

“Brotherhood On The Fly”

By Shanna Lucas

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Ben Johnson, four-time All American Pro Kiter of the Year, two-time cover boy of *Kiting Monthly*, and son of famed kitist Xavier Cugat Johnson, dives deep into his craft to uncover the importance and life lessons of kiting. With over 30 years of experience, Johnson encourages the kiting way of life, with its highs and almost impossible lows.

Bailey Johnson, younger brother to the rising kitist, prefers New Age styles of kiting to the traditional ways of kiting. Sometimes known as ‘Rogue’ or ‘Wildcard,’ this rising kitist had strived to compete alongside his brother in the hopes of winning Austin’s annual Kite Fest back in 2013. Equipped with his camel pack and black state-of-the-art kiting vest, Bailey was sure to tackle the competition with his determination, “downright sex appeal,” and synchronized free-style kiting techniques.

Close to one month after the release of the third film in the *Sky Blades* trilogy, film director Dylan Childs, and brothers Ben and Bailey Johnson agreed to meet for an interview to talk first hand about the trilogy's becoming and future plans.

A bottle of Peroni sat on the living room coffee table alongside a drink dressed with a small brown paper sack. A can of La Croix was soon to join them, for Dylan would be arriving any minute to join the brothers. He was greeted with a warm welcome, and of course with what seemed to be the normal and welcomed heckling by old friends. The three gentlemen sat around the square table, oddly wearing similar color toned shirts-- the brothers matched unintentionally with plaid.

“My name is Bailey Johnson, also known as ‘Bailey Johnson’ in the *Sky Blades* Trilogy.”

“My name is Ben Johnson, also known as ‘Ben Johnson’.”

Ben Johnson Jr., a social worker based in Austin, Texas, is the oldest son to Ben and Alicia Johnson. Ben, like his younger brother Bailey and youngest sister Lily, grew up in the quiet life of Georgetown, Texas. He has a son named Caden. While Caden lives in Midland, Texas, both bond over music, drums, and video games. Ben is perhaps the most down-to-earth of his siblings, while also managing very close relationships with each of them.

Bailey Johnson, a skilled drummer for the band *Michelle & Them* and *Basketball Shorts*, and perhaps tattoo addict like his older brother, is the middle child of the Johnson family, who recently celebrated his 30th birthday back in May.

“I met Bailey--” Ben had said, causing the room to fill with laughter. “It had to do a lot with ma mom giving birth, which was a weird, weird kind of thing. That’s how we met. We had known each other a little while and then crossed paths.”

Bailey is much taller than Ben and resembles his father, whereas Ben and Lily look more like their mother.

Dylan Childs, a digital production expert, husband, and Georgetown-native, met Ben in the second grade. After nearly 25 years of friendship, the two remain close. The friendship strengthened when the two entered junior high.

“Yeah. In the second grade, in the *enrichment* class,” said Dylan.

Ben had said jokingly, “Right, because we were so smart. We have been buddies really since then,” Ben proudly stated. “Especially since junior high. Shit-- We have known each other, what--”

“25 years,” they both said.

Dylan describes *Sky Blades* as “A mockumentary about pro-kiting legends and brothers Ben and Bailey Johnson, their life-long rivalry, and about preparing for the most important event in their lives: The Austin Kite Festival.” This summary, found in the description box of Dylan Child’s short film, was taken from Childs’s VIMEO channel; a platform where the director and filmmaker shares his projects for the public eye to see.

Watching the first film in the series with commentary from Ben, Bailey, and Dylan provided a moment where the three could, for the first time, really sit down and recall the making of each film, and the makings of their friendship. It was apparent through Ben and Bailey’s laughter and expressions that *Sky Blades* was indeed meant to be a joke.

“To be honest, before we had cameras, when our parents had cameras,” Bailey said, in reference to the trio’s start with filming in junior high.

“We would go out on like a summer day and summer night just to make like a dumb movie”

“We did a lot of Scream rip-offs. The only props we had was like a Scream halloween costume. We were like ‘well that’s the bad guy-- that’s the villain’.”

“Not on purpose, but the premise was always: someone leaves and gets murdered and then someone finds their body, brings someone to see the body, and the body is gone.” Bailey reported. “Every time.” Ben and Dylan chimed in with laughter upon recalling their rookie film writing.

“*It was right here man,*” Dylan mimicked.

