



BOUNCE



**NOW ENTERING
THE UPSIDE DOWN**
Kids all over the world are
flipping for a new sport

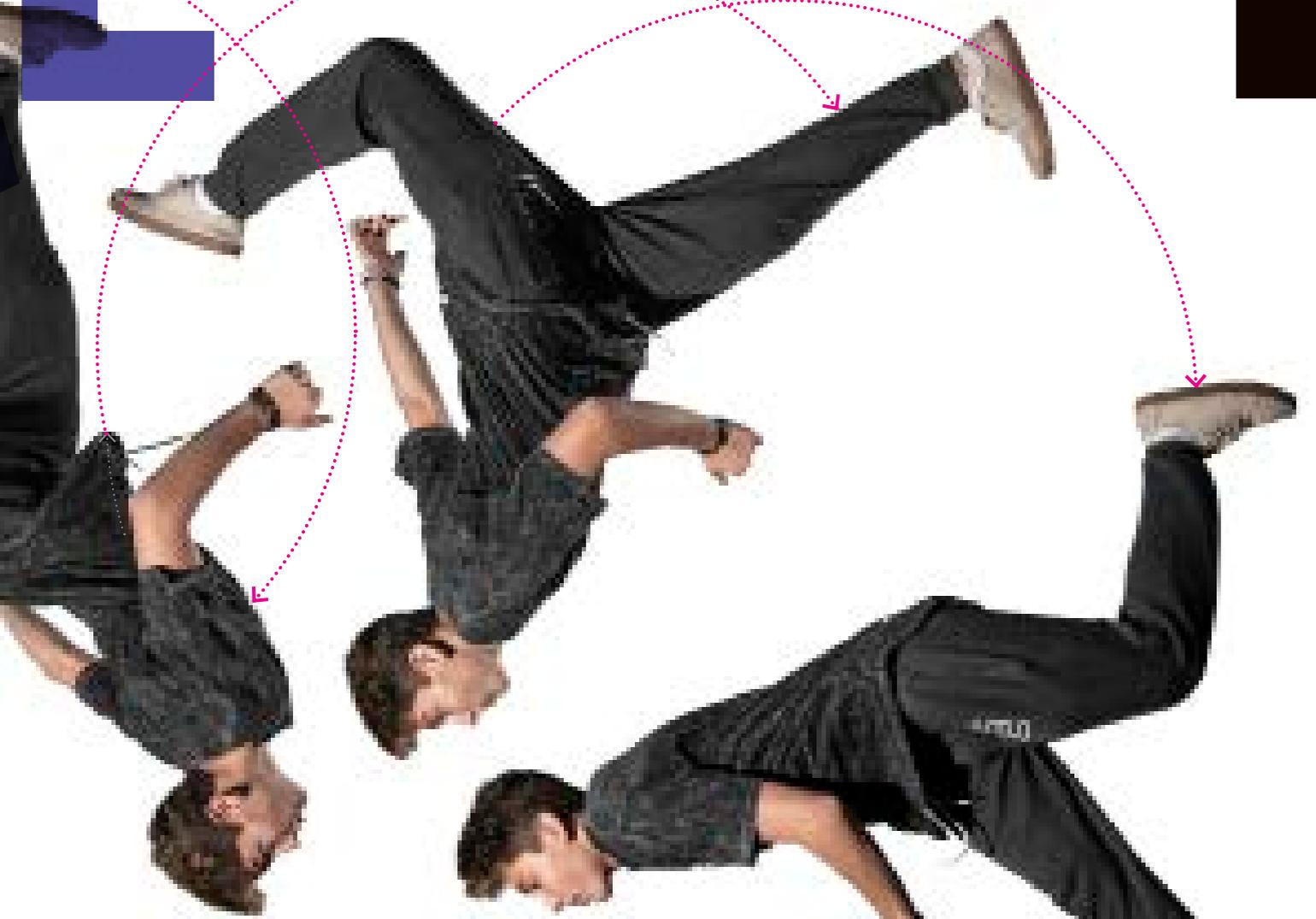


**THE ORIGINS OF COUNTERCULTURAL
SPORTS AREN'T ALWAYS CLEAR. BUT
THE RISE OF GTRAMPING, A FREE-
STYLE PURSUIT THAT COMBINES
PARKOUR AND TRAMPOLINING, CAN
BE TRACED TO INSTAGRAM. NOW L.A.
IS BECOMING ITS MAIN HUB**

