

Risking Reward



Essays on loss, and what we can learn from **TAHOE'S SPORTS TRAGEDIES**

LURKING UNDER THE WOW FACTOR OF THE GLAMOROUS SIDE OF THE SKI AND ACTION SPORTS WORLD IS THE UNDERBELLY THAT THINGS CAN AND DO GO TERRIBLY WRONG.

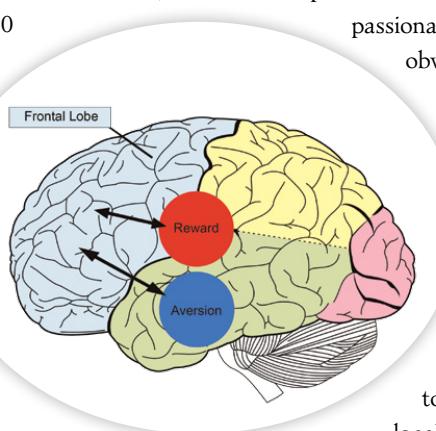
WRONG. The Tahoe community has been a raw witness to this fact, with a steady drumbeat of athletes lost. More than 10 in the last decade — from everyday skiers like Ben Brackett to the most globally celebrated names in action sports such as Erik Roner and Shane McConkey — have died young.

Absolute solutions seem fleeting, but the community is getting pro-active. There are initiatives like the recently formed Go Bigger Coalition, which aims to help parents and youth navigate our high-risk culture; the High Fives B.A.S.I.C.S. program, focused on helping the youth make smarter decisions; and SAFE AS clinics that promote backcountry safety.

But how do we hone in and perhaps restrict our actions in these sports that simultaneously give us joy as well as pain? Sherry McConkey, wife of the late Shane McConkey, pointedly summarizes the complexities: "We live in a community where people are passionate about inherently dangerous sports; for obvious reasons, I have come to dislike some of these sports, but I would never criticize people as I understand emotional connect for these athletes."

Whether you are a parent, athlete, or participant in our high-risk, high-fun culture, we recommend at least adding the tenets of these essays to the discussion.

We posed the question of "what can we do to decrease these tragedies" to six prominent local figures in the action sports community, who responded with the following candid thoughts.
~ Dave Zook/Moonshine Ink



THE BRAIN and a simple diagram of reward/aversion. "What the mind associates with reward or aversion has profound impacts on what we bring into our lives," said Robb Gaffney. Courtesy image

Jaclyn Paaso, 34, is one of the winningest big mountain female skiers on the planet. She considers North Lake Tahoe home.

When I first started entering big mountain competitions in 2008 I didn't really understand the situations I was putting myself in, and the full scope of the risks involved. As the years passed, I suffered the loss of good friends in the ski community, and the reality set in.

Not all of the tragedies are on the same level of risk that I can relate to, or at least that is how I feel. I suppose others may feel differently. But there was always a connection between the risks I was taking and some of the tragedies I was seeing. The idea of quitting entered my mind. I soon realized quitting was not the answer though, and my fallen friends would never want that. However, I do feel that they would want me to make careful decisions and be as prepared as possible in any situation. Nevertheless, life is never a sure bet, so the sidelines are not an option.

When I was competing at the 2015 Verbier Xtermes (the world's premier big mountain contest), I was dealing with two recent knee injuries. Minutes before my run, the tour organizer had radioed the starter to inform me that all four of the women that skied my intended area had crashed badly. He knew of my current physical condition and warned me of the snow conditions. I decided to drop and make the call as I went. Skiing up to the area in question, I quickly determined that my chances of crashing and suffering a severe knee injury, or worse, were greater than my chances of success.

In front of the live cameras, audiences, and judges, I took off my skis and hiked out. I knew that no contest was worth knowingly putting myself in peril.

I believe the most important message we can teach each other is that there is never any shame in turning back. Your life and physical health will always be more important than any amount of money or recognition.

Robb Gaffney
Robb Gaffney has skied Squaw Valley for more than 25 years and has appeared in more than 10 ski films. He obtained a master's degree in psychiatry in 2003 and runs a practice in Tahoe City, where he lives. In 2012, he founded the website Sportgevity, with the mission statement: "Dedicated to making our sports lifelong passions," and, in 2015, he helped found the Go Bigger Coalition.

Action sports have become increasingly risky, and what's even riskier is that within the culture, the blind lead the blind. That might sound drastic, but it's inherently true, as it is in many aspects of life. We need to take the blinders off if we want to shift course.

