



Josh Smith mentoring a group of budding skateboarders at the Nipu-nipu Warna Skate Park in Christie Downs.

Skating into action

Story by **Emma Masters**.

Falling down is an essential part of learning to skate. But it's brushing yourself off and getting back on the board that well-known south coast skater Josh Smith says builds confidence and resilience.

Sitting on a patch of manicured grass shaded by eucalypts at the relatively new Nipu-nipu Warna (the Kaurna term for friendship) Skate Park at Christie Downs, Josh explains they're important skills that equip people in all facets of life. 'It's the reason I can happily take on challenges and get knocked back and then go again and again,' Josh says. 'It's not something special about me, it's just a skateboarder's mentality.'

It's also part of the philosophy that drives Free Mind Skate School, a skateboard coaching and mentoring school Josh founded at the start of last year. In Josh's words, Free Mind is 'focused on building a strong sense of community, while promoting safe and consistent progression on a skateboard.'

Josh was studying behavioural science at university when he first began to see ways to unite his passions. 'We were learning about the negative impacts of stigmatisation and how it can be reversed and I thought I might be able to do something with skateboarding,' Josh said. 'If you go down to a skatepark with a board, it doesn't matter what age, race, gender or background you come from, people are just like 'oh sick, a skater' – there's acceptance and normality. So I wrote a mentoring program focused on building resilience through skateboarding.'

From the moment Josh began to take on clients, his coaching flourished. But it was only when he was offered a PhD scholarship at the end of 2021 that he was forced to make a decision – a life of academia or take skate mentoring a step further. Lucky for swathes of young people around the Fleurieu, Josh chose the latter and Free Mind Skate School was born. Since then, Josh and his Free Mind coaches Jimmy, Jack, Vanessa, Simon and Denise have held private and group skate coaching sessions and holiday clinics, alongside mentoring sessions for youth in need.

Seeing one of their busy summer holiday clinics in action at Nipu-nipu Warna, it's difficult to imagine this area was once described as a wasteland, where commuters from the nearby train station would pass by quickly and police patrolled regularly. Today, more than thirty budding skaters ranging in age and skill level roll around the park while parents chat on the sidelines and siblings play on the nearby playground.

Following an injection of \$3.5 million funding from the City of Onkaparinga, federal and state governments and the Roger Rasheed Sports Foundation, the corner of Morton and Flaxmill roads has transformed into a buzzing sports and recreation hub, which also boasts a BBQ area, courts and an oval.

City of Onkaparinga community development officer Jeffery Purves has been working with Free Mind to hold skate programs. 'The skate park has been built to cater for all levels, so we thought it would work well, but the programs took off quicker than we could've ever imagined,' says Jeffery. 'We went over 1,000 attendances for all our sports programs in the first year and skating made up more than half of that. It's really popular, even the local skate shop has noticed a spike in sales and we want to support the community as much as we can.'

Josh adds that because the skate park was designed to a world-class standard, it has already hosted two competitions, including the Rumble national skate championships. 'The Southern Rumble became part of the pro tour for Australian skateboarding and having some of the country's best skateboarders converge on this park was amazing,' he says. 'For some of our local kids, just seeing skaters the same age doing tricks and ripping up their park, they were absolutely blown away. I really wanted the local skate scene to see firsthand the kind of level they can reach, that it's not unattainable – so it was everything I hoped for.'

With this kind of support, we might just see Fleurieu skaters represent Australia in international competitions or even the Olympics in years to come. The most important measure of success for Josh, however, is the sense of inclusion and belonging that the skaters feel. In Free Mind Skate School, he's created a community he could have only dreamed of when he was a kid.

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