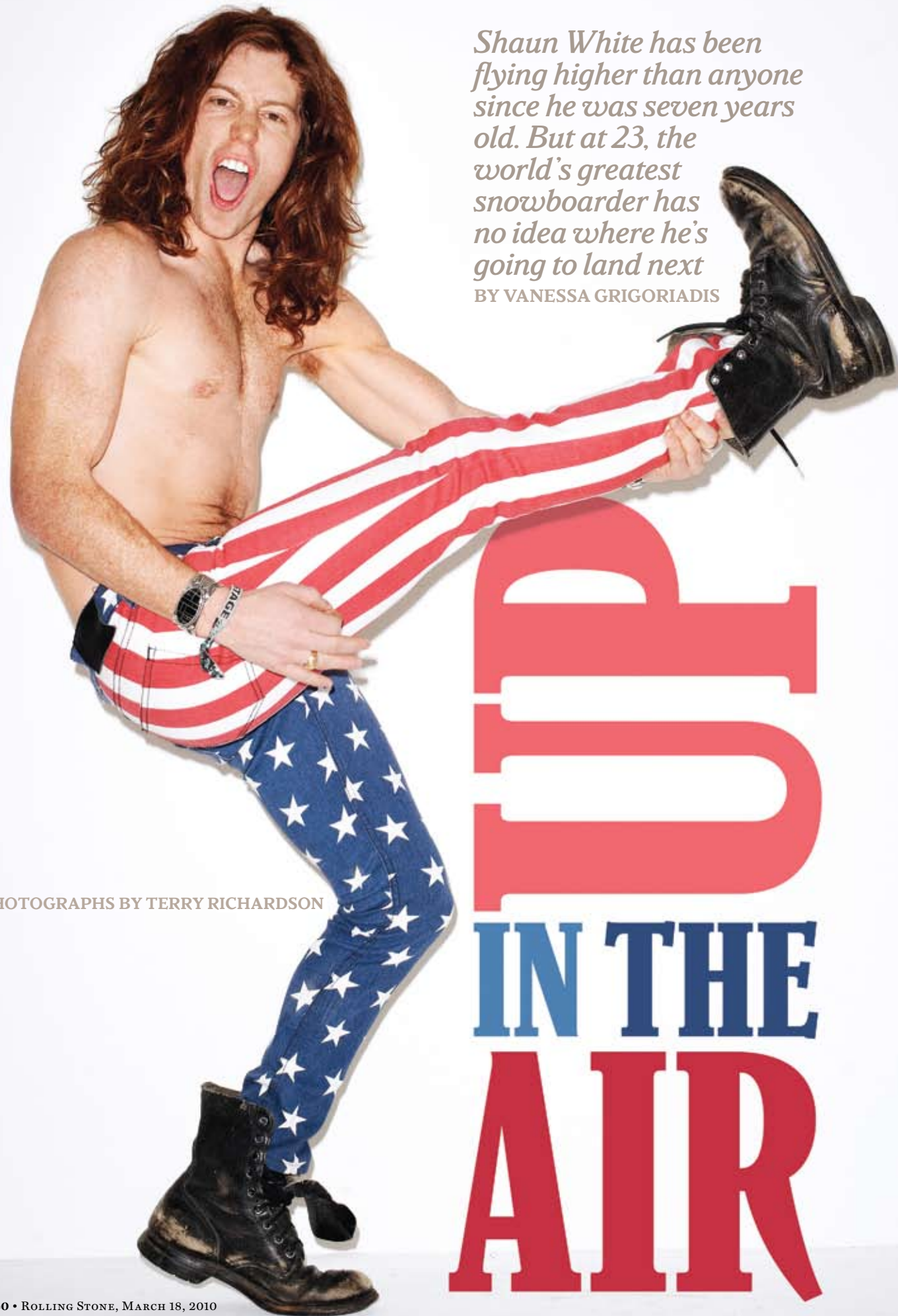


*Shaun White has been flying higher than anyone since he was seven years old. But at 23, the world's greatest snowboarder has no idea where he's going to land next*