“*It was right here,*” said Bailey. “*Kevin’s dead.*”

“*Guess what man, fucking Kevin’s dead,*” Ben joked.

During Ben and Dylan’s senior year, Dylan had brought his camera with him to parties and other functions, filming whatever he could. This was perhaps the start of Dylan’s passion for filming.

As of 5 or 6 years ago, the trio met up again to film on a regular basis.

“A friday afternoon, I’d come over and we would just brainstorm, and create something in like a day,” Dylan recalled.

Bailey added, “We would get an idea, and rope it back into something that was actually doable.”

“It was good batting practice,” the group had all agreed. They believe that *Sky Blades* was batting practice, on a bigger and better scale. In the films to follow, there is an evident cinematic change.

Dylan likes the idea of honing skills, with his regular involvement in digital production. He believes that these short videos, or 6 hour video challenges, has helped pave his way into digital production. While doing short videos with fun as the only intent, filming had a bit more seriousness and thought put into the mix than what went on in front of the camera.

“It was something that I would have liked to do professionally, but I had never thought that like, ‘Oh, we are going to be Youtube sensations’,” -- something that much of society has deemed to mean success.

“We still don’t think that,” Bailey joked.

The group had agreed that if these videos had started to take off, “then that’s cool.”

“I don’t have any desire to *rule* Youtube,” Dylan said. The Trilogy, with its 1,300+ views on Vimeo, towers over its Youtube appearance, with on 18 views. The *Sky Blades* Trilogy has its own Youtube channel, which was created on June 17th, 2017.

Having a professional-quality digital producer for a best friend was a leg up for the brothers, and having the opportunity to create something fun in the midst of producing for clients and events was indeed a bonus for Dylan.

“It’s fun for me to experiment and do something that is purely for the fun of it. Not because someone told me ‘this is what I want’. This is kind of like, ‘let’s make some art’.”

While in agreement, Ben notes, “It’s still Bailey and I running around like idiots and acting dumb, and now the difference is that Dylan creates professional quality production. That’s really where we are at.”

Because the third and most recent film, *Idle Blades*, starred Ben Johnson himself, it seemed appropriate to seek an individual interview with him on his thoughts of the *Sky Blades* series in the making, and how exactly the run-on joke that never expected to run as far as it did came to be.

“It was actually pretty ridiculous,” he had said, looking amused. “We were getting together pretty frequently to kill some time and we would shoot these little short videos. We had a completely different idea. We were going to have these two guys-- two bro-ed out guys-- just randomly get into a fight with each other over something really stupid, and we couldn’t figure out what that would really be. There was a really big field out by my house, and we said “well what if there is kiting?”” Ben had explained.

In the group interview, Bailey remembered the start out clearly. He expressed a similar tale of this video-making routine, all for fun and laughs.

“We were coming up with a way where we could have me headbutt Ben in the penis,” Bailey explained. “We were in my room thinking of ideas of like, how would two guys like randomly have a conflict where I could fall on my knees and headbutt Ben in the dick?”

“You had the joke,” Dylan added. “It was the matter of bringing the setup for the joke.”

Ideas such as the two brothers running into each other at a basketball court while rollerblading, flying kites, and getting into a fight due to their kites getting tangled, all made the perfect excuse to headbutt Ben in the groin.

“We got all geared up, got the kites, and we got to flying,” Dylan said. “We just had a lot of fun. Within the first five or ten minutes, y’all--” (he pointed the brothers) “just messed around with characters and just tried to get like stuff to build up to this and it just became, ‘oh this is going to be something much more’.”

From there, Dylan had suggested the idea to do a mockumentary style. They had set up a few days for the ‘interviews’ and went to film at the Austin Annual kite Festival in March of 2013. Dylan was the one to film the two brothers, Bailey was the one to film the strangers as highly talented kites, and it was left up to Ben to create the names and jokes that would follow,

such as names like Douche Whitmer or Draco Breeze, a man apparently cosplaying as Harry Potter with an owl kite. Sponsors such as Cheerios and Nick Junior Late Night were also ideas that went into play. According to the fictional Ben Johnson, 2 Live Crew was reportedly there; The inside joke that there happened to be four dark gentlemen surrounded by ‘a sea of white people’.

“Dylan just built this story and it just sat around for a long time,” Bailey stated, while also noting that the story was originally pieced together with only three shoots-worth of footage.

“I think I finished it a year later,” Dylan recalled.

