A Wedge into the Skateboard Ban

Erik Snedsbøl and the First Skate Ramp in Nord-Østerdalen

By Erik Tobias Taube

It is little known that one of the very first skate ramps ever built in Norway – and the very first on which skating was legally permitted – was located at Telneset, a remote mountain valley community in Nord-Østerdalen, Eastern Norway. As so often happens, it was an outsider who brought new cultural impulses from abroad. The ramp would even contribute to the gradual weakening and eventual dissolution of Norway's uniquely strict national skateboard ban.

From Edinburgh to Tynset

Erik Snedsbøl (b. 1965), born to a Swedish mother and Norwegian father, grew up in Scotland and spent his summer holidays in Sweden. In both places, according to Erik, skateboarding was already relatively widespread. He considers this the reason he started riding at such an early age – he received his first skateboard at only four years old.

When the family later relocated to Telneset, however, he encountered a completely different attitude toward skateboarding in Norway. Here, the activity was entirely prohibited, and the ban was enforced by none other than the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority itself.

Before returning to Erik's ramp, however, we must first visit the offices of the state bureaucrats and descend into what is, in many ways, a remarkably entertaining archival record preserved by the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority (Statens Forurensningstilsyn, SFT).

The Years of Prohibition

How did Norway become the only country in the world to impose a total ban on skateboarding?

The official explanation was straightforward: Norwegian authorities feared the potential scale of injuries associated with skateboarding. A newly introduced product-control law intended to protect the public from products deemed harmful to health or the environment was applied to skateboards. Authorities argued that skateboarding would worsen the health conditions of Norwegian children and adolescents, and concluded that the only practical method of regulation was a complete ban.

Without much difficulty, however, several additional explanations emerge as to why such a prohibition occurred specifically in Norway.

First, the Product Control Act upon which the ban was based was itself brand new, entering into force on 1 September 1977. When the "skateboard issue" emerged simultaneously, the administration found itself navigating entirely uncharted territory – both legally and practically.

The initial proposal for a ban came from the Ministry of Transport in August 1977, but it was the Norwegian Consumer Council that pursued the matter most aggressively thereafter. Formally, the decision was made by the Product Control Council, yet the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority, operating under the Ministry of the Environment, was responsible for implementing the Product Control

Act and chaired the work of the Council. Consequently, all complaints and applications concerning skateboards ended up on the desks of environmental bureaucrats in the years that followed.

The archival documents reveal rather clearly that the entire process was marked by haste and based upon extremely thin documentation. In an internal memorandum from 21 September 1977, concern was expressed in dramatic terms:

> "In my judgment, urgent action is necessary, since sales will likely increase rapidly during the autumn and the coming year."

A few weeks later, the Consumer Council argued that the matter was so urgent that ordinary consultation procedures should be bypassed entirely:

> "If it becomes publicly known that restrictions are being prepared, this may lead to an undesirable increase in sales in the immediate future."

Ironically, the Pollution Control Authority itself initially opposed a ban and recommended the opposite in draft guidelines from November 1977. That position changed quickly.

A temporary prohibition was introduced in 1977, followed by a permanent regulation the following year.

Moral Panic and Creative Mathematics

The subsequent work on the skateboard regulations throughout 1978 also bears signs of hurried administrative improvisation and rather imaginative mathematics.

Using injury statistics from the United States, SFT projected that the number of injuries would increase more than fivefold during the following year and applied these inflated figures directly to Norwegian conditions. Through such calculations, the Authority estimated that Norway would experience approximately 7,000 skateboard accidents annually, including 900 hospital admissions, many involving serious injuries and mostly children.

This estimate was made at a time when, according to SFT's own figures, only around 3,600 skateboards had been sold in Norway during the previous year.

Whether traces of a uniquely Norwegian mentality can also be discerned in this process is difficult to determine. Yet the contrast with Sweden is particularly revealing.

Despite strong similarities between the two countries – historically powerful welfare states with high public trust in government – they arrived at entirely different conclusions. Ironically, the Norwegian investigation relied heavily upon a Swedish report from Konsumentverket (the Swedish Consumer Agency). Internal SFT documents even stated:

> "Once again, the Swedes have done the work for us."

Nevertheless, Norway adopted the exact opposite conclusion.

SFT noted that permitting skateboarding on designated ramps and tracks – as proposed in "the Swedish model" – would require the construction of such facilities. They further argued, with little evidence, that skating on ramps was no safer than skating in traffic.

A total ban, on the other hand, would likely "halt the development of skateboard sport in this country," as stated in a consultation memorandum dated 20 February 1978.

This was, quite explicitly, the objective.

In March 1978, the ban was formally adopted.

The Swedish report itself, however, argued the opposite:

> "Skateboarding should be assessed according to the same principles as other sports. Most demanding sports involve a certain degree of risk, which is managed through practice in order to achieve skill. If skateboarding is practiced within designated areas and in a manner adapted to the rider's ability, there is currently no evidence suggesting that it produces more severe injuries than comparable activities."

