



WHICH CAME FIRST, THE DRAINAGE DITCH OR THE SKATEPARK?

By **Bill Robertson** and **Paul Zimmerman** | Photos: **Diane Sierra**



Great skate terrain is all about flow, and the same is true for stormwater drainage. Many ditches have been proving grounds for skateboarders, and soul skaters know well the influence of iconic drainage like Wallos in Hawaii and the Mt. Baldy Pipeline in California. And how about the butter-bottom Indian School ditch or the infamous and notorious Bear in Albuquerque, New Mexico? Skaters and ditches seem to be destined for one other, like peanut butter and chocolate or MTV's Rob and Big.

In the past, a number of concrete skateparks have been modeled after ditches. But what about modeling ditches after skateparks? Some cities and developers have toyed with the dual-purpose ditch/skatepark infrastructure idea, but never made it happen due to fears of liability lawsuits and extra construction costs. Well, it seems here in the desert Southwest, the time has come for such an effort.

In Santa Teresa, New Mexico, a few miles north of El Paso, Texas, Winton Homes began developing a new subdivision called Edgemont. "From a business standpoint, our goal is to make as many homes as we can on the land and sell them," says owner Scott Winton. But Winton also understands the landscape of why people might buy a home: "We wanted to add amenities like a basketball court, a playground and a small skatepark," he said.

Call it fate that local skater Chris Najera, a.k.a. PC, put money down on a lot for a home in Edgemont. PC heard Winton was thinking about putting a skatepark in the neighborhood and got excited, but was equally hummed when

he learned that the plan included modular ramps on a flat concrete slab. PC approached the developers, as a skater and homeowner, and insisted that skaters prefer concrete. Remarkably, Winton listened to PC's advice and thought that using the drainage ditch (which they had to build anyway) for skating could be a cost-effective solution.

That is where the El Paso Skatepark Association (EPSA) stepped in and helped in the process. EPSA is a volunteer, non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that is really a group of serious skateboarders who are dedicated to the development and stewardship of safe, freely accessible public skateparks in the El Paso area. The issue was a familiar one to the EPSA, as eight of El Paso's 10 public skateparks are dilapidating ramps on concrete slabs. So the EPSA slogan became "tienes concrete?" – Spanglish for "Got concrete?" And because Santa Teresa was a neighbor community, the EPSA was very happy to help out.

Through a series of meetings with the developer and the EPSA, headed by EPSA President Paul Zimmerman (Z-man), it was resolved that the top 80 feet of ditch concrete could be built as skateable terrain. Z-man was able to modify the existing ditch template into a skate-friendly design. The original wish list of features included things like a vertical wall ride over the inlet pipes, a vert extension wall with a ledge back, China bank diverters and faceted bank bowls and hips. The design was scaled back considerably because the ditch had to first serve its purpose of moving water, and because

of cost constraints. But concrete guru Jim Andrews of Bain Construction agreed to help build escalating 3- to 5- foot radius walls and bowl ends at the top, where water flow would not be affected.

The first concrete trucks rolled up on the morning of September 10, 2009. The Bane crew that normally makes sidewalks and curbs would be hand-stacking radius walls for skateboarding. During the two-week build, Z-man was constantly on site to monitor kinks, seams and lip treatments, but the concrete guys were great finishers and took a lot of pride in the project. These guys are super-nice, hard-working Mexican-Americans who speak broken English. "You buying the *cerveza*?" they would ask. One day a live chicken (soon to be BBQ) was brought to the job site.

As the concrete set on the final pour, a 12-yard bowl to hip, the legalities of such a spot remained unanswered. Winton showed up and explained that the city of Sunland Park (which governs Santa Teresa) had agreed to the plans for modified drainage; when subdivision construction is finished, Winton will turn it over to the city, and it will become city property. Signage warning of flash-flooding danger will be posted, with no mention of the place being a skatepark or skate spot – it's a ditch. This is a new take on do-it-yourself (DIY) projects, one that (it is hoped) will serve as a model for the future.

So if your travels take you to the outskirts of El Paso, and you want to session the ditch, be our guest. It's concrete, and it's free. ■