), told me that he has "never seen a girl at that stage be that good. . . . Right now, if she continues on her path, she will be the best women's snowboarder who has ever lived." You could dismiss that as marketing hype, but at this point there's not much for Burton to market. Lexi is a long way from being famous enough to move product. And Hansen is one of the industry's most esteemed talent evaluators. When, at a party, I ran into a representative of Target, a company that invests heavily in action sports and is based in the Rolands' hometown, I asked him if they were thinking about Lexi. He sort of dismissed her as too small-time, but in a way that suggested he wasn't yet paying attention. When I mentioned what Hansen had said, he perked up. "Really? René said that?"

At the moment, Lexi faces two obstacles. One is physics. At a little over four feet tall and 55 pounds, she just doesn't have the mass to generate enough speed to get big air, or what snowboarders call amplitude. The other is her skill: it's not just that she's too good for her age group; she's also too good for almost every age group below the "open" class (though her rapid improvement has Shawn reconsidering her competitive options). "There are very few girls 12 to 13 who are even close to her," he says. They might do 180's, or occasionally 360's. Lexi, he says, is already "spinning 5's" — referring to a 540, or making one and a half rotations — and is comfortable "riding switch," with her weaker leg forward, a requisite of top riding that typically takes years to master. Young boarders also tend to hold their bodies too erect and raise their arms up in the air for balance. Lexi just looks relaxed, like someone who has been at it for a decade. Nick Hamilton, the director of photography at Transworld Snowboarding, a major industry magazine, has seen just about every pro perform. He recently ran into Lexi in California. On the day's first run — normally a mellow one, he says — "she was hitting rails and bombing down the mountain full speed, riding switch."

On the rare occasions when Lexi does compete, she tends to win. Last winter she entered two regional competitions in the open class — against riders as old as 25 — and won them both. How does this make

her competition feel? "Some of them say, 'Oh, you're so good! I'm jealous!'" Lexi says, giggling.

"The limits for Lexi are the superpipe and jump lines," Shawn says, referring to the fact that she's still too light to get amplitude. The nearest superpipe is two and a half hours north of Minneapolis, in Duluth. "I joke with my wife that all I need is a bigger piece of property. I'll blow my own superpipe."

At this, Lexi's eyes bulge.

"Superpipe? Superpipe!" she yells, and thrusts her arms in the air like a referee signaling touchdown.

# LEXI

→ *IS STANDING AROUND IN THE* parking lot of South Lake Tahoe's Block Hotel one morning wearing a hot pink snowsuit. Her hand is hidden in a pocket, as if she's about to produce a rabbit. "You know how much money I found just in one day at Hyland?" she asks, in lieu of "hello." She pulls out a handful of change and puts it in my palm. "I might buy some Pokémon toys for Ethan," she says. She begins to apply Skittles lip balm to her lips in the way that Van Gogh applied paint. "You can count it."

The total is 78 cents.

Today's plan is to film some jumps in the backcountry to supplement what Shawn considers an excess of "urban" footage. We pile into the rental car and make a stop for critical supplies like bubble gum and blueberry bagels at Lira's Supermarket, which a bronze plaque notes was once a Pony Express stop known as Yank's Station.

"Why do they call it Pony Express and not Horse Express?" Lexi asks. "And what is the difference between a pony and a horse, anyway? I think it would be tiring to ride a horse that far."

One of Lexi's favorite verbal devices is the rhetorical question, and a second party is not necessarily essential to her ability to carry on a conversation. Her preferred transition is "And you know what?" and her monologues tend to come out of left field: "If I could buy three things

ON THE RARE OCCASIONS WHEN SHE DOES COMPETE, LEXI TENDS TO WIN. LAST WINTER SHE ENTERED TWO REGIONAL COMPETITIONS IN THE OPEN CLASS — AGAINST RIDERS AS OLD AS 25 — AND WON THEM BOTH.

other than candy, I would buy mango, kiwi and cucumber. Or, if I could buy five things, I would buy mango, kiwi, cucumber, broccoli and milk."

In the car, she shares a story: "Once I saw this spider as big as a quarter. I was scared of it, so I got Mom. My uncle said it could be a barn spider, but how could a barn spider be in Minnesota?"

