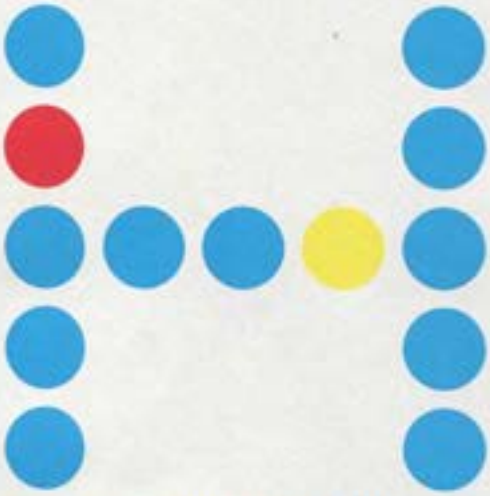
» They called him Christ, for his superhuman grace on the skateboard. CHRISTIAN HOSOI had it all—fans, groupies, product endorsements. Then drug addiction and prison laid him low. Now he's enjoying an uncommon resurrection

BY ROBERT ITO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK HANAUER

ON BOARD WITH THE LORD: Hosoi with wife Jennifer, son Classic, and the Good Book



HE WAS BORN CHRISTIAN ROSHA HOSOI, only son of Ivan and Bonnie, in Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown Los Angeles. His first name came not from the religious beliefs of his parents but from Fletcher Christian, the mutineer, whom Ivan admired for his "wildness." His middle name, Rosha, was chosen because the boy entered this fallen world during Rosh Hashanah, with Jewish blood flowing through his veins. His last name, Hosoi, is Japanese. When asked, Christian will tell you he's Japanese, though he also inherited traces of Chinese, Hawaiian, Scottish, Irish, and French from his mom. Strangers sometimes speak to him in Spanish, believing he is one of their own.

Christian Rosha Hosoi.

When he was reigning as one of the greatest skateboarders of his time, though, Hosoi was known simply as Christ. Christ! Beyond the blasphemy and the hubris, there's the burden of living up to such a title. What would Jesus do if he were skating the first heat of the North Shore Bowl Jam? How high do you have to blast when you're sharing names with the one living Son of God?

In the 1980s, during the peak of his run, Hosoi was heralded as the most stylish rider alive. Mentored by some of the famed Dogtown riders of Venice—where style was all-important—Hosoi hit the biggest airs and looked the best hitting them. If skating legend Tony Hawk was derided by peers as a robot because he only cared about landing the unlandable trick, aesthetics be damned, Hosoi was the guy skaters wanted to look like, skate like. And perhaps even more, live like, for Hosoi lived the life of a rock star, raging on the Sunset Strip with celebrities and musicians, attracting groupies and smoking lots of dope, much of it free, courtesy of fans and hangers-on who wanted nothing more than to say they got to party, even for a night, with Christ. For years Christ ran with the Devil—until the Devil, in his own good time, outraced him.

Tonight Christ is reproaching that demon in the Sanctuary, a church in Huntington Beach surrounded by office parks and warehouses. Thick black hair slicked back, gold cross dangling, he begins his sermon. "God is giving you the power to step on that snake's head," he tells the believers assembled on this Thursday night. "Get under my feet, Satan, you have no room in my life, in my family, in my children, in my wife! There are angels here, right here in this very room—do you believe it? Do you believe that there are demons and angels warring over your very soul?" He talks about the world we see and the world we do not, and how that invisible world, the supernatural world, is just as real as the one we inhabit in our waking lives.

"For we ourselves," Hosoi reads from Titus 3:3, "were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another." He asks the crowd, "Who hasn't done that here?" and there are nods. This sermon isn't going to be about how to be a good neighbor or why one needs to tithe. It's about complete surrender, full faith, the new man who emerges when one is born again.

He pauses. "I was in prison for five years," he tells them, and there is a hush, even though many of the people here already know this. "Everybody said, 'You went from freedom to prison.' In reality, I went from prison my whole life to being set free right when I got there. I spent five years in prison a free man."

Hosoi is now doubly free, liberated from his 60-man dormitory in the San Bernardino Central Detention Center and from the addictions that controlled him for much of his adult life. He has been renewed, his sins washed clean. When he was released in 2004, Hosoi returned to Huntington Beach to preach the Gospel to old-timers he knew back in those bad, great days and to minister to kids who know of him only as the legendary Christ, the guy who, if he hadn't lost his way, might have been bigger than Tony Hawk. He has a wife, kids, friends, and fans, his own signature shoes, boards, and skate team. He has a home and a church.