Such reasoning was largely ignored by Norwegian officials.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Norwegian authorities had already decided, in advance, that skateboarding was both dangerous and culturally without value. Officials recognized that there were no major economic interests invested in skateboarding in Norway, that skateboarders themselves were entirely unorganized, and that they lacked support from established institutions, including the Norwegian Sports Federation.

The Swedish report was read extremely selectively. Norwegian authorities extracted alarming statistics from it, while ignoring its primary concern: how the activity could be practiced safely.

In retrospect, responsibility for the skateboard ban has often been attributed to the Product Control Council. Yet SFT itself was heavily represented within that council, and much of the administrative creativity surrounding the matter originated within the Authority's own offices.

City and Countryside

From the perspective of Nord-Østerdalen, it is particularly interesting that SFT appears never to have imagined that skateboarding could exist outside urban environments.

The only objection the Authority itself could formulate against a ban was that:

> "The use of skateboards – in responsible forms – could become a new recreational activity for urban youth."

Similarly, the director of the Norwegian Merchants' Association, despite strongly opposing the ban, argued that Norway should follow Sweden's example, where skateboarding was intended to occur "in accepted forms, on specially designed facilities," as "a recreational opportunity particularly suited to urban youth."

No one imagined that skateboarding would survive a prolonged national prohibition and eventually establish itself even in remote rural districts.

And certainly no one imagined that the first legal exemption from the ban would be granted in Nord-Østerdalen, more than 300 km north of Oslo – becoming the very beginning of the end of the prohibition itself.

Construction of the Ramp

The Telneset ramp was not only the first skate ramp in Nord-Østerdalen, but among the very first in Norway.

A small number of other large ramps had also been secretly constructed during the prohibition years – including ramps in Oslo, Røyken near Asker, and Molde. Yet this was no ordinary mini-ramp. It was a true vert ramp, with fully vertical walls.

The ramp at Telneset was designed and constructed by Erik Snedsbøl between 1981 and 1982, with some assistance from his friend Rune Sørensen from nearby Folldal.

As Erik himself later described it:

> "My ramp at Telneset was completely self-made and built with a 100% DIY spirit."

At the time, Erik was only eighteen years old.

Inspiration and technical guidance came after he attended the Eurocana Summer Camp in Rättvik, Sweden in 1981 – a legendary event held in a small rural community that temporarily attracted the world elite of skateboarding.

There, Erik recalls speaking with American skateboard stars Mike McGill and Steve Caballero, who served as instructors at the camp, seeking advice on how to construct a proper vert ramp.

The result was the Telneset ramp: situated on a wooded property beside a building owned by Erik's father, it was an extraordinarily ambitious construction.

The ramp measured nearly nine meters in length. The platforms on either side stood 2.8 meters above ground level, while the vertical extensions added another 1.5 meters, bringing the total height to at least 4.3 meters.

The width, however, was only 2.4 meters.

Erik had originally intended to build the ramp twice as wide, but lacked the financial resources to do so.

The dimensions nevertheless allowed for highly advanced skating.

> "I honestly don't know if anyone else in Norway at that time could do airs as high as I could," Erik states today.

After the ramp had been completed and put into use, a journalist from the regional newspaper Arbeidets Rett visited Telneset in September 1983. The resulting article was published on 12 October that year.

From there, knowledge of the ramp spread further through the Swedish skateboard magazine Uppåt Väggarna, which reproduced the article in facsimile form.

Thus, awareness of the Telneset ramp gradually spread throughout both Norway and Sweden.

The First Legal Skateboarding in Norway

The article in Arbeidets Rett also came to the attention of bureaucrats at the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority.

On 21 November 1983, SFT sent Erik a formal letter informing him that the use of skateboards was illegal and warning that unless an application for exemption was submitted within ten days:

> "the ramp will have to be removed and the skateboards confiscated."

On the same day, letters were also sent to the local police authorities in Tynset, Alvdal, Folldal, and Trysil, informing them that if no application was received, SFT would consider the matter "a deliberate violation of the regulations."

Copies of the regulations were enclosed, and police were reminded that they possessed enforcement authority.

The bureaucrats likely suspected that local police in rural districts were not especially focused on prioritizing skateboard enforcement – particularly at a time when illegal home distillation probably represented a considerably larger issue than wooden boards with wheels.

After some archival investigation, Erik's application and the subsequently approved exemption were eventually located.

The documents clearly demonstrate that the Telneset ramp became the very first location in Norway where skateboarding was legally permitted following the introduction of the total ban – and that this represented the first exemption of its kind.

After several months of processing, Erik and his friend Rune received permission, effective from 1 April 1984, to use:

> "the special ramp which has been constructed."

They were also permitted to import skateboards, provided this occurred through the Vauldalen customs district near Røros, and the number of boards imported was to be reported back to SFT afterward.

Particularly interesting is the fact that SFT appears to have enforced the regulations differently in rural districts than in urban areas.

Only months earlier, a serious application in Oslo had been rejected.

Here, however, the location of the ramp likely played an important role. Telneset lay far outside ordinary public visibility, and the ramp had already been built.

