

No More Skiing

A Rough Day

When I got up the morning of March 25, 2019, I couldn't have known that it would be the last time I enjoyed one of my favorite activities—downhill skiing. I had already skied five times that season, the most since my college days. One of those days was at Powderhorn Mountain Resort on the north slope of Grand Mesa near my home in Grand Junction, Colorado, when I experienced what was one of my best days of skiing ever. A couple of weeks later, that experience was topped at Telluride Ski Resort. It was a perfectly beautiful day and the snow couldn't have been better. In my mind, the views from the highest runs of the surrounding ranges of the San Juan Mountains are matchless. On that day it felt like my 51-year skiing career had reached its peak—everything was clicking on every run and I had never felt more confident. Even the steep slopes in Revelation Bowl seemed easy.

I had thought that my season was over on March 5. I had skied with a good friend of mine from work at Sunlight Mountain Resort near Glenwood Springs. We were on one of the longest beginning-level (green) slopes in the state (Ute Trail) near the end of the day when I got a little careless and had a spectacular fall. I was skiing at the extreme edge of the run when my left ski plunged downward in some untracked powder. I did a complete flip, and I was so aware of what was happening it was if it had occurred in slow motion. Thankfully, both skis released and I didn't feel any pain at the moment. I did one more run with my friend, by which time a knee and hamstring were a bit sore (they were fine within a few days).

That was the first fall I had experienced in a couple of decades. Even at 62 I was skiing as fast as I always had and usually felt very confident and in control on the slopes that I skied (I preferred groomed blue, double-blue, and black runs). However, I had joked for several years that if I ever fell while going full speed that I might not be able to get back up. I was glad I wasn't hurt from that fall but I was a bit rattled. Perhaps it was time to call it quits for the season despite increasingly good snow conditions across the state. After all, I had already had two of my best days ever.

I had officially retired at the end of November 2018, but was retained as a part-time employee on an as-needed basis. My company said that I could expect to work in that capacity for a couple more years if I wanted to. My job had been very stressful and had been impacting my health, which is why I retired earlier than I planned. As a semi-retired person, I looked forward to being able to ski more often than I was used to. Therefore, I decided to purchase a discounted Powderhorn season pass for the 2019/2020 season when it was offered in March 2019. One of the perks was that I could use it for the remainder of the 2019 season that went through the end of March, so I decided to go up one more time.

It was a Monday (which semi-retirement enabled me to do), and I was in the lift line before the lift started. Hardly anyone else was there, so I was behind one chair-load of skiers and no one was in line behind me. It was cold for late March, but with clear-blue skies and no wind the weather was perfect for skiing. Soon after I exited the lift, I could tell that the snow was perfect, too. We had had some good spring storms and cold weather. I was looking forward to a fabulous day.

The other skiers went their way and I went mine, so I was the only person on my slope (Bill's Run) with no one in sight behind me. Part way into the run, while at full speed, I glanced to the left thinking

that I might take an exit there for my next run. With my eyes off the slope in front of me, I lost my balance, perhaps catching an edge. I felt myself starting to fall. The next thing I remembered was another skier asking me if I needed any help. I found myself sitting on the slope, and my response was to ask where my skis were. He said that he had brought them down the slope and that they were behind me. I then said that I thought I was OK and he responded to say that he would hang around until I got going again.

The next thing I knew I was sitting at a table in the ski lodge. An employee asked me if I was OK, because she said that I had been sitting there for some time with my head down on my folded arms. That didn't make any sense to me—I thought I was just sitting there. I told her that I thought I had experienced a bad fall but couldn't remember for certain. She then called for a ski patrol person to check me over. While waiting for him, I wondered where my skis were. I walked outside and found them standing in the same slot in the same ski rack that I had placed them when I had arrived at the ski area. What scared me was that I had no memory of putting my skis back on after my fall, skiing the rest of the way down the slope, removing my skis, carrying them down a set of stairs, putting them in the rack, and entering the lodge.