Saving souls is a slog. It's hard telling people that their dearest joys are abominations, their pals millstones around their necks. Such work is even tougher in skateboarding circles, where jailhouse conversions have become a sort of running joke. Any number of skaters have embraced the Lord in prison, exuberantly and publicly, only to backslide upon their release. Two such men, Jay Adams and Mark "Gator" Rogowski, were close friends of Hosoi's. Adams, the sweet-faced blond cherub at the heart of Stacy Peralta's 2001 skating documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, has been in and out of correctional facilities since the early '80s, doing time for assault, burglary, making terrorist threats, and narcotics possession. Gator, who defeated Hawk in the Del Mar Spring Nationals in 1984, beat a girl over the head with a steering wheel lock and raped her for three hours, then strangled her inside a surfboard bag.

"Let me tell you, Christian was one of those Jay Adams guys," says Cesario "Block" Montaño, owner of the Venice Originals skate shop and director of the 2006 film *Rising Son*, a documentary about Hosoi's life. "When he was stuck on drugs, he was gonna end up fucked up or dead. Gator was a nice guy, but he went and killed somebody and went to prison. Jay Adams went to prison two times. So maybe it was a miracle, like Christian says. Maybe God *did* choose Christian to be this person."

CHRISTIAN LIVED THE LIFE OF A ROCK STAR. FOR YEARS HE RAN WITH

POWER COUPLE: Jennifer and Christian Hosoi at the Sanctuary in Huntington Beach

REMEMBER BASKETBALL before the jump shot, when players would run from one end of the court to the other, stop, set their feet, and shoot? The other guy might flap his arms in an attempt to block the shot, but his feet, too, scarcely left the ground. Skateboarding before the arrival of the Z-Boys of Venice was a lot like this: orderly, earthbound, white. Kids rode boards as transportation, like scooters; the accomplished did handstands or 360s, goofy stuff lifted from gymnastics classes at the Y.

All that changed in the mid-1970s, when Tony Alva, Jay Adams, Stacy Peralta, Shogo Kubo, and their Dogtown allies hit the streets, skate parks, and dry pools of the Westside. The Z-Boys were surfers first, fiercely territorial about a crappy stretch of beach littered with the rotting remains of the Pacific Ocean Park Pier. On the days the waves didn't come, they discovered they could perform a lot of the same cool moves on the nearby streets and hills of Santa Monica and Venice. While their skateboarding peers were crafting ballet moves and roller disco poses, the Z-Boys were ripping the parched pools of drought-pounded West L.A., hurling bodies and boards round and round. According to legend, in 1975, Alva performed the first aerial, taking his board, and himself, up and out of the pool. Vert, as it came to be known, was born.

Hosoi grew up in Los Angeles, near the corner of Washington and Normandie, and rode his first skateboard at the age of seven, when he and his parents were living in Hawaii. Ivan and Bonnie had split up the year before, but both continued to raise Christian, their only child. The family returned to L.A. the following year. At nine, Hosoi went to ride at Skateboard World in Torrance, one of the dozens of parks that were opening up around Southern California. He was instantly drawn to the Z-Boys, who rode there. "They had long hair, I had long hair," says Hosoi. "They all smoked weed and went surfing. I was like, 'I'm going to be just like them.'" A grommet among men—Adams was six years older than Hosoi; Alva, ten—Hosoi showed remarkable promise in the years that followed. "He was real young, but he was a ripper even then," says Jay Haizlip, a native of Alabama who rode for Alva Skates. "He had a reputation for tearing it up even as a little kid."

Christian's father was a constant companion. An artist by trade and temperament, Ivan received his B.F.A. from Chouinard and an M.F.A. from Cal, but he spent much of his time hanging with his son. They surfed together, skated together, smoked dope together. To save money on Christian's park fees, Ivan became the manager of the Marina del Rey Skatepark. Mom was the breadwinner, working as an administrator at an insurance company in Beverly Hills. Omar Hassan, one of the country's top pro skaters, grew up seeing father and son at competitions and parks. "If your own dad didn't really support your skating, Ivan would take you under his wing and be that kind of father figure. He was like a dad to a lot of Christian's friends."

In 1980, *Skateboarder* magazine, one of the sacred texts of the sport, ran a full-page shot of Hosoi hitting a frontside air at Marina del Rey. Hosoi is floating high atop what looks like a lunar landscape, his body in a deep crouch, arms up, lips pursed in concentration. He is 12, but he could be 9, a cute boy, his face angelic in its earnestness. Several skaters, including Hawk, saw the photo in the magazine and thought Hosoi was a young girl. The next year he turned pro. "I wanted to be on the cover, I wanted to win contests, I wanted this to be my job," he says. "I was like, 'I can do this forever and never have to work a day in my life.'"

THE DEVIL—UNTIL THE DEVIL, IN HIS OWN GOOD TIME, OUTRACED HIM.

