

Avalanche Account: Everything But My Heart

Contributed by Adam Howard, as told by Adam Smith

On their first outing without their baby son Oliver, Adam Smith, wife Heather and four others left Jackson Hole Mountain Resort for a quick lap out of bounds in Granite Canyon at one o'clock p.m. on February 25, 2007. Heather wanted to see a matinee. Adam wanted to ski powder. Both got an epic.

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Editor's Note: On their first outing without their baby son Oliver, Adam Smith, wife Heather and four others left Jackson Hole Mountain Resort for a quick lap out of bounds in Granite Canyon at one o'clock p.m. on February 25, 2007. Heather wanted to see a matinee. Adam wanted to ski powder. Both got an epic.

There were six of us; Spencer, Boston Dave the Atomic rep, Glasses Dave, who works in the shop, Cole, Heather and myself.

We'd skied the chute to the skier's left of TNT the day before, probably about 3 o'clock with a couple of the same guys. And we checked out the snow. I mean, we didn't do a full pit analysis, but you know, we dug down and did a semi quick evaluation of the snow. We got down to the chute and ski cut it a few of times. Skied it and it felt really good, nothing was moving.

As we were skiing out of Granite, looking back up, we were like, "We should tag that tomorrow." Didn't really think about it until the next day.

We didn't listen to the [avalanche] forecast. It's posted at the gate. I think it was a Sunday. I think it was moderate.

There's two ways to get to Granite. That day we hiked up Pepi's Bench. It's how you'd hike to the headwall. The other route is a boot pack straight up from the Gondola.

The weather was kind of off and on, mostly cloudy with patches of snow here and there. And we got down on top of TNT. It's a banana couloir, and it goes down and kind of doglegs around and back to the left.

So the six of us go in there. Dave Smith ski cut it across. It's just one of those things. It gets skied a lot. It gets skied

quickly. It's a shame but that's how Granite gets skied. I think just the snow analysis we did the day before is way more than anyone ever does in Granite. There are a few guys that are guides and stuff that are digging pits every few days back there. But 95 percent of people that are skiing Granite are just blowing over the top and skiing down. And that's how it rolls.

So, we moved quickly for sure that day. We were maybe a little over confident. It was Granite. We got in there and there were two or three tracks, so we still ski cut it. Dave ski cut it a few times, and skied down and off to the right to this rock bluff.

There are no trees. Rocks, big huge buttresses. At the top maybe it's 100 feet wide. It's kind of got a wall on the left side, kind of a wall to the right side. The couloir is more on the right side, and there's a big huge rock band that comes down on the left. The couloir kind of comes down under this huge buttress, and there's a safe zone below that. So that's where Dave and Heather skied. So they went down and skied to the right. Spencer skied next. He actually skied down and tucked up underneath the rock band on the left.

I was the sixth person to go down TNT that day. Boston Dave and Cole were still behind me, yet to ski. We were just stacking tracks up. I was the next track to the left of where Heather went down.

About my third turn in is when it released.

And it released probably 20 feet above me at one of our ski cuts. It went all the way across, from one side to the other, and down to the ground.

It was kind of like what we'd said the day before: "Well boys, if it goes, it's going to go big." And it happened to be that day that it went big. I don't know how big the crown was. Maybe four to five feet. There wasn't a huge snowpack back there.

Oliver was my very first thought. It's weird, it probably only lasted 10 seconds at most. Probably five seconds. But that first half-second, it was like I had eyeballs around my entire head. I knew where everything around me was instantly. I saw Heather. I saw Dave. I knew exactly where I needed to ski. Everything was mapped out and so many thoughts came to my mind. Thinking about Oliver. Thinking about what I should do. It's pretty amazing how much information the brain can take in, in such a short amount of time.

For some reason I didn't want to be in the couloir. I wanted to ski toward the cliff. So the cliff comes down diagonally to the left and the couloir goes straight and doglegs under at cliff. I start straight lining for the cliff. I don't know why, just, that's where I needed to be. By the time I got there it felt like terminal velocity. I got there so fast.

I got pulled down and swept. I'm fighting it. My skis, they got pulled down into the snow, and I yank it back to go back to

the fall line to keep going straight. I remember just pulling that leg right out of the snow and just tearing everything in there.

Eventually it just overwhelmed me. The speed. As soon as it grabbed me, it was massive heavy snow. Bigger than trucks it seemed like. It didn't feel like blocks, like a hard slab, like you'd picture, like an iceberg coming in and crushing you. Just blocks like masses moving with you. I don't know, you're getting tumbled and hit but everything is moving with you. It's hard to explain. Probably like getting tumbled in a wave in the ocean. It's moving with you. It's soft. It's water, but it's still throttling you.

I remember catching an obscene amount of air. I was basically in a ball, sideways to the fall line, with my left side down the hill. I hadn't been back there all year, but I knew what I was going over. It could have been anywhere from 20 to 100 or so feet up top. I don't know where I went over it. Twenty feet at 60 miles per hour is pretty big air. Holy crap, I'm in the air a long time right now.