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» BY
JUDI KETTELER

» PHOTOGRAPH
BY
DUSTIN
SNIPES



HOUSE



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Y TEN-YEAR-OLD KID, MAXX, DOESN'T STOP MOVING THE ENTIRE FOUR-HOUR FLIGHT FROM CINCINNATI TO L.A. FIDGETING, ROLLING HIS WRISTS, STRAIGHTENING AND BENDING HIS LEGS, LEANING FORWARD AND BACKWARD, TWISTING, CRACKING, STRETCHING. ALL MOVEMENTS IN ALL DIRECTIONS. AND THE TALKING. SO MUCH TALKING. TRYING TO CONTAIN HIS ENERGY IS LIKE TRYING TO BOTTLE A STAR. ♣ MAXX'S RESTLESSNESS IS UNDERSTANDABLE, THOUGH, BECAUSE HE KNOWS WE'RE EN ROUTE TO HIS VERSION OF DISNEYLAND (DIFFERENT, IN EVERY WAY POSSIBLE, FROM THE MIDDLE SEAT ON A PLANE). FOR ONE WEEKEND IN OCTOBER, A SMALL SLICE OF VENICE BEACH IS BEING TRANSFORMED INTO A POP-UP

trampoline park called Gravalanche. More than 500 athletes from around the world will swarm the seaside haven for the event, which is less a competition and more an athletic showcase. As for what these athletes are going to do on the dozen or so trampolines in the sand? It's pretty simple. They're going to flip.

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MAXX IS A FLIPPER. I didn't make that name up—it's the term used to describe the athletes who partake in this newish sport known as Gtramp (short for garden trampoline). Maybe you're familiar; perhaps your kid has shown you a YouTube video of someone jumping off a roof onto a trampoline and doing a triple backflip or a clip of someone maneuvering an urban landscape by bounding over walls and leaping from concrete pillars. That's all fair game in Gtramping. The sport is purely freestyle (pointed toes, for example, are unimportant), and, like skateboarding with its ollies and tic-tacs, flipping has its lingo for tricks: kaboom, cody, ball-out. Flippers have established a kind of hierarchy for the hardest way to do a trick—double bounce, when one flipper utilizes the force of his or her bounce to send another flipper higher, is the easiest, with tower bounce, one bounce, and standing following in order of difficulty. Quadruple flips are becoming more commonplace, with some flippers even doing quintuple flips (quints).

Maxx does flips everywhere and anywhere but mostly on one of the four (yes, really) trampolines we have in our backyard. It all started with him teaching himself a single backflip and then exploded into more complicated forward, backward, and twisting tricks. He learns by watching videos and connecting on Instagram (under my watchful eye) with other kids all over the world who are part of this movement.



The Gtramp community started to gain traction on Instagram around 2016—a quick search of the hashtag #gtramp brings up about 87,000 posts and counting—with YouTubers like 18-year-old extreme flipper Tanner Braungardt playing a big role in the sport's growth, too (Tanner currently has about 4 million subscribers). Instead of teams and coaches, Gtramping has brand sponsorships and athlete meet-ups, with some trampoline companies sending flippers around the globe. Gravalanche has billed itself as the “biggest flipping event of the year,” but it's hard to know whether or not this is the case since such things aren't tracked in Gtramping—not in an official capacity, anyway. And while some of the brands will host exhibition-like contests—take the Gtramp Games created by Greg Roe Trampoline and cosponsored by trampoline company SkyBound USA—on the whole



FROM THE JUMP

Mike Friedman (left, previous page) and his son Andrew observe the scene at the inaugural Gravalanche in Venice Beach. Both are repping their company, Gravitated Equations. Wyatt Pedersen (above) takes a spin at a complicated maneuver

flippers reject traditional competition-based sporting constructs in favor of an all-inclusive, supportive community.