Before his senior year of high school, Hosoi dropped out to become a full-time skateboarder. "I really wanted him to stay in school, and we went around and around on that," says Bonnie. "All mothers want their kids to have a good education, I assume. But then he turned pro, and that's when the trouble began." Hosoi was touring around the world, making more money than his teachers. "He had more power than any kid in his group, and had more style," says Lance Mountain, a member of Peralta's legendary Bones Brigade. "Christian was amazing," says Hawk. "He just had this flow to him that was very inspired by surfing. But he was one of the few that could have that style and still do modern tricks. A lot of the guys that had the best styles didn't necessarily do the hardest tricks. Christian had all of that."

Hosoi's ascendance came at a time when marketers realized they could sell skateboarding as an outlaw activity, an extreme sport before "extreme" was used to sell everything from beef jerky to carbonated drinks. In less than a decade skateboarding went from something your kid brother did to the leisure activity of choice for members of the Red Hot Chili Peppers, the Germs, and the Beastie Boys. Skateboarding was now a rebel sport, and Christian was a poster child for the new school. Organized sports, with their balls and teams and screaming coaches, were what your parents wanted you to do. Few parents wanted their kids to skateboard, certainly not as a "sport," which few thought it was. "It was all about girls and traveling and money and pictures in the magazine," says Hosoi.

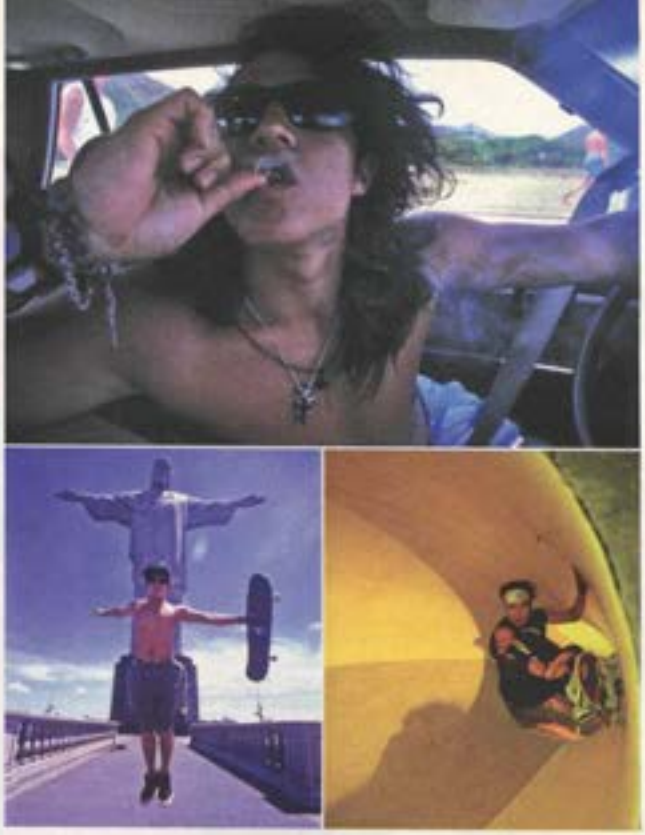
In 1985, Hosoi was dubbed Christ—he can't recall by whom. He was 18, handsome in an ambiguously ethnic sort of way, with long black hair and the cut, tanned body of a surfer. At competitions he would whoop and holler—for himself!—and the cries of joy sounded like the yelps Bruce Lee made moments before he kicked somebody's ass. He rocked spandex shorts and white leather jackets, cowboy boots and jeans, dressing in the pinks and fluorescent greens of the day. He wore hair extensions, so that his mane reached almost to his belt line. When the baggiest of tees were the uniform, Hosoi rode shirtless.

The girls loved him, and Christian loved them right back. "He threw it out there, you know," says Hawk. "He was skating with his shirt off half the time, and girls knew he was ready for it."

Through the mid-'80s, Hawk and Hosoi dominated the professional contests, trading first-place finishes. The marquee was Ali versus Frazier, Magic versus Bird, the long-haired bad boy from Dogtown versus the clean-cut blond kid from San Diego. Hawk became known as a contest machine, inventing trick after remarkable trick—backside varial, finger flip backside air, frontside 540-rodeo flip—for routines that seemed like ice-skating compulsories. Tall and reed thin, Hawk had a physique for anything but ripping. "His legs were as skinny as your arms," says Hosoi. "You'd look at him and go, 'You can't skate!' But then he gets on his board and does just some of the most incredible things. He was a prodigy."

Christian was the guy with the biggest, most spectacular airs. His "Christ Air" was almost holy in its beauty. Hosoi would sky off the ramp and, when his body reached its apex, extend his arms and legs out in a pose replicating Jesus's crucifixion, one hand gripping his board. If the true Christ returned to Earth as a young Southern California skateboarder, He'd be hard-pressed to invent a groovier move.

