

Breakdance Competition Wows Northeast Kingdom Crowd

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Alex Diaz competes in a UDEF Pro Breaking Tour competition at Burke Mountain Academy on Sunday, May 7, 2017. (Photo by Paul Hayes)

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Brothers Steve and Liam Shannon were raised in Wheelock — a place far removed from the epicenter of breakdancing.

But one day while channel surfing they came across the movie "Beat Street," which featured 1980s hip hop culture in New York City.

They were hooked.

"We watched the battle scene [from Beat Street] over and over again," Liam said. "We'd rewind it and try to do what we saw... We actually broke the tape because we watched it so many times."

The Shannons were among those in attendance Sunday when The Pro Breaking Tour stopped at Burke Mountain Academy. The event featured 12 professionals competing.

The tour was founded by BMA graduate Steve Graham, a 57-year-old private equity executive, who discovered breakdancing while working for Goldman Sachs in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

"I'd take a late night cab ride from Goldman Sachs to the South Bronx to learn moves," said Graham, whose breaking name is D-boy Silverback.

Four years ago Graham founded the non-profit UDEF and the Pro Breaking Tour, "to provide the breaking community with a well-organized series of prize money breaking competitions," and draw more audience, sponsorship and media attention to breakdancing, according to the UDEF website.

"I'd like to see the tour essentially become like a little, self-sustaining [tour] of its own," Graham said. "That doesn't mean it's going to be the next coming of the NBA or the ATP tennis tour. It could be a four- to five million dollar tour, paying a few million dollars in prize money, being able to support the cost of running events."

For him, the tour is a labor of love.

"There's a lot of people who've had some success in the business world that want to make a philanthropic impact. Some people choose art museums and universities. But this is an area I feel close to and I feel good about supporting," said Graham, who runs the Philadelphia-based investment firm Graham Partners. "I'm connected to these guys. These guys I'm closer to than a lot of people in the business world."

The winner of Sunday's event was 26-year-old Alex Diaz of Boston (a.k.a. B-boy El Niño), who has been breaking for two decades and has been with the Pro Breaking Tour for all four years.

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"I feel like [breakdancing] is one of those talents that doesn't get enough credit. I know how hard it is and how much you have to practice for it," Diaz said. "I see other athletes — basketball players, football players — making millions of dollars. We're not making millions of dollars off this, but this is just another great opportunity for us. It's putting money in multiple breakdancers' pockets. People who've been doing it for years. People I've grown up with. We're all just making a better living now."

Sunday's performance at Burke Mountain Academy was a meeting of kindred spirits. Breakdancing and alpine skiing are vastly different disciplines, but both share a combination of strength, stamina and skill.

"Both of them have an incredibly high athletic component and dedication, so there are some real common threads," Graham said, standing inside of BMA's Honore Bertack Center, where the competition was held. "The [skiers] love the athleticism of the breakers. They respect that."

Meanwhile Graham has gained the trust and respect of the b-boy community. He might be a white, middle-aged investment banker, but he traces his roots to the foundation of hip hop.

"When I first met him, I gave him a lot of respect," said Diaz, who met Graham five years ago.

"He wasn't some guy who was just trying to exploit the culture. He was actually there dancing on the floor with us. I think that's why he gets a lot of respect from our scene."

Following Sunday's competition, Graham was sat at again, participating in an informal break battle alongside a group of dancers representing Vermont, which included the Shannon brothers.

In the years since they were exposed to breaking and hip hop culture through Beat Street, they have made it a part of their lives. They eventually formed a crew in Vermont, and later performed on cruise ships.

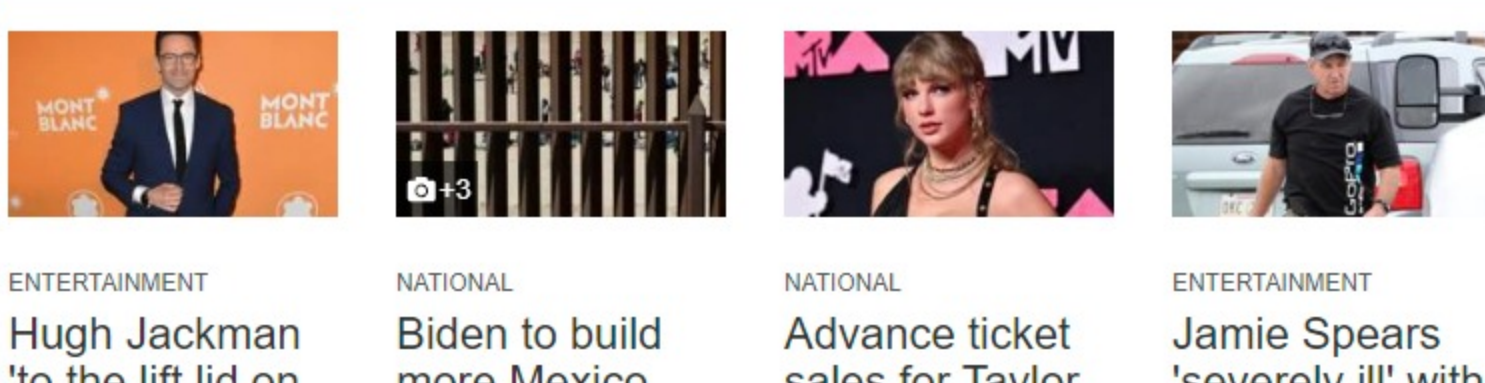
"We were really rambunctious kids," Liam said. "We needed an outlet and, to be honest, breaking probably saved us from doing bad stuff in our life."

Steve graduated from Lyndon Institute and made it his career. Today he teaches breaking at Swan Dap in Burlington and also works as a DJ, dancer and emcee for Premier Entertainment and Events.

"The reason [Beat Street] spoke to me is because we grew up kind of poor," Steve said, noting that he never gravitated to traditional role models in the community, but that "when I would see a b-boy they were like real-life super heroes because they were teenagers like us, they dressed like us, they talked like us."

"They put all that hard work into it, they honed their craft, and they commanded your respect. That was a role model I could see myself being like."

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