Then I hit and basically I popped. It's the loudest sound that your body can make, on impact. I probably hit a tree on my left side. My femur broke just above my knee and just below my pelvis here, clean. So I probably took a tree that wide. Usually it breaks once and it's loose so it can't brake again. And I broke the wing of my pelvis off. That's what punctured my skin, and opened my side up. Probably eight inches long. My own bone, when it broke off is what cut me open.

That's when everything exploded. It felt like shit shot out my ears. It felt like an explosion.

It lacerated [my] liver, kidney. My colon popped. Lacerated my small intestine, large intestine. Appendix, spleen. I don't think my lung got punctured, just crushed. Pretty much everything but my heart. I don't know what else can get damaged in there, but it was all a big ball of molten lava. Everything was spilling into everywhere else.

I rag-dolled through trees for what felt like an eternity. Through trees, and the sound was like I took my helmet and went wham, wham, wham, wham on the floor. And just fighting and swimming as hard as your body can. Just fighting and swimming and pulling and wrenching. Everything you've got to swim and swim and swim. I just remember trying to keep my hands latched to my coat.

Everything went black for a millisecond. I don't know how long that is. My body felt like it was going black. Black hole. Not like light at the end of the tunnel. Like this black hole. And then I just went into this shock and felt my whole body jerk. And my hand was able to move and my eyes. I can see light and I know which way is up. My head is only just below the surface. I push this hand through. The snow's not thick. I'm basically on top. As soon as I got the snow out of my mouth, I started screaming like a bitch. As loud as I could.

Glasses Dave was on top of me in 20 seconds. He was on his third pass over from one end to the other doing a grid. The deposition was 100 yards wide. A couple hundred yards long. I've heard I went 1,500 to 2,000 feet.

I had a tip of my ski out of the snow and my hand out.

Probably within five or ten minutes Mike was traversing out of Granite, he was a part time patroller over at Targhee just skiing for the day. He came up on the scene, and he kind took control of the scene from there. He kept everyone together. After they got me dug out, he had Glasses Dave taking vitals every couple and writing them in the snow. Heather was stabilizing my back and neck. They had hats, gloves here trying to stop the bleeding.

At that point Cole traversed out to try to get a phone, to get reception. He called search and rescue.

I was screaming. I was in serious pain. When they dug me out, my leg was all crooked. I knew my right knee was blown out now. And my insides we just destroyed. I remember I had to take a piss so bad I peed into a bottle and it looked just like tomato soup. Thick and red.

By this point it was snowing. It was starting to sock in. It was cold. Other people have frost bite issues from that day. Rick, the guy who led up the party to make the landing zone for the heli is still dealing with frostbite from that day.

That traverse out of Granite is James Bond skiing. I knew I wouldn't be able to make it out on a meat wagon behind a snow machine.

It was really frustrating sitting there, not knowing if the helicopter was coming in or not. They came down and got me on the backboard. They got me on a sled. And this is like an hour-and-a-half later. Just that whole procedure of getting me on the sled was... I thought I was going to die right there. They're still talking about dragging me out a couple of miles. Skiers taking me out, then snowmobiles taking me out from there.

I'm still screaming at the top of my lungs. It hurt. I had two blown knees and a broken femur, and I didn't even care about that stuff. It was my stomach. It was everything I could do to get a little breath in. I was on fire.

You think you can take pain. But I still think about what a bitch I must have been.

They had to call a guy, Ken Johnson, out of church. It was my luck that day that he happened to be on call. Cause no other pilot would have done that. Not leave the airport in zero vis. You can't even see the mountains at this point. He just left blind out of there. They flew towards Granite. They flew in there just looking at the ground.

Renny the Park Ranger, his gut feeling was that he needed to get the chopper in there. I can remember just hearing that

low muffle of the chopper just coming up the canyon. I knew I had a long way to go, but....

They load me up onto the sled. Ski me down a couple hundred feet to the LZ that they'd been working on for a couple hours. I thought I was going to die right there. There's no way I would have made it out any other way.

I remember looking out the windows and it was just full milk bowl. I mean you can't see a tree. Just dumping fog. And I saw Rene and I said, "Rene, it's me, Adam."

They couldn't land at the hospital. So they had to fly to the airport. And drive me in an ambulance. That was a bumpy ride. I remember begging for morphine. "I need the morphine, I need the morphine."

The last thing I remember is when they unloaded me out of the ambulance, and them opening and rushing through the hospital doors, and I blacked out for two weeks.

I'm probably out of the backcountry sport for a bit. To the extent that I was skiing lines that I was. I'll still ski powder. I don't think I'll be skiing the Grand Teton again any time soon. Maybe that will come back. I am gun shy. I just don't want to break like that again.

If you've been lost or injured in the backcountry, or had a close call or been caught in an avalanche, email [drew \[at\] holpublications \[dot\] com](mailto:drew[at]holpublications[dot]com) for the opportunity to share your story and educate others.

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