At his financial peak, around 1985, Hosoi was making $350,000 a year, more than a lot of guys in the NFL. He lived off Sunset in a hilltop home once owned by W.C. Fields and partied with Eddie Murphy, River Phoenix, David Arquette, Matt Dillon, the Chili Peppers, Prince. "A lot of these actors and guys he was hanging out with at the time—he was famous before they were famous," says Hassan. "A lot of them were probably riding a Christian board."



TESTAMENT: (clockwise from top) Hosoi partying back in the day; ripping at a skate park; demonstrating "Christ Air" in Rio de Janeiro

For four years he dated the daughter of singer Lou Rawls; he bought a Harley-Davidson and a 1988 McLaren Mustang before he had a license to drive. Friends—and Hosoi always had a lot of friends—were treated to clothes, cash, food, trips to Honolulu and London and Rio de Janeiro. Hosoi always picked up the tab. "Saving money was a losing battle," says Bonnie. "He was just like his dad. His dad could never save money! And they were the same, on so many levels."

Around 1990, it ended. Vert, once the pinnacle of skateboarding cool, was suddenly uncool. Street became the thing. No mammoth ramps or empty pools were needed, just curbs or stairs or handrails. Anything could be skated and was; riders now had the freedom to skate anywhere and piss off pedestrians everywhere. In many ways street was a victory of the common skater over the Hawks and Christs. Only a handful of humans can drop in and hit a 720, even if they could find a vert ramp within a hundred miles of their home. A ten-year-old, though, with practice and a driveway, can ollie over a two-by-four. "Vert is dead," proclaimed the skateboard mags, and a new generation of riders began to idolize heroes who were doing things they could master in their own hometowns. Sponsorships and vert competitions dried up. "Street came in and took over," says Hosoi. "The industry was all street culture, so the market was all street products. Vert skaters had to get jobs." Hawk, who used to earn thousands for a single appearance, was reduced to doing demos in theme parks for $100 a day.

IF THE TRUE CHRIST RETURNED TO EARTH AS A SKATEBOARDER, HE'D

CESARIO "FLOCKY" MONTAÑO (3)

In 1992, Hosoi left his Bel-Air home and moved in with his mom. A year later he relocated to Huntington Beach, which, in the early '90s, was becoming a destination for tweakers and tweakers-to-be. In the next few years both parents left California. Hosoi began snorting crystal meth. At first it was a line here, a line there, but soon he was using more and skating less. When the high wasn't enough, Hosoi began smoking it. Eventually he was smoking crystal meth every day, living out of his car, sleeping on friends' couches.

Then, in 1995, two events would change the course of his life. First, Hosoi was arrested for possession of drug paraphernalia, a misdemeanor. When he didn't show up for his hearing, bounty hunters began looking for him.

That summer ESPN hosted the first Extreme Games, which would become the X Games the following year. As much marketing scheme as athletic competition, that first show featured everything from in-line skating and bungee jumping to sky surfing and street luge. Vert, with its camera-friendly half-pipes and high-flying aerials, seemed perfect for the competition. Nobody knew if it would hit or fail, but sponsors like Nike, Mountain Dew, and Taco Bell saw a demographic gold mine in the making; producers saw an opportunity to revive the Hawk-Hosoi wars of yore. The Birdman versus Christ, they dreamed, together again on an international stage. Biographical segments about the two were filmed before the event and aired during the broadcast, but Hosoi, on the run from the law, never showed, choosing to hang out in Japan rather than return to the United States.

For years Christ had run with Hawk—until Hawk, in his own good time, outraced him. If the Hawk-Hosoi story had a pivot, this was it. At the Extreme Games, Hawk won the gold medal in vert, going on to become Tony Hawk Inc., a multimillion-dollar empire that includes books, DVDs, signature boards, a clothing line, a sports tour, a radio show, a best-selling series of video games, and a charitable foundation.

"I was just sad, because here was an opportunity for us to make a comeback, for those of us who had been skating through all the dead years to shine again, and Christian couldn't see past his partying," says Hawk. "I remember distinctly telling people after the first couple X Games, 'God, if Christian were here, he would be one of the stars of the whole thing.'"

For the next five years Hosoi lived in the shadows. His girlfriend bore him a son, Rhythm, but their relationship dissolved soon after. On the rare occasions he would appear for a demo or a contest, it was obvious to his peers that he was on speed, or on something. The guy known for showering friends with gifts and trips was reduced to living off those same friends. Sponsors who used to line up to get Hosoi to wear their clothes now closed their doors when he came around. All his worldly possessions fit into a duffel bag. When a man at a trade show asked one of Hosoi's friends if he was Hosoi, the friend said yes, playing around, thinking that the man wanted an autograph. He was escorted out of the show in handcuffs. "Tell him I'm not Christian!" he yelled to anyone who would listen.