We find suitable backcountry at Meiss Meadow, a local hike-in area just west of Carson Pass, famous for its role in facilitating the passage of gold prospectors to and from California. Most of the snow has melted, but enough lingers on the north-facing slopes for a snowboarder to pick a line between the trees and ride to the bottom without scraping dirt.

"I think that we should limit ourselves to 15 minutes of hiking," Anthony Cupaiuolo says, as the group sets off up the hill. "We gotta keep in mind she's 8."

Sure enough, approximately five minutes later, Lexi announces, "This is the most I've ever hiked. We don't have these kinds of hills back home."

"Well, this is a real backcountry experience," Cupaiuolo says. "You're hiking at 8,600 feet."

She looks at him, cocking her head like a dog sizing up an unfamiliar object. "I don't understand what you mean."

It is one of those moments when you realize just how young this person



is, possessing talents that have far outgrown her mind. In the 8-year-old's universe, the concept of altitude does not yet exist.

Then again, Lexi can surprise you. During a lull the day prior, she was killing time, building a small castle in the snow while Shawn and the crew set up a shot. She sighed — sometimes, it takes dads so long to build jumps. “We should make a movie and call it ‘Snow Bored,’” she said, and collapsed dramatically onto her back.

→ *LEXI HAS A FEW NICKNAMES, SOME OF WHICH HAVE BEGUN TO STICK.*

“Baby Butters,” she says.

“I’ve heard Snow White,” says her dad.

“That’s dumb! It’s a princess name! Get that out of there!” she howls.

“I think that’s a compliment,” he tells her. “It’s after Shaun White.”

The group has reassembled at a junkyard just outside the boundary of Heavenly ski resort. At the base of a hill, we set up a ramp and a large corrugated pipe, creating a long and precarious-looking rail that’s taller than Lexi. Two older riders are along for today’s shoot. One is a 23-year-old South African named Kat Maponyane, whom Lexi immediately decides to call Pussycat — and if you had wondered if there’s anything more unusual than snowboarding with an 8-year-old, it would be snowboarding with an 8-year-old and a South African. The other rider is Chase Harriman, a 22-year-old beanpole of a local known for his ability to backflip on his board over just about anything.

The three take turns sliding along the corrugated rail. Lexi is battling physics again; she’s having trouble getting enough speed to make it across the pipe. She advances a little further with each run before tumbling off the end. She then collects herself and trudges back up the hill. When she gets tired, Shawn carries her. (“I stay in shape so I can do that,” he says.)

At the top, she rests alongside the two older riders.

“You gotta go faster, no matter how scared you get, O.K.?” Harriman says. “Promise?”

“O.K.,” she says.

“I’m gonna push you, just like you push us,” he says.

“You’re gonna push me?!” she says, eyes wide.

“Well, not *push you* push you. Encourage you.”

Lexi considers this for a moment. “So, when you hit this, you have no fear?” she asks.

“I just don’t think about it. I visualize it. If I visualize falling, I’ll fall. So I don’t. Can you do it?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you scared?”

“Why wouldn’t I be? It’s over my head!”

Lexi yells, “Three, two, one — attack!” and then rides switch onto the pipe, sliding to the end and throwing in a 180 on the landing, every bit as smooth as Harriman.

“That’s what her movie should be called,” Harriman says. “Three, two, one — ATTACK!”

As the group celebrates her success at the bottom of the hill, Dan Moses turns the camera back to Lexi.

“What’s your secret?” he asks.

“Root beer,” she says. “Root beer gives me energy.”

Harriman does yet another backflip, this one over a pile of wood chips, and Lexi cheers. She and Shawn are already discussing when she might begin to integrate flips into her repertory. “We were thinking about it this year, maybe,” Shawn says. “But she’s not quite ready.” They’ve been working on the backyard trampoline to sharpen her spatial perception. “That’s the most important thing,” he says, “her awareness, so she’s spotting the landing at all times.” (During a trip to Whistler in British Columbia shortly after her 9th birthday, in June, she would clear 40 feet or more off of jumps and make a breakthrough on the superpipe. As a reward, Shawn would capitulate to her longtime desire to dye her hair purple.)

What do you want to be, in the end? I ask her. What’s your goal?

“Good enough so that I can beat Shaun White at the Olympics,” she says. “And I wanna do a 9” — a 900, or two and a half rotations — “when I’m 9.”

“Pretty soon I think I’ll be all over,” she continues. “Like everyone knows Shaun White, they’ll know me.” ■