Gtramping can be a solitary pursuit until a bunch of flippers get together and show off, which is exactly what's happening at Gravalanche. Entrants have come to sunny Los Angeles from places as disparate as Michigan and the Netherlands.

We arrive on Friday and spend our first day sightseeing and relaxing at the beach. But Saturday is reserved for Gravalanche. Maxx is ready to roll around 6 a.m. even though the event doesn't begin till 10. When it finally becomes reasonable to do so, we set out from our hotel near the Venice Beach Boardwalk, and within a few minutes Maxx spots a kid wearing a pink T-shirt with bold, graphic palm trees on the back. "Look, he's wearing Grav, too!" Maxx says to me before running toward him. "Grav" is an abbreviation for Gravitated Equations, one of the most visible brands in Gtramping.

I catch the eye of the kid's dad and smile. He introduces himself as Karl Mueller and tells me he drove up from San Diego with his son,

Finn, who looks close to Maxx's age. They've never met, but they are already chatting away. Our kids' matching T-shirts mean that Karl and I understand a lot about each other, too. Like me, he's familiar with attempting to explain these wild flips his kid spends hours every day perfecting, not for a team or competition but for the joy of doing it and sharing it with others. "There is this moment when you meet another parent who just gets it," Karl says. I know exactly what he means, and I feel like I could cry.

The four of us cruise the boardwalk, passing landmarks like Muscle Beach and the renowned pickup-basketball courts. Though it's barely midday, the strand is already buzzing with grunge, color, and texture. We spot someone flipping about 20 feet in the air and know we're in the right place. "Finn was a little nervous this morning," Karl says. But all trace of that is gone. He and Maxx are already "seshing" (their word for doing flips) in the sand with a half dozen other kids near the entry queue.

The exuberance is palpable. It's going to be a great day, and I know it by looking at Maxx, who is in his element. These are his people. The music is thumping, the temperature is warming up, and L.A.'s iconic palm trees are swaying in the salty breeze.

By the way, the palm trees on the back of those pink Grav tees are not a thoughtless design. In fact, they're sort of why we're here at all.

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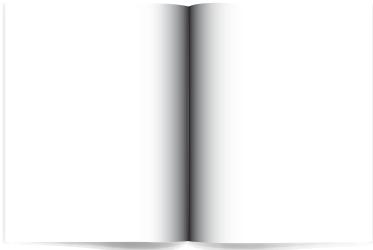
PALM TREES REPRESENT paradise because vacation for me was always somewhere with palm trees," Solomon Berg tells me. "So I thought: 'Why can't I live with palm trees every day?'" Solomon is 16. On Instagram, he is @soloflow7, "because I'm flying solo." He's also a cofounder of Gravitated Equations, the brand sponsoring Gravalanche.

Solomon was 13 and living in Boston with his family when he connected on Instagram with Andrew Friedman (@afriedman15), who was then 15 and living with his family in Brentwood. They were two of the earliest flippers to push the limits of backyard trampoline tricks, which didn't go unnoticed on Instagram (together the pair have amassed more than 200,000 followers). Early on they started a group chat on the social media platform and named it Gravitated Equations—because it was a "puzzle of language," Solomon says. He likes random wordplay, flipping words around the same way he flips his body around.

The group chat would morph into its own Instagram account and eventually a popular clothing brand of the same name, one that has acquired worldwide recognition and become inextricably linked to the flipping community. But before all that, one very key thing happened: A few adults paid attention to something their kids were saying.