"He did more good than bad, and all the bad he did, he did to himself," says Montaño. "He never came and ripped us off or nothing. He just got sprung and fucked up and ran from the cops because he was getting high. For five years he was just doing speed, not doing shit."

"When Christian was called Christ, I was so happy," says Ivan. "But I knew the blasphemous thing was gonna come down on him some way. I just didn't know how."

THE BIBLE BOWL IS NOT ON ANY MAP. THE pros and grommets who come here to carve its concrete walls describe it as being at "an undisclosed location" or in "a backyard in Santa Ana." If you're here at all, it's because you've been personally invited, either by skateboarder Dave Kindstrand, who owns the home it's behind, or by Julie, his 14-year-old daughter and fellow skateboarder. Unlike the abandoned Westside pools the Z-Boys used to commandeer, the Bible Bowl is not really a pool at all, never having felt a drop of water except from the occasional Orange County shower. It's a private skate park, a glorious expanse covering nearly every inch of the Kindstrand family backyard. It is also a testament to one man's ability to convince his spouse of anything. "He said if I let him build it, I would get a Jacuzzi," says Kindstrand's wife, Lauren.

Hosoi is here with his wife, Jennifer, son Rhythm, ten, and son Classic, ten months. Jennifer is talking with Lauren and changing Classic, whose box of diaper wipes is emblazoned with HOSOI SKATES stickers. Rhythm is riding the bowl with a friend from church. Julie Kindstrand, who turned pro this year, is regaling Christian with stories of her latest triumphs at the "Soul Bowl" (part of the Honda U.S. Open of Surfing in Huntington Beach) and the Vans Pro-tec Pool Party, where she beat riders many years her senior. In the past she has broken her left arm, her right index finger, and a front tooth, all souvenirs of her chosen sport. Christian listens intently. "You must have been ripping," he says. "That's awesome."

Christian picks up his skateboard in one hand, baby Classic in the other, and heads for the bowl. "You are *not* going to drop in with him," Jennifer tells him. Words ensue, but it's clear that Christian is not going to win this one. "I won't, I won't," he relents. He walks down the bowl with Classic in his arms.

Once at the bottom, Christian begins riding with Classic, gripping the child as he makes swooping circles around the pool. "Baby on board!" shouts Rhythm. "Watch out for that pebble," warns Jennifer. Christian stops, then places Classic on his board and pushes him up the gently sloping side of the pool. Jennifer looks on, an eagle watch-

BE HARD-PRESSED TO INVENT A MOVE GROOVIER THAN THE CHRIST AIR.

ing her brood. "He likes it!" he yells up to her. "He's not smiling," she says. Classic isn't smiling, but then, he's not crying, either. Wide eyed, he's just digging the feeling of movement. "We're gonna skate when Mama's not around," Christian tells him.

"I'm the strict one," Jennifer says later, sitting cross-legged on the floor. "But he's an awesome dad. His boys are really stoked. He's very protective of them, especially the baby."

Jennifer first met Christian ten years ago, when she was 19. She had been leafing through a friend's photo album and came upon a picture of Christian smoking speed, blowing fat rings. "I thought he was supercute and wanted to meet him," she says. Her friend introduced the two. Jennifer didn't know who he was or that he used to be Christ, back when she was still in grade school. "When I met him, he was living out of his car," she says.

Christian and Jennifer started dating, and partying, although Jennifer was tiring of the life. Spooked by seeing a friend hallucinate for two days in her grandparents' home after shooting too much speed, Jennifer swore off drugs and asked God to come into her life. She started reading the Bible and going to church. Christian was using every day but telling himself that things were going to turn around, that *he* would turn things around. "I'd tell her, 'I'm going to make this big comeback, I'm going to quit doing drugs...next year,'" he says. "'I'm going to quit doing drugs...next year.'"

On January 26, 2000, Christian was caught at Honolulu International Airport smuggling a pound and a half of meth from Los Angeles. "I was doing it for the dope," he says. "I was doing it because I wanted to use it. I wanted to get more."

Under the minimum sentencing guidelines of the time, Christian was looking at ten years in federal prison on the mainland. Over the phone Jennifer told him that they both had to put their trust and faith in God. "I don't need God," he said. "I need a lawyer." He phoned his mother, who was living in Virginia. "His first call to me after he was arrested, he said, 'Mom, I'm not a bad person. I've never hurt anybody intentionally,'" she says. She hadn't known what just about everyone else seemed to know, that her only son had been doing crystal meth for a good chunk of the last decade. She told him that she and Ivan would stick by him. "Christian has always, always, always been loved. And he knows this. No matter what's happened, we are always there for him."

