

Face Off

Contributed by Adam Howard

The last thing Sam Bass saw was a horizontal, dark striation eight feet up on a 10-inch aspen. Traveling at 30 miles-per-hour, he had just an instant to throw his left hand up, and hunch into a stable, crouched position. It was a posture he'd picked up as the face-off guy on his high school lacrosse team. This time, the move might have actually kept his face on.

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When he came to rest at the base of the tree, crumpled like a crash test dummy, Sam too had a dark striation just above his right eye. He'd also broken his right orbital floor (eye socket), three vertebrae in his back, and two bones in his hand. We were an hour from Nowheresville. Cell phone coverage? Forget it. But we did have two ski patrollers/guides with us packing radios, a toboggan, backboard, and even some oxygen in the snow cat waiting at the bottom of the pitch. That's right, we may have been deep in the backcountry, but we weren't backcountry skiing at all.

And maybe we were skiing differently as a result. Pushing each other harder. Skiing a little faster. Certainly we weren't worn out from the climb. But aside from having a little more grunt for the downs, what else is different about machine-supported skiing? Well the risk is smaller, plain and simple, because the apparatus is in place to deal with trauma. Had Sam been this hammered in true backcountry, things could have gone from crash test dummy to corpse in hours. And even with cat support, it was an hour before Life Flight dropped from the sky in the opening below our stand of aspens.

Sam was lucky, too—he was wearing a helmet. A loner from a friend, he put it on that day, "Just to try it out," he said. And Sam never wears a helmet in the backcountry—I know I don't. Or, at least, didn't before this happened. But this wreck reminds me of how fast fun can become fear, and even fatal. Sometimes, shit just happens. We do our best to stabilize and package Sam for the ride out.

As the pros load Sam into the sled, I look at the aspen one last time. That tree might have been the last thing Sam saw, ever. Luckily, he picked good ski partners—and you should, too. Because in the backcountry, the consequences are higher, and help is not just a patrol shack, or helicopter away.

-Adam Howard, Editor