

Snowboarding legend Craig Kelly

Equipment, products, focus of snowboarding changed forever by pro rider

In the early days, snowboarding was all about slalom races. The first snowboarding competition at Ski Cooper in 1981 featured a slalom event, and then in 1985 the Mount Baker Legendary Banked Slalom began. Snowboarding has changed focus over the years, and many would agree that modern snowboarding owes colossal thanks to the legacy of one famous snowboarder – Craig Kelly.

A native of Mount Vernon, Washington, Kelly was born on April Fool's Day in 1966. An avid BMX rider, he first tried snowboarding in 1981 when a local bike shop purchased a couple boards and was immediately hooked. Mount Baker began allowing snowboarder on a trial basis in 1982 but after the mountain manager saw what Kelly could do on a snowboard, "it changed his whole outlook."

Tom Sims made a trip to Mount Baker a couple years later to see Kelly snowboard, and says of the encounter, "In 1983, there were only about a dozen really good riders in the entire country. When I saw Craig snowboard, I knew he was special." Kelly joined the Sims snowboard team.

Eventually, Kelly was sent a contract to sign, designating him as an official team member. Throughout the 1980s, Kelly tore up the snowboarding contest scene. In 1986 alone, he was the Slalom World Champion at Breckenridge and the Overall World Champion four years in a row, and won numerous other contests, particularly in the halfpipe and slalom events.

As Kelly's fame was growing towards the end of the 1980s, he switched teams from Sims to Burton. A lengthy legal battle ensued between Vision Sports (the licensee of Sims Snowboards), Craig Kelly and Burton in 1988, as both Sims and Burton claimed to have contracts with Kelly, requiring him to ride for their individual labels. A court injunction prevented Kelly from putting his name on any product, so he rode black boards with no logo (and continued to dominate snowboarding contests) until the order was reversed in 1990, at which time Kelly signed a long-term deal with Burton.

This temporary court order led Burton to release Kelly's pro model in 1989 as the Mystery Air, creating a huge amount of buzz and hype. As the first Burton pro model, even without Craig Kelly's name, it became one of the best selling boards that season.

Kelly was one of the most successful snowboarders, constantly winning competitions in every aspect of the sport and four World Championships, and also helped shape, research and design products. By the early 1990s, he quit competition to focus on freeriding and the peace that snowboarding offered him, without the increasing greed and negative energy, and began to redefine the category of professional riders. As Jake Burton said, "When the rest of the industry listened to Craig, that was when the sport really took off."

However, on Jan. 20, 2003, his life was tragically cut short. While training to be the first fully certified Canadian Mountain Guide snowboarder, Kelly and six others were caught in an avalanche near Revelstoke and did not survive. In 2011, Burton named its newest research and development facility in honor of Craig Kelly, as a tribute to his incredible impact on snowboard design and technology.

Craig Kelly inspired countless snowboarders, companies and innovations, passing on his love and passion for the freedom of snowboarding. As he said, "When I want to be happy, I go snowboarding."

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