BY VANESSA GRIGORIADIS



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRY RICHARDSON

# BOB IN THE AIR







## Each morning during the Olympics, Shaun White tried to grab shotgun in the Team USA van head-

ed to the mountain, but fifth-placer Louie Vito always beat him to it. "It pissed me off so much, because that meant he got to control the music," White says with a slight smile. "He'd play stuff he knew I hated, like Miley Cyrus' 'Party in the U.S.A.,' which is just painful. It's bumming me out even thinking about it." White was the snowboarder to beat in Vancouver – he's been that guy forever, actually – so it wasn't a bad idea to try to psych him out. Vito played a lot of Miley, every day, plus Dr. Dre and terrifyingly long bouts of reggae. "A lot of guys on the team are so into reggae," says White. "They'd all be like, 'Yeah, bumbaclot nation!' I'd just be sitting there, like, 'Jesus.'" He shudders. "They knew that all I wanted to hear was rock & roll." • White may rule snowboarding, one of the coolest youth cultures in America, but he's such a

bundle of energy, ambition, discipline and competitiveness that the sport doesn't quite express who he wants to be. Rock fandom, as it turns out, is essential to White's "new zone, my whole new deal," as he puts it. "Getting into music has changed my personality and way of doing things," he says. "I'm far more open now."

Tonight, no longer encumbered by the capacious red-white-and-blue jerseys of Team USA, White's arms are festooned with a main-stage wristband he's been wearing since last year's Coachella festival, a red-and-black cloth bracelet from a vintage-rock store, and a lot of heavy silver jewelry, including an onyx cuff that's similar to one owned by Robert Plant, his musical hero and all-around obsession. (His favorite song in the world is Led Zepelin's "Whole Lotta Love.") White's jacket is black leather, baby-skin soft and cut to highlight muscle. "I met Matt Sorum from Guns n' Roses in L.A., and he told me to come by his clothing store on Melrose," says White, digging his hands into his pockets. "Apparently, Slash only smokes a certain kind of cigarette, but they're super-long, so he made the pocket on this jacket extra long to fit them. As soon as I heard that, I was like, 'I'll take it! I'll take it!'" He breaks into a grin. "Then, since I was in

the presence of rock heroes, I decided that I had to get the pants to match."

So here he is, our leather-enslaved two-time gold medalist über rock fan, 23, holding court with his team manager, bodyguard and two PR reps at a table in an upscale bistro in downtown Manhattan a day after leaving Vancouver, with only a brief stop in Chicago to school Oprah in the rigors of the double McTwist 1260: his showstopping trick, made up of two flips and three and a half spins, that he stuck at the Olympics *after* he won the gold – a "righteous victory lap," as he put it. With his flowing carrot top, White, who stands five feet nine and is built like a bantam-weight boxer, is recognizable from across any room, and bejeweled matrons keep rushing over to offer him a big thumbs up. A waitress nearly pees her pants reading him the specials. "I used to hate on New York because it was cold and I didn't understand it, but now it's one of my favorite places," says White. "After the Turin Olympics four years ago, I went to Madison Square Garden for a Knicks game. They put me on the JumboTron, and the whole place stood up. It was unbelievable. I sat down, and I was shaking."

His first gold medal at Turin in 2006 may have blown White's mind, but the second one cemented his reputation as athletic and pop-culture legend. "Honestly, I'm never that proud of my performances, but this time at the Olympics feels different," he says. "I was able to get that last run in on the pipe, and I think that truly affected people. It showed something about myself to them, something more than what they knew."

Before he digs into a New York strip steak, White messes around with his iPhone, scrolling through some messages. He stops at a picture of Vice President Joe Biden at a news conference in Vancouver, with a video screen set up behind him to show clips of medalists' performances. "Man, I worked so hard to set this picture up right," says White, wriggling with excitement. "Check it out," he guffaws. "I'm shredding on the VP's head."