Most of what we do is driven by deeply complex factors that ultimately drive our behaviors. Yet, we cruise along each day, coming up with all kinds of ways to explain why we do what we do. These rationalizations usually look good, seem to make sense, and often do a great job of convincing others that our drives are fully conscious and calculated. The only problem is that rationalizations operate as veils that cover up the real drivers underneath.

There are a lot of people out there just like me, who feel an urgency to address the issue. To go down that path we first have to examine how we rationalize and justify our culture. We have to open our eyes to the intricate ways we hold onto the path of morbidity and mortality we've already witnessed. We honor those who have died, which is understandable. But then we continue to celebrate and revere the very same actions that have taken them away from us. Conveniently, we look right past the real drivers responsible for pushing us further and further, and we engage in things that deepen the very same culture we fear our kids are becoming a part of.

Perhaps it's time to shed the rationalizations and look further into ourselves and our relationships with our children, each other, and our culture, all of which have quiet, but profound, impacts on our behaviors. Then we'll be addressing the real issues that have the ability to shift our course.

John Walsh
John Walsh, born and raised in Squaw Valley, is Timy Dutton's uncle. Dutton was a professional Squaw Valley-based skier who passed away from a midair skydiving collision in 2014. Walsh has also been a ski coach for 25 years and spent four years on the U.S. Ski Team. He now lives in Tahoe City.

After the loss of my nephew Timy, my emotions ranged from disbelief to sadness to anger. Our family had been hit with a gut-wrenching sadness of emptiness. At every holiday, birthday, and family event, we are reminded of the loss. My brother is reminded every day with emotions he never new existed. When you add the circumstances of the tragedy, it makes it that much more confusing.

That being said, I think that the best way to make change to these sad tragedies is like everything else that helps with change: EDUCATION! We need to raise the awareness of making better choices for both the community and our children. Some of the awareness can be about the truth behind these extreme sport sponsors. The companies' true sponsorship is minimal in finances and life insurance, but super high in pressure and commitments. When these young athletes and their parents understand that their risk vs. reward ratio is so warped, they may challenge some of the bad decisions being made.

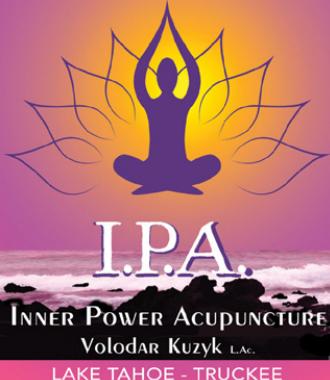
Also, we need to change who we truly see as heroes and idols. Is the hero the adult that works hard and gives back to the community by volunteering and coaching, or the person who chooses to do things that many consider to be dangerous with an outcome as serious as death? In the high-risk world of skiing, we need to challenge the ski areas to increase their education of respect and understanding of the mountain. This can be done by properly compensating the educators and coaches with years of experience to pass on their knowledge. We need to take this education to all of the kids in the community through lectures, camps, and mentorship. But my concern is that it may be too late due to the permeation of this invincible attitude in Tahoe.

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SPORTS & OUTDOORS

JT Holmes

JT Holmes got his first segment in a ski movie at 17. Since, he has pioneered ski BASE jumping, practiced wing suit flying, and been a stuntman in Hollywood blockbusters. He is now 35, and lives in Squaw Valley.

Accidents happen. I have lost dozens of friends and acquaintances to tragedies ranging from freak accidents to bad luck to statistical inevitabilities. Because of this, I started a program with the High Fives Foundation called B.A.S.I.C.S.

The goal of the program is to prevent the accidents that could have been easily avoided. B.A.S.I.C.S. is an acronym for Be Aware & Safe In Critical Situations. The goal is to raise awareness for the dangers that exist in terrain parks and in the backcountry, and encourage and enable good decision-making. We don't try to limit progression, but we do try to get kids to use their heads, at least a little bit. As a community, we must encourage one another to make good choices.

The action sports community is big and growing. We'll never halt the tragedies within it. With the growing number of participants, we see a proportionally increased number of tragedies. It is just numbers, really. I don't believe that per capita we are seeing more accidents. More runs, more jumps, more ascents, and more stunts equates to more accidents.

Then consider the visibility of it all. Thirty years ago very few participants were idolized. Now, we have dozens of platforms for viewing exactly which sports fascinate us. Mountaineers, race car drivers, motor cycle enthusiasts, skiers, and bull riders have been crashing, dying, and getting injured since their sports inception. We've just multiplied every number in the equation. It seems staggering. No death goes unnoticed.

We live in Tahoe where sports with consequence tend to be more popular than ball sports or swimming, for example. Skiing and action sports are good, clean, fun. It is satisfying to be in the outdoors enjoying adventure, sightseeing, and feeling wind in your face. Skiing and action sports will always be dangerous, but with effort we can eliminate at least some of the mistakes being made.