On his third day in jail, Christian dropped to his knees and cried out to God. Millions before, in foxholes and prison cells, have made similar pleas. If you're real, Christian prayed, come into my life. All he wanted was to make bail, to be given the chance to speak to his parents, to see whether his girlfriend would stay or go, to set his affairs in order. I'll do the time, he told God, just let me make bail. "I visited him when he was in prison, and when he was first in there, he thought it was over," says skateboarder Jay Haizlip. "He went from 'How could this happen to me?' to 'Man, I just need to die.'"

Jennifer told him he had to get a Bible. Another prisoner, a guy five years into a ten-year haul, offered him his, and Christian began ripping through the pages, his eyes glazing over at the succession of names and chapters. I Kings stopped him with its tales of how God moved through David's life. "I had no idea what I was opening it up for or why, but I knew that I was seeking to find out who God was," he says. "I think that's what happens when people finally come to a place where they go, 'I keep blowing it, I keep messing up, I gotta give God a shot.'"

HOME FREE: Hosoi in Huntington Beach

News of his arrest shot through the skateboarding world. The response was more relief than surprise. "All I could think was 'Whoa, that's awesome,'" says Mountain. "How crazy is that? I just thought, 'If this is what it takes...'" But Christian becoming a Christian—that was a tougher sell. "I've had a lot of friends gone to jail and become religious, and then come out, and they're not religious anymore," says Montaño. "Jay Adams is the perfect example. He was all religious, 'God, Jesus, born again,' and then he goes and does his thing and rages and then he's back in jail, and then he's religious again."

If there were doubts about the sincerity of Hosoi's conversion, whether this was just another con's scam to cut his time, they evaporated when people met him in prison, looked into his eyes, and heard him speak. Whether one believes that God came into his life and spoke to him, there's no question among his pals, followers and non-Christians alike, that *he* believes it. During his lost years, Hosoi was a master of hiding his addiction, and even now, he can be guarded, hesitant to talk about who he did drugs with or to glorify his prison stay and his years spent running from the law. When his old friend

IF THERE WERE DOUBTS ABOUT THE SINCERITY OF HIS CONVERSION, THEY

Block Montaño was making the film about his life, the director recalls, there were several times when Hosoi said, "That's not important to the movie." But ask him about God, and whoa, it all starts coming out like a vacuum cleaner in reverse.

Then you'll hear how his "good times"—the wins, the girls, the dope smoking—left him empty, without peace, until God came to him with love, real love, and the joy that lasts and lasts. It's as if a switch is flipped and Hosoi is now looking back at a guy he hardly recognizes. Not that all the other stuff didn't happen, it's just not that significant to him except as a means of displaying how God can redeem even the most lost of souls. Now, he'll tell you, everything is easier.

If there's a downside to Hosoi as a reformed sinner become preacher, as an "I suffer just like you" kind of guy, it's that personal weaknesses and tough times aside, he still seems better than the rest of us. For many fans, his time in prison and his battles with meth only enhance his legend. He was a god then, and now, he's still kind of a god, but even mightier, because the real God's got his back.

While Hosoi was turning his cell into his own personal Bible college, his family was dealing with a succession of attorneys who ranged from inept to criminal. The first had never practiced in federal court, was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor that drastically altered her behavior, and made a multitude of blunders that resulted in Hosoi facing a 20-to-life term. "She ripped us off for over $50,000, and two days after Christian got out, she committed suicide," says Jennifer. Another took $1,500, met with him once, then abandoned the case. Jennifer paid $3,000 to another pair of attorneys only to discover they weren't attorneys at all but swindlers fresh out of prison.

By the time Jennifer contacted criminal defense attorney Myles Breiner, a former county prosecutor in Honolulu, Christian had been incarcerated for two years. "The family had spent an enormous amount of money and just got screwed," he says. "I kept thinking, 'This kid doesn't deserve this kind of sentence.' The vast majority of my work is with violent felons, sex offenders, really bad people, and they get sentences that are a slap on the wrist by comparison."

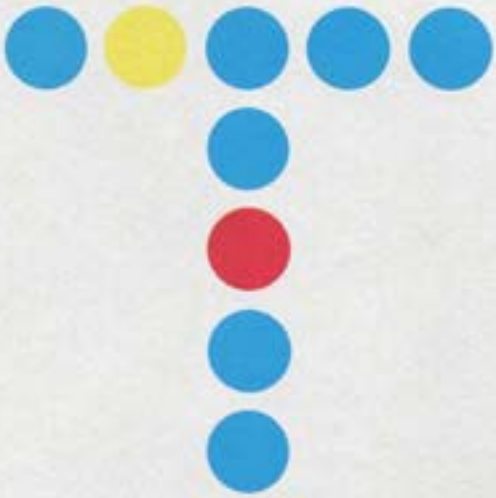
Hosoi's refusal to inform on his supplier and drug buddies didn't help his cause. "Everyone ratted him out, but he refused to do that to them," says Breiner.

