



## AAC Publications

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### Long Fall and Epic Self-Rescue

Colorado, Elk Mountains, Pyramid Peak

**IN LATE MORNING on March 5, Ryan Montoya, 23, had nearly completed a solo winter ascent of 14,018-foot Pyramid Peak, near Aspen.** After spending the night at the foot of the peak and climbing the west face and northwest ridge (4th class), he was about 40 feet from the top at 11 a.m., in clouds, light snowfall, and no wind. As he moved toward the summit, he either slipped on a loose rock or fell through a small cornice, and in an instant he started falling down the east face, a legendary extreme ski run. Montoya tumbled at least 1,500 vertical feet over snow and rocks before coming to a stop in soft snow.

Montoya's pelvis was broken in three places and an elbow was partially dislocated. His helmet was shattered. He was still at least 2,500 feet above the valley floor and miles away from any regularly traveled trail or road. He had lost one glove, his headlamp, and both of his ice axes, and he'd left his sleeping bag in a snow cave on the other side of the mountain. He still had a small stove and fuel, a shovel, a plastic emergency bivy sack, warm clothes, a few chemical hand warmers, and some food and water.

After the fall, worried about avalanches, he slid and scooted down the rest of the east face to the valley, where he was able to stock up on water and dig a shallow cave to spend the night. Snowfall and high winds (approaching 100 mph at the height of Pyramid's summit) kept him in the cave until midafternoon the next day. When he emerged, Montoya found he had less pain in his hip and decided to try to walk down the valley. He slowly made progress and that evening spent another night in a small cave. The next day he continued walking, eventually covering about four miles through snow.

Montoya had been reported missing the night of his fall, but searchers focused on the west side of the mountain, where he had started. They found his snow cave and skis and feared he might have been caught in an avalanche. In late afternoon, however, Montoya reached the closed Maroon Creek Road and ran into some backcountry travelers, who quickly alerted Mountain Rescue Aspen. He made it to the hospital that evening. In addition to his injuries from the fall, Montoya had frostbite on the fingers of one hand, where his remaining glove had gotten wet.

### ANALYSIS

Though one could point to small errors of judgment that led up to Montoya's fall, his perseverance and aptitude after the accident were extraordinary. Montoya was an experienced, well-prepared, and remarkably tough mountaineer who largely self-rescued despite great adversity. He wrote a full account of this incident that can be found at [14ers.com](https://14ers.com). Also highly recommended is Montoya's interview with Ashley Saupe in episode 17 of the Sharp End Podcast (see link below), in which he describes the ordeal and the lessons learned in detail. (Sources: Ryan Montoya, [14ers.com](https://14ers.com), published accounts, and the Editors.)

## Images



Ryan Montoya fell over 1,500 feet down the east side of Pyramid Peak, then self-evacuated for two and a half days despite severe injuries.

**Article Details**

Author	Ryan Montoya and the Editors
Publication	ANAM
Volume	11
Issue	71
Page	64
Copyright Date	2018
Article Type	Accident reports