GOOFBALLS: The LaPlante brothers, with Logan on the left, and Cody in the middle, mess around with Shane McConkey in 2007. Photo by David LaPlante

Logan LaPlante

At 16, Logan LaPlante is entrenched in a skiing family. He is a competitive big mountain skier, his parents are skiers, and his younger brother, Cody LaPlante, 13, is considered one of the top park skiers in the nation. The LaPlantes live in Truckee.

I see dead people. Walking over to Coffeebar I see a fading McConkey sticker slapped on a fire hydrant. In the parking lot there's Timy Dutton's rubber ducky sticker on a Thule box. Inside, I order a coffee. Gotta pee. Washing my hands, I look into the mirror and notice I'm wearing a CR Johnson sweatshirt. I pull out my computer to do homework, which means checking Facebook. There's a funny video of Erik Roner in my feed.

These athletes lived in our community and are legends in the action sports universe. At the same time, they were friends, coaches, childhood heroes, someone you ran into in line at Squaw or waiting for a latte at the Coffeebar. Like most kids into skiing and growing up in this community, I looked up to them. I miss them.

Action sports can be risky. I guess that's what makes them so appealing. Pushing the limits can mean "being a hero," which makes good content to share. And, yet, I am 16-years-old and have been to more funerals and memorial services than weddings.

Even though the helmet debate is pretty much over, thanks largely to Danny Toumarkine and High Fives, the cultural risks can be just as dangerous. Kids can get bullied by peers for not going big enough. Throw in the pressure to get more likes on your Instagram edit, and it adds up. Then there's avalanche danger, getting landed on, not speed checking jumps, inspecting a cliff jump. Lots to think about.

My little brother Cody is an example of both the problem and the solution. Flips at 7. Double flips at 11. Triples at 13. Where does it stop? While simultaneously inspiring kids to move up the progression curve, I also see kids losing interest in the sport because they can't keep up with the progression. Worse, they can get hurt.

There's no sign Cody will be slowing down anytime soon. But what people don't see is the jumps he turns a shoulder to, and how many times he says, "These jumps suck, not going to hit them." Because of his coaches and a community of mentors that make making good decisions as cool as going big, Cody is just as good at walking away. The High Fives Foundation B.A.S.I.C.S. program and the SAFE AS clinics are two examples of taking risk management to the extreme in our community.

I'm 16. Brain scientists say that I can look forward to another 10 years of "poor impulse control." So when us kids are surrounded by peers and mentors that look out for us, we're all safer.

Megan Michelson

SPORTS & OUTDOORS

Megan Michelson grew up in Nevada City, skiing in Tahoe. She is a freelance writer and former editor for espn.com, Outside, and Skiing. She lives in Tahoe City with her husband and daughter.

I was at Kirkwood reporting for espn.com on a Freeride World Tour contest when skier Ryan Hawks backflipped off a cliff during his run and didn't stand up. He was airlifted to the hospital and died from his injuries the next day. Instead of having a moment to grieve, I was tasked with writing the breaking news story about his death. It wasn't the first or last time I was given such an assignment.

As a writer within the ski industry, I've covered the deaths of Sarah Burke, Arne Backstrom, Shane McConkey, Kip Garre, Timy Dutton, and sadly, many more. Because the ski world is so tight-knit, this means I'm often writing about the loss of friends. In 2012, I was skiing off the backside of Stevens Pass, Wash., when a massive avalanche killed three of my ski partners. After the horror of that day, I crumbled under a dark cloud of guilt and sorrow. The only way I knew how to deal with my pain was to write about it.

Each time these young, promising skiers are taken, the shock feels similar: numbing, raw, disorienting. As a journalist, I'm supposed to have thick skin, to keep my emotions at bay, but every time, I sob onto my keyboard. When it happens again and again right here in Tahoe, I wonder: Why are we getting hit so hard by trauma? Most importantly, how do we make it stop?

Tahoe is a place that breeds and celebrates passionate athletes, those who live large and push limits. But with that comes inherent risk. Changing that culture means dampening the soul of the place we all love — and nobody wants that. But perhaps there's a way to teach the next generation that you can be bold and still have a long, satisfying life. We need to teach our kids to check their intentions before they venture into the mountains and that risks can be calculated and minimized.

We need to lead by example and show that it's OK to step down or turn back when things don't feel safe. Until that happens, I'm afraid the stories nobody wants to hear will keep coming. And so will the tears. ☺



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Photo by Grant Gunderson

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