

Billy Morgan



**Drop
in!**

a snowboarding life with Mark Turley

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Part One

**IMPOSTER SYNDROME
AND HOW TO
OVERCOME IT**

‘It’s not what you are that holds you back,
it’s what you think you are not.’

– Dennis Waitley

1.

Pyeongchang, South Korea,
24 February 2018

THERE'S NOTHING like being up in the mountains ... nothing. You breathe and everything evaporates, just dissolves away like salts in the bath. All around you, a panoramic vista of the purest, pure white. There's no white like it, anywhere, while the air teases your nostrils with precipitation, pine and wild herbs. That smell jolts me out of wherever my head was and plants me *bang* in the moment. After that, I'm on it.

Buzzing.

High on white.

Sounds beautiful, right? That's the true winter sports vibe, what the purists live for. Long days absorbed in immersive, rich environments of natural beauty, time and routine disappearing. But here's the reality crash: in truth, professional competitions are mostly nothing like that romantic ideal, especially big competitions and especially my main event, known as 'big air'. Big air just needs a ramp and some snow, which could be artificial, or even brought in from somewhere. That means wherever you can construct a ramp, you can have a comp. I've done my thing before crowds in London, Los Angeles, Beijing and many other places where there are no mountains (or natural snow) for miles.

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The South Korean Winter Olympic venue was set in the Taebaek mountain range, but inside a fishbowl stadium, with the snowboard big air and the ski jump competitions facing one another from either end. When you were up there, getting yourself together, it wasn't white and alpine and immersive. Not at all. It was concrete and cables and car parks. People rushed here and there with clipboards.

That part of South Korea, known as Gangwon Province, has an average of two feet of snow a year, so all the stuff in the snowsports arena was fake. The big day was actually a warmish one too, mild enough for me to wear only a T-shirt and a hoodie as I waited. Petrol fumes lingered in the air, mixed with the rainy, sludgy scent of snowmelt and the murmur of a few thousand voices. I sat inside the gazebo the organisers set up as a waiting area, took a few deep breaths and tried to get into the right headspace.

Near me sat Seb Toutant in Canadian red, with his highly rated countryman Max Parrot. Seb's cool, all smiles, but Max is harder to read, a serious pro. He keeps himself to himself. Kyle Mack was on the other side, chatting with his coach. Mack's a rarity, an American who manages to be genuine and one of the cool kids. That's not an easy combination to pull off. Near him was Michael Schärer from Switzerland and the Kiwi, Carlos Knight, a young, technical and stylish rider with infectious enthusiasm, having the absolute time of his life. Then there was the regular slew of Swiss and Scandinavians, pure naturals, the type who look like they were born on a mountain and never left. All the best riders in the world, basically.

Yeah, I remember thinking. This line-up is stacked. The action's gonna be savage. And then it properly hit me, like really, really hit me. Shit, this is the Olympic final.

We were all trying to act casual, despite the calculation and self-talk occurring inside. Snowboarders are like that, a cultural

thing. *Whatever dude ...* But people misread it, that attitude. What we do can never be half-hearted. Each of us has an acute understanding of what can happen.

Pretty soon I knew I would take my turn, careen downhill then take off from a 49-metre ramp arching up at an angle of 40 degrees. It's common to achieve speeds of up to 50–60mph while doing so. Most people don't experience that outside of their car.

Sometimes, depending on weather, you stand at the top of the run and can't even see the bottom. You're flying blind, hurtling down into fog with nothing other than adrenaline, cortisone and whatever else your endocrine system can muster. *It's okay,* your inner voice says. *Don't sweat it. You'll see the ramp when you get there.*

Fortune favours the brave, right?

Right?

After that, 'whoosh', you're airborne for two or three seconds, which is the weirdest combination of total presence and complete absence you can imagine. You're so in the moment that the moment disappears. All there is at that time is you, the sky and the ground below. It's peace and danger and excitement and calmness – everything and nothing. Ski jumpers, sky divers and the rest will know this feeling too, but it's the closest thing to being born or dying you can experience. It's like staring the universe in the eye. If I could choose one moment and make it last forever, that would be it. Total focus. Total absorption.

The sky is my zen place.

The difference for us – me and other big air athletes – is that we don't glide and go for distance or wait for the right moment to ping off a parachute. While jumping we perform as intricate and difficult a combination of tricks as we can manage. We twist, turn, switch, roll, somersault, flip, rotate and grab, before attempting to land on a deceptively hard surface. Most think snow is fluffy

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and soft. But up in the mountains it freezes, gets compacted. You may as well be jumping on to concrete. Get it wrong, which we all do often, and you can review your performance in hospital rather than in the bar.