The ski patrol person conducted what he confirmed later to be the ski area's concussion protocol. I had passed the test because I answered all the questions correctly (date, day, birthday, age, etc.) and that my eyes looked OK. He was still concerned, though, and offered to have someone drive me home. I said that I would let him know later, because I needed to rest a bit. After a while I went to the restroom, and that was the first time I noticed that I had a pretty good scrape and bruise on the left side of my chin. I also realized that the side of my face was swollen and sore. I had been wearing a helmet, but it was apparent that I had hit my chin instead of my head when I fell.

About 2 ½ hours after my fall, I decided I was able to drive home on my own. I went out to my car, ate my lunch, and then headed home. I was fully alert during the drive, stopping for a coke, and listening to music. However, when I was about 15 minutes from home, it occurred to me that I should probably pull over and call Linda because she would be home on her lunch break. She sounded worried and had suspected that something bad had happened to me. It was my habit when I went skiing, whether she was along or not, to send her a text message with a photo or two on one of my first runs. On this day, for the first time, I had left my phone in the car. Furthermore, it didn't even occur to me to call her until I was nearly home. That, on top of my memory loss, was starting to worry me.

Linda decided not to go back to work right away so that she could wait for me and see how I was doing. After an hour or so, we decided that I should call my doctor. As soon as the receptionist heard me say that I fell and had blacked out, she instructed me to go to the emergency room at the hospital. After a very frustrating 4-hour wait, I finally had a CAT scan that thankfully did not show any bleeding or other abnormalities in my brain.

Afterwards

Because of the length of time that I had lost consciousness and the subsequent memory loss, my doctor's diagnosis was that I had suffered a severe concussion. He warned me to avoid activities for a year that could expose me to head injuries, including skiing. That was a serious blow because I had been looking forward to skiing many times during the next season using my newly purchased annual pass. I

asked him to put it in writing and he wrote a letter for me on the spot. Thankfully, with that letter, Linda was able to get a full refund for my ski pass.

My doctor also said that it might take a full year for me to completely recover from my concussion. That prognosis seemed excessive, considering that I had suffered a concussion several years earlier in a car accident and had apparently fully recovered in less than two weeks. However, he told me that damages from concussions are cumulative, in that each concussion has a worse effect on the brain than the previous one, and that the recovery time is extended.

I definitely felt the effects of this concussion. I experienced headaches for a couple of months. Although I had to withdraw from an inspection trip for work that was scheduled to occur soon after my fall, I was able to resume my new-employee training activities that I had been conducting. I was teaching recently hired site managers how to manage their uranium tailings disposal sites, conduct annual site inspections, write reports for those inspections, and prepare and manage annual budgets. However, I tired easily and often found myself searching for the correct words to say and even forgetting procedures that I had written.

By June I was doing a full work load, and actually worked overtime through most of the summer. I think I did productive work, including conducting site inspections in several states, writing and reviewing reports, and developing and providing budget management training for my department. However, I was more fatigued than normal and struggled walking on rough terrain during site inspections. I realized later that I was suffering from depth perception problems related to my concussion, which caused me to be far more cautious than usual with each step I took. By the end of June, I decided that I needed to completely end my employment by the end of August (I wanted to fulfill scheduled commitments) instead of continuing on for another year as planned.

In September it was obvious that I still had a long way to go before fully recovering. I did not travel to visit my daughter in Alaska, scheduled for the end of August, partly because I had no confidence in making all the flight connections (I had done so a couple of times before without any problems). I also decided at that time that my skiing days had to be over. This was a very difficult decision because I had planned to ski well into my 70s. However, I knew that I couldn't risk another concussion doing something just for fun, and possibly damaging my brain beyond repair. To seal this decision, I sold all of my ski equipment so that I wouldn't be tempted to change my mind.

