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Sports

Longboarding is like surfing on wheels for landlocked locals

Local surfer Anthony Smallwood lives about three hours from the nearest decent beach. But he's not about to let that come between him and his daily swells. Instead, he rides the asphalt waves right here — surfing D.C. streets on a mega-sized skateboard.

After work, Smallwood likes to head out with his four-foot board to secret spots nestled in Northwest D.C. He carves down tight streets, rips around parked cars and blows past U.S. Secret Service squads. "I ride my longboard every day," said the 40-year-old airline employee. "That's my surfing."

For many street skaters, Smallwood's longboard may not be the sexiest plank on four wheels. Born in the 1950s surfing culture of California and Hawaii, longboarding still has a distinctly old-school flavor. But in the D.C. area and across the country, a growing number of people — land-locked surfers and off-season snowboarders, urban speed freaks and suburban commuters — are finding the skateboard's overgrown cousin to be just the right size.

Don't mistake this for any old skateboard, though. A longboard's roomy deck (some are twice the length of street boards) can flex and cut fluid lines with extra stability. Its soft, big wheels are built for real road abuse, said John Dillon, a longboarder since college at the University of Maryland in the mid-1980s. "We can ride over things like gravel, sticks, dead animals."

These luxuries add up to a ride so creamy that shortboarders can only dream of it. "A skateboard rolls five feet and then stops," said Adam Colton, 22, who is planning a cross-



ROAD WORK: From left, Andy Pillifant, Gene Haffey and Ed Dugan in Arlington.

country longboard tour this summer. "A longboard is fast and smooth. It feels like you can float forever."

Your high-school physics teacher could explain the details. Longboarding feels like surfing or snowboarding because you can channel the potential energy of a wave or hill through your body while perched on a popsicle stick. "It's all

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ON A ROLL: "Some say we're not real skaters. But we're not. It's longboarding. We don't go to the skate parks," said Ed Dugan.

About a Board

about speed, balance, and momentum," said Andy Pillifant, 27, editorial coordinator at a scientific journal. And everyone swears that longboarding can keep your core strength rock-solid until you can reconnect with surf or snow.

Of course, cross-training on a longboard works only if you survive the training. There's no cushy powder, no forgiving ocean swells. Last year, a spill left bartender Bret Wasley, 28, with a limp and a concussion. It took five months before he could face the board again. "I wreck all the time



BOARD NOW: Gene Haffey, 28, picked up longboarding in San Diego, Calif.

in snowboarding and surfing," he said. "I'm telling you, longboarding is scarier."

Professional downhill racers and weekend hill-bombers up the ante further. Crouched in an aerodynamic speed-tuck posture, they point their bodies down a steep hill and simply shoot. Speeds can reach up to 50 mph in controlled races.

For the past few years, the D.C. Downhill Club has invited professional speed demons from all over the world to show their stuff during the Adams Morgan Day festival in September. Mandatory gear

includes full-body leather, thick gloves, face helmets and plenty of respect for gravity. "It's hell on wheels," said Smallwood.

So why can't work commutes be as much blood-curdling fun? For four years, Doug Dupin, 38, longboarded nine miles roundtrip from Palisades to the Department of Agriculture. Tame hills, sure, but more exciting than the Metro. When he itched for more, a couple of 175-mile tours along the C&O Canal towpath and mid-Atlantic backroads proved the longboard's potential for adventure. "I'm expecting the art of longboarding as transportation to really take off," said Dupin, who has designed his own experimental touring boards.

Actually, today's weekend warrior could be tomorrow's untapped longboarding market. Years after overworked joints cry out for mercy, a smooth longboard ride still makes a good workout. Just leave the bone-shattering hills to the kids, plant yourself on the Capital Crescent Trail and fire up the Beach Boys on your iPod. "You don't have to be young and edgy to do it," Smallwood said. "You can be anybody." REGINA NUZZO