To hear their parents tell it, Solomon and Andrew have always been natural athletes, both with a tendency to throw themselves into whatever sport they tried. "Anything Andrew decided to take up, he hyper-focused and excelled and became incredibly good at it," says Andrew's dad, Mike Friedman. The Friedmans encouraged Andrew and his brother, Jason, to find ways to move from an early age. Debbie Friedman, their mom, tells me that when the boys were young, she and her husband installed a zip line and ball pit in their basement (talk about being the fun parents on the block). Mike shares how he always tried to make fitness a game in which the only thing to beat was your own best record: How high can you

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Bounce House

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jump? How many push-ups can you do in 30 seconds? How far can you throw the ball? “It was always about setting new goals,” Mike says. When the Friedmans got a trampoline, flipping was simply an extension of that ethos for Andrew and Jason.

Across the country, Solomon was cultivating the same passion for challenging his body, says Alisa Berg, Solomon’s mom. “But as he got older, he lost interest in structured sports and wanted to use his athleticism in a way that was meaningful to him.” Solomon started flipping—doing many of the same tricks Andrew was doing on his trampoline in L.A.—and the pair followed each other on Instagram (the Gtramp community was relatively small back then). When Solomon commented on one of Andrew’s posts, the two struck up a conversation. Soon Solomon announced he was going to L.A. to stay with his friend Andrew and went as far as buying a plane ticket on his own.

Like any reasonable set of parents, Solomon’s mom and dad asked him to slow down and let them do some research. First they called the Friedmans. “They seemed like a high-quality family determined to let their children follow their own path—within parameters,” says Eli Berg, Solomon’s dad. They agreed that Solomon would go stay with Andrew for a few weeks that summer. (“It was Alisa and Debbie who really figured it all out,” Mike Friedman admits.) Solomon wound up visiting Los Angeles seven times between 2015 and 2016 before he moved out for good in January 2017 to live with the Friedmans. “We knew L.A. is where he could pursue his passion and artistry,” says Eli Berg. “It would have been a fool’s errand to try to box him in.” Before I met these boys and their parents, I would have thought that was, well, nutty. But in talking to them—and now going through this with my own kid—keeping Solomon and Andrew apart seems like it would have been the nuttier option.

Solomon arrived at the Friedmans and settled in fast. He and Andrew and Jason would spend hours flipping on the Friedmans’ trampoline, hanging out, and visiting

iconic L.A. landmarks. They christened every location on their list—whether it was the Walk of Fame or the Hollywood sign—by doing a flip.

Andrew is naturally soft-spoken and reluctant to be in the spotlight, but Solomon’s energy was just what he needed to bloom. For fun, Jason, Andrew, and Solomon wound up creating a logo for their Gravitated Equations Instagram account. After that, using a heat press in the basement left over from one of Mike’s previous business ventures, they made T-shirts to wear to Tempest Freerunning Academy in Hawthorne, the local parkour and trampoline park that catered to freestyle flippers. Soon other kids at Tempest wanted the shirts, so the trio started a small e-commerce website (by then Jason had mostly lost interest in flipping but was intrigued by the business side). When flippers on Instagram saw these kids wearing the Gravitated Equations shirts, they wanted them, too. “I thought they were playing around with a logo just to have their own thing, but I realized what they meant to the kids in the community,” Mike says. “I thought, ‘This is skateboarding 20 years ago, and you guys are Tony Hawk, so we may have something here.’”

The Bergs became bicoastal in the fall of 2017 and joined forces with the Friedmans to run Gravitated Equations, which is now a full-on apparel company. Nobody gave up their day jobs—Eli is a physician, Alisa is a full-time mom, and the Friedmans own a real estate appraisal company—but they tapped every resource (and family member) to build Grav. Jason, now a high school junior, was instrumental in designing the look of the Grav brand and innovating the designs of the apparel (shirts start at \$26; sweats can run as much as \$48). Zeke Berg, Solomon’s older brother and a junior at the University of Virginia McIntire School of Commerce, helped strategize on website development.