Reflection

Although I miss skiing—I still felt like I was 20 when on my skis—I don't have any regrets for deciding to quit. I had started skiing in January 1968 at the age of 11 while living in Fort Collins, Colorado. My parents had surprised me with a set of four ski lessons at a little family ski area called Hidden Valley in Rocky Mountain National Park, which was about 1 hour from our home (it no longer exists). I hated my first lesson (I struggled embarrassingly to get back up after falling down—several times) and told my mom that I wanted to quit. She refused to hear it because she had paid for four lessons and I was going to take four lessons! By the end of my fourth lesson, I begged my parents for another set of lessons. They agreed, and I didn't need any more lessons after that—I was hooked, learning quickly, and totally enjoying myself.

During my junior high and high school years I skied most of the Saturdays during ski season. I skied primarily at Hidden Valley, but occasionally took day trips with my family to Eldora, Loveland Basin, and Winter Park. I also traveled with my parents on occasional ski trips, where I was able to experience Steamboat, Breckenridge, and Crested Butte ski areas. We even skied at Telluride in 1972—its first year of operation. The next time I skied at Telluride was in 2012 during its 40-year anniversary.

My ski days dropped off dramatically during college (Colorado State University) due to school commitments and lack of money. However, I had some great days with a college friend at Keystone and Arapahoe Basin. We would leave early on a Saturday morning, be the first in the lift line, eat sandwiches during the lift rides, be the last skiers on the slopes at the end of the day, and then drive home. They were very long days, but we seemed to have endless energy then.

My skiing habits, and my life, changed dramatically after contracting a severe case of mononucleosis in February 1981. I was newly engaged to Linda and hoping to ski with her that winter, but I was too sick to ski that season. I never fully recovered from that illness, and I was later diagnosed with chronic Epstein-Barr virus, which is the mono virus. That diagnosis has since been lumped under the general diagnosis of *chronic fatigue syndrome*. I was highly susceptible to about every viral and bacterial infection going around, in addition to always being tired and having a constant side ache (probably resulting from an enlarged spleen during my original illness).

After 10 years or so, I found that I wasn't catching everything going around but I'm still always fatigued and still have a constant side ache. By the grace of God, I was able to finish my Master's thesis (though a year later than planned, while working full time) and I was able to successfully perform my work. However, due to frequent illnesses, I used up all of my annual sick leave and most or all of my vacation leave for sick leave every year for several years. I'm very thankful that my employer was understanding of my situation, even allowing me to use more leave than allotted some years, which took several years to completely make up.

Due to frequent illness, keeping up with my family and job responsibilities, and tight finances, I rarely skied during the 1980s and 90s. Sometime during the 2000s I started skiing a couple of times a year, mostly at Powderhorn but with occasional days at Copper Mountain and Ski Cooper with my daughter Karen, who was attending the University of Northern Colorado at the time (those were special days!). Beginning in 2012, I began skiing 3 – 4 times a year. Each year I would get a discounted ticket for Telluride at a local annual ski swap, and a couple of times I bought a discounted ticket for Crested Butte. I couldn't justify full-price tickets because I only had enough energy to safely ski for about 4 hours. I skied at Telluride twice in 2019, using my annual ticket for one trip and then a free ticket given to me by my staff as a retirement gift (I had the pleasure of managing an amazing staff during my last few years of work). It was during that second trip that I had such an incredible experience.

With all of that, I'm extremely thankful that I was able to enjoy downhill skiing over such a long period of time. It was very satisfying to end my skiing career with two of my best days ever. However, having experienced bad falls in two of my last three runs, both due to lapses of concentration, I knew that it would be foolish for me to risk another fall and potential concussion. Although I had thought that I was fully recovered a year after my fall, I no longer think so. I sometimes find myself struggling to remember things, process things, and form the right words in my head as I describe something or respond to someone. I get headaches for no apparent reason, and I still occasionally struggle with my depth perception. Additionally, I regretfully catch myself being impatient with situations and people,

including Linda (I'm trying to consciously avoid such responses). These are noticeable changes since my concussion.