That's our spectre at the window. The ghost that haunts us. The chance of serious, life-changing injury hangs over every event like a thundercloud. We can never escape it. It's part of the deal we make with fate and, while I want to win, I really don't want my mates (competitors) to get hurt. By all means fall, screw it up, get a terrible score, but please don't go and wreck yourself.

Please.

In the outside world, away from our snowsports bubble, boxing, martial arts, gridiron or rugby injuries get a ton of media hype. Those guys take massive hits on a regular basis, but while, in recent years, combat or heavy contact sports have sought means to become safer, investigating dangers and how to limit them, the reverse is true for us. Snowboarding's development is all about pushing boundaries. Everyone wants broken records, new marks, raised bars.

Bigger, higher, riskier; recent years have seen boarders brain-damaged, suffer major organ trauma and smash bones like matchsticks. Outsiders think of us as goofy kids with baggy trousers and backwards caps, but that's only a type of shield. We're too cool to admit it – *we're young, this is fun* – but we need total, insane focus to make this work. 'Progression' – that's what it's all about for us.

Up above me, the American phenomenon Redmond Gerard went to make his run. The kid was just 17 and took gold in the slopestyle event two weeks before. What on earth do you do with the rest of your life when you win the Olympics at 17? I guess he'll either be president or in rehab by 35.

Red's jump was decent, a backside triple cork, but he looked a bit off-kilter as he came down to land. For a moment he looked like he might stack it, but just about held his feet. It was a little sketchy and he put a hand down to keep himself up, which is good for injury prevention but not for getting points. That's a big no-no as far as judges are concerned. From there he had two more runs to put things right. And I knew it would be my turn soon.

As I waited, I had a constant internal dialogue going on, building inside my guts, a bubbling soup of doubt and dread.

What if I really mess this up?

What if I make myself look stupid?

What if I can't do it?

I didn't articulate my fears. You don't speak terror out loud, not if you've got any sense. That might manifest them into reality, but I dwelled on this stuff, every sharp aspect. I really tried not to, to keep it out of my head, but sometimes it even kept me awake at night.

'Billy Morgan, two to drop!' The official's words cut through my inner voice like a guillotine. I had to move.

My team-mate, Rowan Coultas, stood with me. 'Yeah boy!' He bumped my fist with his.

Hamish was there too, my coach. 'Go on Bill,' he said softly. 'Get it.'

We shuffled over, out of the gazebo and into a sort of queuing system. Hamish and Rowan followed me up for moral support. I always needed someone there, if only to distract me from what I was about to do. If on my own, I could overthink things. It's important to have some banter on at the top.

We reached the summit. There were a couple of South Korean kids operating the lift and a screen to watch the ongoing action. I always preferred not to watch, so hung out with Hamish and Rowan, burning time.

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I could see the rider ahead of me, in front of the curtain, awaiting his turn. Once you walk through that curtain, you're gone for a while. It's you and the sky.

The signal came for the guy in front.

'Billy Morgan, one to drop.'

We shuffled further up the mountain and another rider filled in the space behind. A conveyor belt, one by one, like we're walking the plank. The curtain sat in front of me. The stage door. I got my nod from the official and passed through.

It's strange when you go out on to that platform. The guy in front of me was mid-jump, so although I emerged into a huge, public arena, with a circle of cheering fans, flags and whistles way below, I felt alone. All eyes and cameras were on the jump in progress. No one was looking at me. I may as well have been standing in the dark.

I put my gloves on, adjusted the cuffs on the bottom of my hoodie. My sleeves always need to go over my gloves, or I don't feel right. I made sure the tension on the bindings that hold my feet to the board was right, another pre-jump ritual. I knew I had about 60 seconds to fill before my drop, so I kept checking – boots, laces, gloves – everything, over and over. To anyone watching it would have looked like OCD, but I knew that if I stood up, with nothing to do, looked down the hill at the ramp and the supporters, then fear would kick in. Overpowering, insurmountable fear.

My equipment was fine, I knew that, but fiddling with it gave me something to do.

'Billy Morgan, drop in!'

I stood.

Hamish and Rowan piped up.

'Send it, Billy!'

'Nail it!'

PYEONGCHANG, SOUTH KOREA, 24 FEBRUARY 2018

Back in the gazebo, I knew the other boys were watching. It was me against them after all, although we were also in it together. Later, I knew, we would all get smashed, drinking and laughing until all this was a crazy blur.

But right then, I had to go and fly.