Equally significant was Erik's highly formal and carefully worded application.

Among other things, Erik claimed that he and Rune were members of the Swedish Skateboard Federation and that together they effectively constituted their own "Skate Club," with Erik serving as director and Rune as the sole member.

Notably, Erik also explained that the ramp was used as a "snowboard ramp during winter," illustrating how closely connected skateboard and snowboard culture already were in Tynset by 1984.

The Oslo Connection

One person who read about the ramp in Uppåt Väggarna was another major Norwegian pioneer of skateboard and snowboard culture: Anders Wittusen of Oslo.

Wittusen became the first individual to manufacture skateboards and snowboards on a significant scale in Norway, producing hundreds of boards by hand in his own apartment.

Only months earlier, in July 1983, he himself had received a rejection from SFT after applying to construct a skate ramp on behalf of the newly founded "Oslo Skateboard Association."

After reading about Telneset, Anders wrote directly to Erik.

Together with his girlfriend Angela Barco-Baron – herself an early skateboarder and one of the founders of the Oslo association – Anders cycled all the way from Oslo to Telneset during the summer of 1984 in order to skate Erik's ramp for several days.

Today Anders recalls that he greatly enjoyed the ramp, although he considered it somewhat narrow.

At one point, while Erik was away at work, Anders borrowed a hammer and removed one of the vertical extensions so he could experiment more along the coping:

> "Perhaps it was a little rude, but Erik forgave me," he remembers today.

Erik, however, preferred "being fully vertical and airborne," and the extension was eventually reinstalled.

Several months later, Wittusen submitted a new exemption application to SFT on behalf of the now more professionally named "Oslo Skateboard Association."

In the application, he explained that the skateboard environment in Oslo and surrounding districts was once again growing, and that the association wished to construct a proper ramp.

Because the communities remained small and highly interconnected, he argued that any exemption should also apply to:

> "other ramps in Norway where skateboarders have received similar exemptions, for example Erik Snedsbøl's ramp at Telneset near Tynset."

The Ban Begins to Crack

After Erik received legal exemption for skating at Telneset in April 1984, something began to change within the offices of the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority.

In November that same year, Wittusen's application arrived from Oslo Skateboard Association, followed shortly afterward by applications from several additional skate clubs.

By July 1985, SFT announced that due to:

> "increasing interest in organized skateboarding activities,"

clubs would now be allowed to apply for exemptions.

The connection to Erik's exemption at Telneset is unmistakable.

It is therefore entirely reasonable to view Erik's ramp and application as the very first wedge driven into the national skateboard ban.

As additional clubs and applicants emerged during the following years, the prohibition gradually weakened.

Finally, on 3 May 1989, the total ban on skateboarding in Norway was officially abolished.

This led to a major expansion of skateboard culture throughout Norway – including Nord-Østerdalen.

On 1 May 1989, local youth in Tynset reportedly stood publicly shouting:

> "Skateboard is not a crime!"

And only weeks later, skateboards could visibly be seen in the national Constitution Day parade in Hodalen.

A Cultural Nexus

Several years later, Erik moved away from Telneset and the ramp was sold to Olav Bakke at the request of his son Emil.

The entire structure was relocated to a farm a few kilometers south of the football field at Telneset. There, according to Erik, the height was reduced and the ramp effectively transformed into a mini-ramp.

For many years afterward, it remained visible from the county road.

Today, however, not a single plank of the original structure survives.

As we have seen, the ramp became a point of connection to an unexpectedly complex state bureaucracy.

Far more importantly, however, it represented a concrete cultural intersection linking the origins of skateboard culture in California with its evolving forms in Sweden, Oslo, and Nord-Østerdalen.

The ramp also connected Erik's largely solitary skating during the early 1980s with the next generation of local skateboarders.

Many local skaters who began riding during the late 1980s used the Telneset ramp.

Yet several of them were unaware of Erik himself and the history of the ramp until the regional museum exhibition *Youth Culture: Board Sports in Nord-Østerdalen* was produced in 2024.

It was therefore with considerable satisfaction that first- and second-generation local skateboarders were finally reconnected through the exhibition – with future skate gatherings now even being discussed.

Skate or Die

Today Erik resides primarily in northern Sweden and has pursued a long international career as an artist.

He lives according to straight edge principles and, naturally, still skateboards – though he now prefers longboarding.

He also remains close friends with Anders Wittusen, with whom he later studied both at an art program in Røros and subsequently at an art school in Lofoten.

Erik's contribution to Norwegian skateboard history has nevertheless remained largely unknown and deserves significantly greater attention.

As Erik himself explains today:

> "I never really spoke much about my early skating or the ramp at Telneset – because that was never really the point of it all. The point was being left alone and being able to focus completely on it. In many ways it also became my therapy, and about surviving the violent conditions at home – literally: Skate or Die."

Erik's story of pioneering vert skating on the Telneset ramp against a background of severe domestic violence and personal hardship is heavy, unusual, and deeply inspiring.

But the rest of that story must be told elsewhere.

Sources

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