Having shipped its merchandise to all 50 states and 33 countries since the company’s inception a little more than a year ago, Grav is the leading lifestyle brand for the flipping community.



WITH A PERMIT you can paint the graffitied walls of Venice Beach on the weekends, and I already spot a few artists with their aerosol cans as we make our way into Gravalanche. Maxx immediately hops on a trampoline and feels at home, but it takes me a few minutes to orient myself. There are close to a

dozen trampolines, a 12-foot-tall tower—yeah, like for jumping from—with an airbag at its base, a ninja course, and an 80-foot-long, extra bouncy inflatable tumbling strip called an AirTrack.

I quickly spot the Gravitated Equations-sponsored athletes, including Jack and Bailey Payne, charismatic brothers from South Carolina; Z Zoromba, the daring former gymnast originally from Egypt; and Dom Lewis, better known as Domitrick.

At 26 Dom is the old man of the group and serves as a mentor and unofficial big brother to many young flippers, including Tanner Braungardt. Dom has an easy smile and a compact frame punctuated by calf muscles that pop out like baseballs. His flipping skills are self-taught, and he got serious about training when he was in college at Northwood University in Midland, Michigan (he has a B.A. in international business administration).

Flipping and inspiring kids is now his full-time job, and he spends about 75 percent of his time traveling to Gtramp events, trampoline parks, and gyms. His signature move is a back handspring from a sitting position. “This is a sport where you can create your own style,” he tells me before stepping onto the AirTrack and punching out something like seven backflips in a row with a grand finale of a double twisting backflip. Maxx’s eyes widen to the size of dinner plates because he’s only seen guys like Dom on Instagram. “I love that Grav events give kids the chance to interact with each other on a more personal level,” Dom says.

Many of the influencers pushing the sport and capturing imaginations are from humble backgrounds, but they are all self-made in one way or another. Brittany Hertz, 22, presses up into a handstand while a partner supports her over his head. (Women in the Gtramp community are few and far between, but the contingent is growing. I spot a few dozen at Gravalanche.) She’s a former national cheerleading champion who’s built a huge social media following for her skills in dance, martial arts, and tricking. “I do this because I want to promote being healthy since my dad has heart disease and diabetes,” Brittany says. “Flipping is all about intrinsic motivation.”

A few hours in, I spot Karl Mueller on one of the shady couches provided for tired parents. As I plop down next to him, Finn comes over. I ask him what his favorite part of the event is so far. “Everything,” he beams, and runs back to the AirTrack to tumble more.

Karl tells me that earlier this year one of Finn’s flipping friends—a girl about his



DOGTOWN AND G-BOYS

A crew of young flippers practice their craft at Gravalanche

son's age who lived 40 minutes away—invited some fellow flippers to her house for a meet-up. Meet-ups involve flippers descending on the home of patient and agreeable parents so the athletes can do flips all day, eat pizza, and spend the night (or the week). For Finn, it was the first time he got to be around other flippers, and for Karl, it was the first time he started to understand the community that these young athletes have forged and that his son had become a part of. Maxx spent a few days at flipper Colby Iverson's two-week meet-up in Waterford, Michigan, this past summer, and I experienced the same dynamic.

Though flipping found popularity on social media, the in-person events, whether informal or brand-sponsored, are what help solidify these kids' cross-country—and sometimes intercontinental—friendships. This is obvious when I watch Maxx meet his Instagram friend Jonah Schwinnen, 11, in person for the first time. Jonah is a good-natured kid from Boulder, Colorado, and his mom, Rachel McLaughlin, has brought him to Gravalanche. When she got a postcard promoting the event in the mail in August (anyone who had ever purchased Grav merchandise got the postcard), Rachel, a single mom with a lot of responsibilities, thought the same thing I did: "No way can we make this happen." Then she remembered some family members—relatives of her estranged poet-hippie father whom she'd only met twice—who lived in San Clemente. She'd been meaning to visit, so she decided to combine it with a Gravalanche trip.