During Hosoi's incarceration, changes were made in the federal mandatory sentencing guidelines that gave judges more leeway in setting prison time. The judge in his case, Alan C. Kay, was a highly religious man who believed in Hosoi. What happens when a devout judge and a born-again prisoner meet? They trade scriptures. "I fervently believe in the separation of church and state, so I found it very disturbing that Judge Kay was openly engaging in religious discourse with my client. In open court!" says Breiner. "But I had to tolerate it because it was actually benefiting Christian." Another indication of the judge's faith: On June 19, 2001, moments after Hosoi's initial sentencing, Kay married Christian and Jennifer in his courtroom.

As the legal fees grew, Jennifer went to Christian's old skating buddies for help. Scores sent money to the Christian Hosoi Legal Defense Fund; others attended fund-raisers on his behalf. Ivan sold his house in Hawaii to help cover costs. Hundreds of people, including Hawk, sent letters to Kay pleading for leniency.

In 2003, Hosoi's sentence was reduced to time served, which, in his mind, meant he'd be out in a week. But the federal attorney filed appeal after appeal, and Hosoi stayed in prison for another 11 months. He was finally released on June 4, 2004. That night family and friends gathered at Yanagi's, one of the best sushi bars in Honolulu, to celebrate. His old group partied in grand style, drinking and carousing far into the night, to the chagrin of the waitstaff. Christian and Jennifer abstained. "They were stone sober that evening," says Breiner. "Christian was like, 'Praise the Lord, thank you guys for being here, Jesus loves you, I love you.' And his friends were like, 'Woo-hoo, let's tear this place up.'"

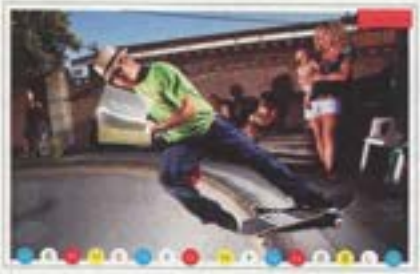
The day after his release, Christian went to Oahu's Hawaii Kai skate park with Jay Adams and Shogo Kubo. He hadn't been on a board in five years. "I didn't know what it would feel like," says Christian, but video footage reveals that, on that day, he was ripping. A month and a half later, he returned to Southern California, skating at the Harvest Crusade at Angel Stadium in front of 21,000 people. Later that month he was preaching at the Sanctuary, testifying about how God had transformed his life. "It wasn't God's plan for me to go to jail," he says now. "But He definitely got my attention once I got there."



THE LAZY DOG CAFÉ IN WESTMINSTER IS a T.G.I. Friday's-like restaurant nestled among a Target, a Pavilions, and a comic book store. Classic snoozes in his stroller while the rest of the family eats. Rhythm, clutching the crayons provided by the server, is drawing elaborate crosses on a paper place mat as Jennifer looks on. Christian has just learned that he has a 19-year-old son, James, who is living in Texas with his mom and stepdad but is soon going to move in with the Hosois. "He's a love child from the '80s," says Jennifer with a bemused smile.

Hosoi's duties now are divided between the secular and the religious, but every appearance, every demo, is an opportunity to win souls. One week he's at the X Games, judging the "Big Air" competition at the Staples Center, witnessing the scariest moment in the history of the competition as Jake Brown loses his [CONTINUED ON PAGE 304]

EVAPORATED WHEN PEOPLE MET HIM IN PRISON AND HEARD HIM SPEAK.



Heaven on Wheels

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 177] board and his bearings at the top of his flight and falls 40 feet straight down. Another day he's preaching the Gospel to teens at a skate ministry, where praying comes with skating sessions and free food. One week he's giving his testimony at a huge Luis Palau festival, where skateboarders and BMX riders perform with Christian hip-hop groups; the next, he's working with Vans on a series of signature high-tops, which will debut in the spring. In addition to starting up his own company, Hosoi Skateboards, he is a member of the Quiksilver skateboard team alongside, yes, Tony Hawk.

If Hosoi's life is a cautionary tale, then it's hard to see what the moral is. Don't do drugs, or you just might end up, years later, with a beautiful wife and kids? Don't take the Lord's name as your own, or He just might curse you with sponsorship deals, a nice home in the O.C., and good friends that stick by you through the rockiest of times? Or maybe it's that God's forgiveness is beyond our ken, that He'll put up with off-the-charts nuttiness and sin in people if they'll just come to Him. It's easy to envision a wholly different end, one a lot less serene: Hosoi still living on the street, face ashy, eyes sunken into his skull. Or as many of his friends might have foretold, dead, mourned by family and friends who wonder if they could have said more, done more, to redeem him. Maybe, as his friend Montaño mused, one still sees miracles in this world. Maybe God did choose him for other things.