Almost 6 months after Dylan and Bailey edited and wrapped up *Sky Blades*, they had the idea to make *Sky Blades 2*. Using footage from what would be *Broken Blades* and other film projects, they had realized that with what they had, and given the time of the season, filming a movie about kiting in mid-winter was not the best idea.

“You couldn’t even buy a kite,” Bailey said.

Things got busy for Dylan. He went back to school, got married, and ultimately got caught up in the functions of daily life. The second film was ultimately put on hold, only to be picked up unexpectedly by Dylan, who thought there could be something more to the footage he had. In the winter of 2016, Dylan dedicated his time to piecing together the story he saw in front of him. *Broken Blades*, as described in the video’s Vimeo description box, is “A powerful gritty mockumentary about former pro kiter Bailey Johnson's life on the streets following his fall from grace. A continuation of the Sky Blades series.” The film was released to the public in the beginning of April, 2017.

Idle Blades, to Bailey, looked the most involved. “It was the fastest turn around,” he confessed.

Bailey notes at the end of the *Sky Blades* commentary, that Dylan’s animation, photoshop capabilities, and cinematography have really stepped up since those films made 5 years ago.

It is evident that Dylan had focused on aspects such as lighting and angle techniques, or even lens flares to help display crisper lines between a mockumentary from something funny; certainly lacking details in the first of the films. Dylan’s style of filming in *Idle Blades*-- a project that took two months to produce-- instills the importance of nature and environment, and adds an underlying appreciation to nature itself while also adding onto the story. This is expressed with long sequences of film with sole focus of the fields, cacti, and numerous plants--doing justice to the film site; the Johnson’s childhood home in Georgetown, Texas.

While the flight path for the *Sky Blades* Trilogy has not yet been determined, the trio believes that after the unclear split between ‘Ben Johnson’ and ‘Bailey Johnson’ after Austin’s Annual Kite Fest back in 2013, there will be a reunion of some sort; one in which “brings the dynamic back, and there being some kind of conflict.”

Dylan would like to continue making short films in association with the trilogy, however not directly making a series. Videos that are stand alone, while also tell the *Sky Blades* story is what he has in mind.

Ben added, “We had the idea to take more of the approach where we have this world that these characters live in, so there’s a couple of little things like, um, Dylan has the same person

who has written all of the fake articles written by us. You see a graphic pop up with an article and it's the same fake person, or Dong Longagin--"

"Who 'produces' all of the films," Dylan interrupts.

"So we had ideas to look into those characters and what they are doing, or have things where we are doing maybe just a commercial where its me and Bailey gearing up for a tournament, and we have kind of like a, you know a, trashing talking commercial. Just kind of having like this world where professional kiting is somehow a thing."

"One might be a 30 second commercial for something and one might be a digital short film. Each video doesn't have to be on a time line. They still jump around, but still take place in this world," Dylan says. "Those are our lofty goals."

In consideration of future steps for the *Sky Blades* films, the trio believes that they should go back to their roots, to where it all started.

"I feel like at some point you have got to headbutt me in the dick, I feel like --"

"At some point we have to do that."

The room once again roared with laughter upon this abrupt contrast between a serious discussion to the return of the joke that started it all.

"It will end *Sky Blades*," Dylan said. "It will be the final scene. Cut to black. Que *Journey*."

Author's Note

The interview with Ben was not as detailed as I would have liked, so while I value his independent thoughts and ideas expressed, I had to rely on the group interview for a clearer detailed picture.

I interviewed with Ben on Monday afternoon, but could not get the whole group together until Tuesday afternoon.

During the interview, Ben and Bailey's sister stepped in occasionally to make small comments before leaving work. I would have loved to interview her for her opinion, other than the use of the word 'stupid' or 'stupidity' that she commonly threw around. At another point, a friend and bandmate from one of Bailey's bands, "Michelle & Them" showed up to briefly support the film series with a thumbs up.

The group is interested in possibly merchandise after so many good reviews and strong outside support. Dylan hopes to produce merchandise with a 80s/90s vintage sports feel. There have been reports of kite companies reaching out in support through instagram, although there are no apparent wants of advertising as of yet.

The goal of this article was to show the dynamics between the trio as a whole, how they work together, and brainstorm together in the hopes of continuing a possible film phenomenon.

I do not know if I will fully be satisfied with this article as I know there is more behind the scenes content that I find interesting. I look forward for more content from them to come in the future.

Best, Shanna Lucas