Watching Jonah and Maxx together, Rachel is delighted she decided to come.

"One of my favorite things about the flipping community is how supportive the kids are of each other," she tells me. "There is so much positivity. They really want everyone to do awesome things." She's right. All day long, Gravalanche participants are cheering on and motivating their friends new and old. They are the ones making the sport, and they are each other's coaches.

Rachel and Jonah aren't the only ones who felt especially drawn to the event. Jannine and Gordon Sandmeier, who hail from Long Beach, New York, surprised their son, Kieran, with a trip. "Kieran hasn't been into organized sports," his dad tells me. "He is more enthusiastic about flipping than anything else." Flying across the country for Gravalanche seemed like a needless splurge until the family realized they could tie it in with a memorial for Gordon's sister, who died in 2017 and had lived in the area. They held a service for her in New York this same week last October, and it only made sense to have one in L.A. exactly a year later. "It was fate," Jannine says.

I tear up a little because I know the feeling. I made the decision to come to Gravalanche on August 31—the five-year anniversary of my father's death. I went from saying, "We can't possibly" at noon to "What if we just went?" by 3 p.m. Did some cosmic force bring us all to Venice Beach? A bunch of middle-aged parents trying to figure out this thing our kids do and looking for clues from our departed loved ones?

Maybe. I really like the idea.

But it might also be the incredible pull of Gravitated Equations. "They are bringing this world to life," Jannine says.

WHEN THEY FIRST conceived of Gravalanche in early 2018, Mike Friedman, Eli Berg, and the Grav boys—

Solomon, Andrew, and Jason—knew exactly where they wanted to hold the event. "Venice Beach is the kids' stomping ground," Mike says. "It's the soul of everything." SkyBound USA, the backyard trampoline company, immediately came on board as a sponsor.

But then Mike wondered if Provo, Utah-based CircusTriX, the largest developer, operator, and franchisor of trampoline parks in the world, could engineer a trampoline grid in the sand. CircusTriX owns Defy, a new breed of trampoline parks that cater to the Gtramp athlete. They liked Mike's challenge, according to Ty Nielson, regional vice president of CircusTriX, since the company wants Defy to be the brand that innovates for the flipping community. CircusTriX tapped its network of partners and built out a version of a Defy park right there in the sand.

Flipping does come with risks, but, I'm happy to see that the brands are encouraging as much safety as possible. Even the parents join in: Toward the end of the day, Debbie Friedman jumps off the tower into the giant airbag, and Mike goes through the ninja course as the crowd cheers. "In my appraisal business, I deal with suits all day," he says. "This is something much more exciting and rewarding because it involves my kids and their sport." He waves his hands around. "It's a movement."

The movement is precisely what brought Pamela Stefanowicz and Matt Janusz to Gravalanche all the way from Poland. On Instagram, they are @fit.lovers, and with almost a million followers, it's possible they are the most popular people in their homeland. They came on a whim because they wanted to experience Gtramp—and Venice Beach—first-hand. "It is paradise," Pamela says through a thick accent, and I know she means all of it: the balmy weather, the ocean, the Grav energy, and Solomon Berg's idyllic palm trees.

I'm far too Midwestern to get attached palm trees, but there in the sand, surrounded by their lanky trunks and weighty fronds (not to mention hundreds of kids cultivating their passion), I see what Solomon saw—the soul of something purely and spontaneously athletic with a freedom of movement that slips right through any system that wants to control it. No one here is being put in a box—unless you're counting Instagram's square frames.

Judi Ketteler contributes regularly to The New York Times. She is currently writing a book about honesty to be published by Kensington Books.