Montaño is sprawled out on a bed in his Venice home, watching *SportsCenter* and massaging his right leg, which he broke skateboarding. He is a large man, fiercely protective of Hosoi. He skated for Hosoi's team back in the '80s, rolled with him, saw him at his best and worst. His pride in him is that of a longtime friend or a startled but happy older brother. "There's other people I know that haven't gone to jail in the last five years, and they ain't doing shit," he says. "And then I watch Christian, who had nothing, comes out of prison, and he's got it going on."

The evangelical thing, though, mystifies him. Montaño will question his friend about all manner of religious topics, from news of a preacher caught molesting kids—"The Devil got him," Hosoi will say—to the power of prayer. He'll mess with him, have fun but not make fun. It's this mix of openness and clowning—and two decades of history with Hosoi—that got folks to open up for Montaño in his film. Somehow he got Hosoi's old buddy Eddie Reatagui to admit that he was the guy who turned Christian on to meth. Somehow he got Ivan Hosoi, Pops, to cop to smoking meth with his son.

Montaño, and guys like him, are the reason that Hosoi has been called to preach the Gospel. Think: You've just done five years in federal prison for drug smuggling, and you're going to try to convince your friend that *he* needs help? Labors like these are what Christians refer to as "crosses." "The Holy Spirit tells you, 'Hey, talk to this person over there,'" Hosoi says. "And sometimes you go, 'Are you sure? I don't want to make a fool of myself.' And God's like, 'Come on. Are you worried about being thought of as a fool compared to his salvation, his eternal soul?'" So he ministers.

"He's always inviting me to church," says Montaño. "'Come to church, Block.'" Montaño hasn't gone yet but says he'd go hear Hosoi preach if, say, he opened his own church. "Hell, yeah. I opened up a skate shop, he came. If he opened up a church, I'd go. Why not? Support your friends."

Hosoi still skates in competitions and demos, although now, at 40, it's often in the "legend" or "master" category. Skateboarding is a forgiving sport, allowing riders to excel long after athletes in the NBA and NFL are sent to the glue factory. Weeks after his release, Hosoi was hitting Christ Airs at Hickam Air Force Base in Oahu. "Christian still has it," says Montaño. "He still rips."

He says he would still skate even if there weren't any contests or crowds or cash. Pro athletes say this all the time, of course, but they're rarely, if ever, put to the test. Hosoi really did skate when the money ran out, when the sponsorships—and the companies that paid for them—evaporated. Skating was his religion before he found Jesus, his dearest love until he met Jennifer, and he never lost faith in it, even when the drugs sapped his strength and will. The wins were great, so too the cheers and the fame, but what he really dug was the rush of going up.

He remembers now, when he was in grade school, he would climb the tallest tree. Skittering up the trunk until he got near the top, he would swing from branch to slender branch. Hosoi never had a fear of heights, even at that age. His teachers, understandably frightened, shouted, "Come down, Christian, come down." He would stare down at them, smile, then climb a little higher. ■

In the Line of Fire

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 159] Fry knew LaBonge well and was fond of him. But he also knew how excited the councilman could get.

"Tom," Fry said. "I can see that the park is on fire."

"Okay, okay," said LaBonge. "Okay. I'll go out and I'll tell you where it's at."

"All right, Tom," said Fry. "You go out and you tell me where the fire's at."

As LaBonge careered off, Fry couldn't help noticing that the councilman's wife, Brigid, and a young legislative analyst were hanging on for the ride.

Saxelby had shut down the cliff-side road—too narrow and dangerous for trucks. Without that access, engines 35 and 235 had to follow Vista del Valle around to the back of Aberdeen, then shimmy their hose lines up a nearly vertical, 150-foot rockfall to position themselves in a saddle under the footbridge. William Heritier, holding an inch-and-a-half line that sprays 125 gallons a minute, gazed into Aberdeen. "I was looking down a chimney, down a chute," he says. "That's a bad spot to be in. But we wanted to get water on it and knock it down." Beside him stood Brian Walker, who clutched a second hose line. The two watched as the fire slowly made its way toward them.

Everything was beginning to speed up around Fry. At the Greek, engines were arriving, ready for assignment—not only LAFD engines but companies that would come from Glendale, Burbank, San Marino, and L.A. County. This was exactly the kind of interagency jurisdictional response that had been MTZ chatter an hour earlier.

As if on cue, Varela appeared. "Craig—where do you want me?" he asked Fry.

Varela is Fry's senior. But as first on the scene, Fry held incident command for the moment. By now he had ordered 40 engine companies, some 400 men, to the Greek. Sensory studies show that perception narrows in stressful moments like the one Fry was experiencing. Situational awareness drops off radically. An individual communicating with three to seven others can keep track of what is going on around him and those he is speaking to. When that number climbs above