**S**NOWBOARDING IS A YOUNG sport, only 15 years into its mainstream popularity, but every year, the halfpipes get bigger and the tricks get wilder – in Nagano, Japan, in 1998, the longest rotation was only 720 degrees – and a lot of that has to do with the influence of White. He's an elegant athlete, strong and precise, so good that keeping up with him means literally taking your life in your hands: Double corks, a trick that White pioneered, put top-ranked snowboarder Kevin Pearce in the hospital with a brain injury right before the Olympics. "Doing these tricks is the most vertiginous feeling you can ever get, especially during the day, when the snow matches the sky," says White. "You're

up there spinning, like, 'Where am I?' and your life depends on finding the blue line marking the pipe. It's kind of like tennis: You have to be quick and react quick."

On TV, White may play the eternal radical little dude – a goofy guy whose radicalism is sweetly unthreatening – but in person, he's not only intelligent and sophisticated but a stone-cold killer. Like Tiger Woods, whom White has called a "great guy deep down who just made some bad calls," he's as competitive about business as he is about sports: Between his own video game and his endorsements, including Target, Burton and Oakley, he made an estimated \$9 million in 2008. Bud Keene, the halfpipe coach for the U.S. snowboard team, puts it this way: "Imagine an experiment where you mix the DNA of the most naturally talented athlete of a generation, say a Michael Jordan or a LeBron James, with the DNA of the hardest-working athlete imaginable, a Rocky Balboa or a Cal Ripken. Finally, you throw in the DNA from the most driven and uncompromising athletes you can think of, a Lance Armstrong or a Tiger Woods, and – *voilà!* Out pops Shaun."

Last year, when White realized that his celebrity was creating a problem at public halfpipes – he was afraid to try new tricks because there always seemed to be a kid around with a cameraphone, ready to post a YouTube video of him falling on his butt – one of his sponsors, Red Bull, put together a plan out of a sci-fi movie: For an estimated \$500,000, the company built White his own private halfpipe, a 22-foot monster with a foam pit, in a backcountry bowl near Silverton Mountain, in Colorado. That's a nutty thing to do, like building a race-car driver his own track. "People Google Earth-ed the pipe, and there was a big debate on the Internet if it was real or not," says White, smirking a little. "For sure, it was real. And it was pristine. A normal halfpipe is mauled by the public by 2 p.m., so this was just the perfect scenario."

White turned pro about a decade ago, and since then he has won every major snowboard contest at least once. He began snowboarding at six and went pro at 13, while also skateboarding

under the mentorship of Tony Hawk, who considered him the most promising young skater he had ever seen. "Shaun's confidence is a family thing," says his brother, Jesse. "Our mom moved to Hawaii on her own when she was 18, and my dad marches to the same drummer. He just has it on the inside."

White's mom, a waitress, and father, a city employee, brought him up with a progressive attitude in Del Mar, a beachfront town near San Diego – he was named after a professional surfer, Shaun Tomson, and his parents imagined he might become one too. When Shaun was eight, his dad bought him a surfboard with a picture of the Tasmanian Devil on the back and took him into the waves. "After one big wave, I got washed, and I was like, 'I hate this,'" says White. "Taz just rocked me in the face."

His accommodating family hunted for a sport at which White and his siblings would excel, and found it in skiing, reachable with a few hours' drive to the San Bernardino mountains. White was so instantly fearless on skis that his parents put him on a snowboard to slow him down. "I kept hitting other people with the poles," he recalls. "I was a monster child." Pretty soon,

### AIR AMERICA

Opposite page: White pulls off a "righteous victory lap" at the Vancouver Olympics, nailing his signature double McTwist 1260 after he had already won the gold medal during his first run. Below: Celebrating his triumph with teammate Scotty Lago.



PREVIOUS PAGE: JEANS BY SHAWN WHITE FOR TARGET. THIS PAGE: BRIAN KERSY/UP/ILANDY

JUAN SOLIZ/PACIFICCOASTNEWS.COM



he wanted to snowboard every weekend, but the family didn't have much money, so they bought a van to crash in at the mountain. Then White started winning contests – small purses at first, but with enough pache to get noticed by sponsors. He became the sport's youngest prodigy, dashing around the world with Mom and Dad. "Then I would go home to California, and everything was normal," he says. "I'd show up to play on the soccer team, and kids would be like, 'Where were you – Japan? Anyway, Ninja Turtles are rad.'"