I've had a chance to reflect on my head injuries over time. During my early days of skiing, I experienced a number of spectacular falls, suffering a couple of cracked ribs and a dislocated shoulder. No one wore a helmet in those days, and I recall several times hitting my head hard enough to where I "saw stars." I experienced the same thing a couple of times when the back of my head bounced off the court after some aggressive plays during intramural basketball games in high school and college. Looking back, I don't recall suffering actual concussion symptoms, but I was jostling my brain enough to see stars.

While driving back to work after my lunch break several years ago, I hit a pickup truck that ran through a stop sign. Both vehicles were totaled (I knocked the left rear wheel off of the truck) but, thankfully, no one in the truck was injured. However, I experienced my first confirmed concussion. To my knowledge, I didn't even hit my head on anything. However, the paramedic warned me to watch for concussion symptoms because I probably experienced a whiplash, which jostles the brain. I thought I was fine and Linda drove me back to work for the remainder of the afternoon. However, at about 9:00 the next morning, while at work, I started getting a bad headache and was dizzy and nauseous. I could no longer work and was unable to drive, so I had to be driven home. Linda had to drive me to work for the next week because I was unable to concentrate on driving. Within two weeks of the accident, I considered myself to be completely recovered and didn't think about it again until my fall at Powderhorn several years later.

Now, because of the severity of my most recent concussion, caused by landing on my chin and not hitting my head (I think of a boxer with a "glass chin" who is easily knocked out), I can't help but think that those early head traumas while skiing and playing basketball, and the previous concussion, truly had a cumulative detrimental effect on my brain. I'm very concerned about how another bump on my head (or chin), or even a whiplash, might affect me.

Closing Thoughts

I feel blessed by God. I had the opportunity to enjoy skiing for many years, something that many people don't have an opportunity or aren't able to do for various reasons. I'm thankful to my parents for getting me involved in skiing and supporting my habit for the next seven-plus years. It is hard to put into words the feelings I experienced while skiing, even up to the very last day. I wasn't considered to be a particularly athletic guy, but skiing was something I could do well—it was exhilarating and made me feel young again.

I loved the views wherever I skied—I truly enjoy the Colorado mountains! Telluride topped my list, however. I made it a point to get to the highest ridge trail—See Forever Run at the top of Gold Hill Lift—first thing in the morning (one time I was the first paying customer to get to the top, which involved riding three different lifts). I couldn't help but laugh the first time I did so and found a small sign pointing to a photo spot. It was good to know that other skiers appreciated the vistas as much as I did. I took photos from there and from many other locations during my visits.

Back to being blessed by God. Skiing is just a sport, so it isn't really important. However, I appreciated being able to ski, both physically and financially, and being able to enjoy God's incredible creation. I can't count the times while riding up a lift, or standing at the top of a run, or just stopping to take in the view, that I quietly thanked and praised God for His creation and for being able to enjoy it in such a fun way.

Occasionally I wonder why I suffered the concussion that ended my skiing career earlier than anticipated. I think the first thing that comes to mind is how much worse my fall could have been. I was skiing fast, which I normally did under full control, but my body is not as nimble as it used to be. Apparently, I tumbled a considerable distance. I'm thankful to God that I only bumped my chin. Perhaps God was teaching me something, which I believe He does through all sorts of means. I learned once again that our bodies are both amazing and frail, and that I need to be more cognizant of taking care of my body. That includes reducing unnecessary risks, like skiing where any fall could now be permanently debilitating. Since my retirement, I have become more physically active by working out regularly, riding my bike, and taking more walks and hikes.

More importantly, although I've been a Bible teacher for small groups since the late 1970s, I have had a renewed passion to do more Bible study and teach others what I've learned and what I'm learning. I guess that I want to use my time to the best advantage while I'm still able to do so. Consequently, after occasionally talking about the idea for a couple of years, Linda and I launched a website in the spring of 2020 that allows me to share my Bible studies with others.

Furthermore, because I realized how fragile life can be, I think I have a better appreciation for my family and friends. I think about them more often, and I try to communicate with them more regularly and spend more time with them. I'm thankful to God and my Lord Jesus Christ, and I'm enjoying life!

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. Let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:12-17)

Dick Johnson
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