



AAC Publications

FALL ON SNOW – Inexperience, Exhaustion

Washington, North Cascades National Park, Sahale Mountain

On July 9, Eric Richtmyre (35) and Shiona Martin (23) summited Sahale Mountain and Boston Peak under clear skies. As they descended, Richtmyre was on a splitboard and Martin on skis. Martin, a mountaineering guide and former EMT, wrote ANAC, “After arriving back at camp, we packed our gear but kept skis/board on our feet. As we approached Cascade Pass on our descent, we decided to stay in our board/skis instead of following the summer trail in our boots. At around 6:30 p.m., we neared a steep knuckle and Eric, who was 30 feet below me, reported there were bushes and boulders blocking the way. We agreed to traverse through a gap in the trees, and I started moving that way. Then I heard him below, screaming for help.”

Richtmyre had fallen and injured himself in an unusual manner. Martin wrote, “Eric had taken off his board and lost traction when he stood up in his snowboard boots. He slid down the slope as his snowboard flipped end-over-end in front of him. He slid 15 feet, crossed a patch of slide alder and rocks, and then dropped another 15 feet directly toward a tree. His snowboard had caught in the tree and Eric struck the board, right between his legs. He fell another 20 feet before stopping in a tree well.

“Eric was almost passing out as I helped lower him onto a strip of dirt between a couple of rocks, where he could lie on his side. I assessed and found shallow abrasions on his backside and extremely inflamed testicles. They were already about the size of an orange. He was going to need a rescue, so I hit SOS on my Garmin inReach. It was about 7 p.m.”

Richtmyre complained of extreme pain and pressure around his testes as well as pain across his buttocks, numbness and tingling in his limbs, dizziness, nausea, mild respiratory struggle, and feeling very cold even underneath two sleeping bags. “He became increasingly pale as the inflammation became worse, and his voice became faint,” Martin reported. A climber, Will, who had followed their descent path, arrived on the scene and began to assist. Martin received an inReach message saying that a Navy helicopter was expected to arrive at 11:30 p.m. “Will dug a platform in the snow and laid out all of our pads/bags,” Martin wrote. “We carried Eric across the boulder field in the dark, which was significantly more difficult than anticipated.

“It was only 10:30 p.m. when the helicopter approached. The helicopter swooped directly over us, and a medic rappelled onto the boulder field. I was not prepared for the downwash. I threw myself over Eric to protect him as sleeping bags and pads were ripped from us, and I almost took a flying ski to the face. Once the medic was down, the helicopter left and we helped package Eric for transport.”

Richtmyre and the medic were short-hauled to a landing site and then loaded into the helicopter for the trip to a Level 1 trauma center. Exhausted and still seven miles from the road, Martin and Will decided to bivouac before hiking out. They had lost some of their gear and clothes in the helicopter downdraft and spent a cold, wet night sharing a single bivy sack.

At the hospital, Martin later learned, Richtmyre’s “bladder was almost at the bursting point, because he was unable to urinate. His urethra was misaligned, so they were unable to catheterize him; he underwent a urostomy. He also had a concussion. The most threatening injury, however, was an arterial bleed. Luckily the pressure from the inflammation in his scrotum kept the rate of hemorrhage down.” Emergency surgery was successful, and he did not sustain permanent injuries.

ANALYSIS

Looking back, Martin said, "I feel that my biggest mistake was not questioning Eric before the trip about what alpine touring experience he'd gained since I toured with him last. As it turns out, Sahale [was] only his third or fourth tour. If I had known what I know now, I would have been more conservative in my decision-making and more attentive to how he was doing.

"Eric did not sleep much during our first night on the mountain, so by the time of the incident, he was exhausted. In his sleep-deprived state, he made a questionable decision to take his board off. He tried to go up the slope with snowboard in hand, wearing snowboard boots without stiff edges. Eric also should have taken his ice axe off his pack and used it.

"Another mistake I made was with my inReach Mini. I had an active text subscription, but I did not connect it with the phone app, so I had to send all the messages through the device, requiring scrolling through the entire alphabet for each letter. This was extremely time-consuming and confusing, as I was receiving messages from both the emergency response center and SAR. All the chaos on the tiny screen led to several crucial messages being sent to the wrong thread, causing us to lose precious minutes.

"Finally, helicopter downdraft is a good thing to be aware of, especially on a steep slope or near crevasses or cliffs. In the chaos of the helicopter's early arrival, I did not recognize that our gear might be scattered and that I might spend another night on the mountain." (Source: Shiona Martin.)

Images



The view up the slope where a snowboarder fell after removing his board to traverse a steep slope. His board is wedged in the tree above.



When a snowboarder removed his board to traverse a steep snow slope during the descent from Sahale Mountain and Boston Peak, he slipped in his soft snowboarding boots and slid down an embankment. Along the way, he impacted the board, which had lodged in a tree. He sustained serious injuries.

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