In middle school, as he turned pro, life began to change. "I couldn't even walk through the school without someone asking me to get them a board, or saying, 'Bro, put me on TV!'" he says. The school wouldn't give him credit for class work on the road – not even P.E. "It was a rich area, and the teachers were pretty bitter: 'How come he gets to do this and I don't?'" The family moved to Carlsbad, a nearby town, where White attended a high school which had a program that catered to kids with professional careers. "That school was awesome – and more than helpful," he says.

On the road, though, he began to find that he didn't quite fit in. After all, he was almost a decade younger than most of the snowboarders he was competing against. "I'd win a contest, and then I couldn't even go out to get the award because the ceremony was in a bar," he says. While his competitors were out having fun, he was in his room with his parents, playing video games. He had no interest in partying – and no qualms about taking advantage of the snowboarders he'd be facing off against the next day. "Sometimes, the night before a contest, they would give me a glass of milk to play quarters with them," says White. "I was like, 'Drink up! I'm going to rock you tomorrow, dude.'"

At 15, at a contest in Japan in which White was not the favorite, the other competitors decided that they didn't dig the jump. They agreed to throw the contest and split the prize money, but White refused to go along with the plan – then proceeded to win the event, pocketing \$65,000. "It was a defining moment," he says. "I deserved it, I wanted it, and I got it. It was then that I realized that I can do anything I want to do."

**T**HOUGH WHITE IS THE MOST recognizable face of snowboarding, and possesses the clan's core value – fun is good – he's cut from a different cloth. He's never lived in the mountains full-time, usually drinks alcohol on a full stomach (he gets a headache otherwise) and has zero interest in watching snowboard or skate videos. "I'd rather do it, not watch it," he says. When he goes to the mountain, he prefers

VANESSA GRIGORIADIS wrote about Devendra Banhart for RS 1096.

to ride for an hour or so and then cruise – at which point, he puts thoughts about snowboarding entirely aside, listening to his favorite bands, like T. Rex, Roky Erickson and the Kinks, or watching concert footage on YouTube. "I love the sport of snowboarding so much, but I just don't want to talk about it, ever," says White. "When someone approaches me and says, 'Dude, it's snowing in Mammoth!' I don't know what to say, because I could really care less. I mean, I'm sure Slash doesn't want to talk about guitars. He probably wants to talk about kittens."

In fact, none of White's friends are snowboarders: He's too much of a loner for that, and too competitive. "The show *Entourage* always intrigues me because that guy's got his homeys with him everywhere, and I never roll like that," he says. "I've never had a crew. I've just been on my own, always." This fact has not been lost on the rest of Team USA, some of whose members, while insisting that they harbor no personal animosity toward White, created their own collective last year called

**"I JUST CAN'T RELAX," SAYS WHITE. "I'VE BEEN COMPETING SINCE I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD. WHEN I HAVE TIME OFF, I CAN'T HANDLE IT."**



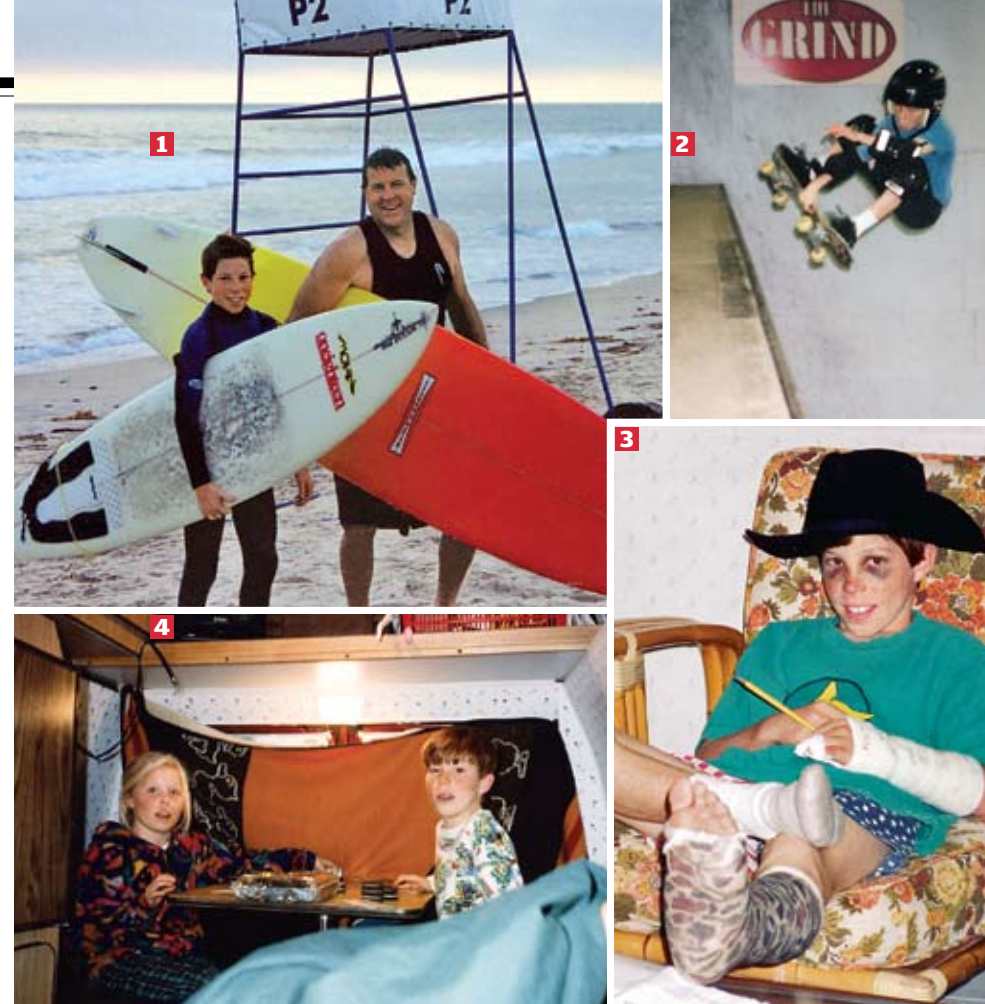
White jamming at Sundance last year

Friends (they left out the "I" to symbolize the communitarian spirit of the sport). After word of White's personal halfpipe got out, Kevin Pearce had his sponsor, Nike, build him one of his own, and then invited the Friends to ride on it with him – while White claimed his pipe for himself alone.

That's pretty heavy stuff, but White made a point of getting a little closer to some of those guys in Vancouver. Last night, at least, he had a friend to run around with, an old buddy of his brother's who tore his ACL snowboarding and now lives in Greenwich Village, and the two of them went to a bar downtown. "All I know is that we were at some place where you'd be hanging out and some crazy fog would roll through, and then these cool jets would come out," White says. It's the following afternoon, and he's chilling in a penthouse suite of a Soho hotel with a dead-on view of the Empire State Building from a wrap-around terrace. He puts David Bowie on the stereo and asks his willowy blond publicist to order some calamari. A couple of Louis Vuitton trunks sit on a bureau in his bedroom, with his clothes neatly unpacked in the closet. His gold medal is stashed in his carry-on luggage. "When I was little, with my parents in the van, I would take showers by putting water in a milk carton and dumping it over me," White says, staring out the window from his seat on a modern gray couch. "And now I get a place like this. It's just so bizarre."

Those who know White well say he is remarkably unchanged by his success. "What I respect about Shaun is that he is down-to-earth," says his friend Andre Agassi. "Even with insane talent at such a young age, he conducts himself with no pretense or sense of entitlement. I imagine Shaun has the same fun and intensity in the Olympics at 23 that he had on a family vacation at six. It's just built in."

But being the king of the world isn't as easy as it's cracked up to be, and White starts to open up about the past few years, which have been hard for him. "I was ready for the 2006 Olympics," he says. "I wanted it. I wanted the attention. But afterward I freaked out a little bit." We think of White as a symbol of freedom and rebellion, but he's been sheltered in a lot of ways. He loves fashion now, particularly when it intersects with rock history – "Think about Robert Plant onstage with a smoke and a drink, holding a dove, in a frilly white shirt. How do you beat that?" – and genuinely likes designing his Target line, but before he was an adult, he never bought clothes in a store. "I've always ridden for a company, so since I was a kid I've gone shopping by walking into a sponsor's warehouse and filling my bag," he says. "The concept of a dressing room just blew my mind. I was like, 'You're going to let me put on these pants, right here? Just drop drawers?'"



**BOARDING SCHOOL**

(1) White, who got his first surfboard at age eight, with his father at Del Mar beach in San Diego. (2) Skating in Mount Hood, Oregon, age nine. (3) Recovering from a skateboarding collision at age 11. (4) With his sister Kari in the van that his family lived in on trips to ski resorts.

So after the Olympics, at 19, he resettled in California only to discover that his friends from home were all off at college or working nine-to-five jobs. "I was so frustrated, hanging at home with Mom," he says. Also, he had a girlfriend – he's not attached now – and he didn't feel right bringing her to his mother's house, so he bought the best home his millions could buy: a seven-bedroom place on three acres in Rancho Santa Fe, a blingy subdivision near San Diego. Sprinkler systems, kitchen cabinets, custom-made couches – it was a lot for a teenager to handle, and White soon bought another place, a small house in the Hollywood Hills. "I didn't know what went into a home, and a big house was just headache after headache," he says. "I don't even want to go there anymore. Now I just use it to throw parties, like a big Halloween party."

But it's downtime that kills White more than anything else. "I just can't relax," he says. "I've been competing since I was seven years old, so when I have time off, I can't handle it." A few months ago, when he had some dead space between contests, he bought four surfboards and almost ran off to Hawaii. "Then I realized that the winter waves are 24 feet tall," he says. "I didn't think it was a good idea to drown before the Olympics." He can't go out much anymore; he gets mobbed, and it's no fun anyway, because he always has to be vigilant about spit-shining his image. "Times have changed, and it's such a bummer," he says. "I was just in a bar in Colorado, and some-

tempted to hold off on shredding for a year and just skate, to make that my new goal."

In New York, he usually gets around by skateboard, too. "If I'm walking on the street, I have to put my hair in a bun so I don't get recognized," he says. "But if I'm skating, I can let it out, because by the time people have seen me, I'm gone."

**F**ROM WHITE'S PERSPECTIVE, the evolution in snowboarding that he has witnessed and catalyzed over the course of his career is a good thing. "Times have changed, but it's rad, you know?" he says. "When I first learned to snowboard, we weren't allowed on mountains, and now they compete to have us. Nineteen-year-olds are making six figures as snowboarders. There's even skate P.E. and surf P.E. in schools. Can you imagine going to school in California and not wearing skate shoes? You'd be laughed at." To White, snowboarding is a metaphor for achieving your dreams. "I like the idea that you can do whatever you want to do," he says. "That's what life is about." There's a poster of Jim Morrison in the office where he works on his video games, and he thinks about it sometimes, what Morrison's face means to him – freedom, for sure, and experimentation. "I think about what people will think in the future when they see my face too," he says. "I don't know what I want them to think of, but I definitely wouldn't want it to be snowboarding, because there's so much more to me than that."

These days, White is learning to turn to one of his three Les Pauls when he needs to relax. "Music is my refuge, my getaway," he says. He has been playing guitar since he was 17, but he started to get more serious about it this year, jamming with his coach Keene on the road. White plays a lot of Guns n' Roses, Zeppelin and Hendrix. "He rips, but is very considerate and democratic playing with others," Keene says, "so you don't feel like his backup band."

In most areas of his life, it's impossible for White to deal with losing – the only place he accepts it as a possibility is Vegas, where he's dropped \$60,000 in recent years: "I like to stay at the Hard Rock, because at least then when I lose money I can walk over to one of those cases and see Axl Rose's jacket or Billy Idol's glove – I'm all 'All right, that's awesome, take my money.'" But when he picks up his guitar, he's able to set aside his competitive streak. Since he started playing, life seems less stressful. Now when he's in L.A., White drives down to the beachfront towns of his youth for a different kind of shredding with a group of friends. "I think guitar is the best thing in the world," he says. "It's the only thing where no matter what I do, I can't do it all myself. There's only so good you can get in your room, and it's never going to sound as rad as if I play with other people. With guitar, I really can't win."