

There's nothing more 'Extreme' than a Young & Brutal Death

Jim Stiles

I've never been a fan of extreme sports, especially when they use Nature as the venue. Even as a young man in my twenties, the idea of stunt climbing and extreme recreation didn't appeal to me. I am of the school of John Muir and Aldo Leopold and Edward Abbey. For me, these lands are special... sacred...and much more than something to climb up or jump from. And, more than anything, I don't like the rush of adrenalin that others hunger for. I prefer tranquility. All these years later, my attitude hasn't changed; if anything my lack of enthusiasm for extreme sports has grown, well, more extreme, for more reasons than you might imagine.

Consequently, to some, my antiquated attitude betrays the soul of an 'old timer.' I'm a fossil because I don't want to wear a neon green squirrel suit or leap from tall pinnacles and Interstate highway bridges. That's okay. As the wise man once said, I can live with that.

Over the years, I've penned a few stories about extreme sports and some of today's most visible exhibitionist/recreationists---those who seem to pursue not only the thrill of a dangerous and reckless 'sport' but the adulation and worship that comes with it. For instance, I could not resist commenting on Dean Potter, who illegally scaled Delicate Arch a few years ago and who has cultivated almost mythic status for his daredevil feats. His devotees were not pleased.

In the Zephyr comments section, one young climber named 'Seth' wrote: "People like you are the ones that turn it into an issue. Dean Potter has raised more awareness about nature and done more for the protection of our wildlife areas than an army of you idiots bitching on the internet will ever do, for eternity...It's this geriatric community of do-nothings that wants to sit by and look at rock that is getting butthurt (sic)." He continued: "It's so sad, watching you people grow old and bitter, wanting the government to regulate everyone's lives to suit your tastes."

Seth's friend 'Sarah' agreed. She told me, "...you have no business writing about rock climbing or its ethos, or otherwise raining judgments on something that is so clearly far from your daily desk job."

Well, that's not exactly right. While I may spend more time now than I'd like to behind this cursed keyboard, when I was Seth and Sarah's age, I was a search and rescue ranger at Arches National Park. For a decade, I sometimes risked life and limb, and often my patience, to rescue rock climbers from severe injury and death. I agree, it tainted my views on extreme sports.



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We once found a young man rimrocked above Landscape Arch. He couldn't move in any direction and was utterly terrified. Tourists heard his screams echoing down the canyon and contacted the rangers. We hauled our gear to the sandstone fin above him, and I descended to his location, hooked him into a harness and the other rangers pulled us back to the top. It wasn't even a vertical pitch, but he was frozen with fear.

But the moment he was safe and out of his harness, he made a fist and pumped his arm and screamed, "MAN! What a f**king rush!"

"Do you realize how close you just came to dying?" I asked.

"I can't help it, man," he exclaimed. "The rock is in my blood!"

My compadre Ranger Maki looked at him evenly and replied, "Keep this up and your

blood will be on the rock." He didn't get it.

Over the years we rescued dozens of would-be under-qualified and over-confident thrill seekers. Some didn't make it. One fell 125 feet to his death, trying to impress his girlfriend. His last words were, "Look how close to the edge I am." Incredibly he was still conscious when we found him, but he was white with fear and in agony. He died on his way to the hospital of complete cardio-pulmonary collapse..

Another young man, scaling a rock wall near Park Avenue was supposed to be belayed by his friend below. But the friend forgot to take up the slack. He fell 50 feet and almost instantly, his abdomen began to swell. We got the call and rushed him to the hospital where Dr. Mayberry performed emergency surgery. Mayberry called in every nurse and staffer he could find and actually removed the boy's intestines, all 23 feet. He strung them around the operating room and then inspected every inch of bowel. Finally he found a spot where the impact of the fall had telescoped and then collapsed the wall of the intestine upon itself. Nothing could pass through and so the young man was on the verge of literally exploding. Fortunately Doc Mayberry was there.

Still another died when he tried to free climb a wall near the Three Gossips. A miscalculation sent him over a 175 foot cliff. When his girlfriend found his body, he was unrecognizable. I'm sure the image haunted her dreams and her thoughts for years. It may still.

All this happened many years ago, and while the falls and mishaps were unsettling and sometimes tragic, they were relatively few and far between. Rock climbing was one of the rarest of activities. In my decade as a ranger, my time spent in searches and rescues was never as overwhelming as it must feel nowadays.



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In 2014, there are new and terrifying ways to maim and kill oneself that we never dreamed of 25 years ago. From BASE jumps to Corona Arch swing-throughs to Squirrel Suit flyovers, to highlining between sandstone pinnacles, the opportunities for high-risk, adrenalin-fueled, seemingly suicidal acrobatics have exploded across the canyon country and beyond, to everywhere there's an object or structure with enough altitude to jump from it. Of course, southeast Utah has a plethora of such places and so we can add these kinds of activities to its long "Capital" list. From "Uranium Capital" to "Mountain Bike Capital" to "BASE Jump Capital"...who knows what's next?

Extreme sports has become an industry. Once the realm of the few, for only those with the resources and the nerve and, yes, the skill to perform these kinds of feats, now it's a sub-culture for the many. The more affluent Gen-Xer's and Millennials, with the financial resources to pursue what was once a cost-prohibitive sport, have arrived in Moab en masse, to pursue their daredevil impulses.

The 2013 Grand County, Utah Search & Rescue statistics are mind-numbing. Clearly, people are coming to Moab in search of thrills, regardless of the risk.

But the number that no one can bear is the growing fatality list. By mid-2013, five young recreationists, all under 30, had died from climbing mishaps—from miscalculations and faulty gear. Utterly pointless. But more deaths were coming...

Later in the summer, a BASE jumper, Ammon McNeely, snapped one of his legs in half when his chute failed to deploy properly. He somehow managed to video the entire event and its inevitable gruesome outcome. The jumper survived and the video, of course, went viral. His friends and followers wished him well from the soulful depths

of facebook. Seeing a smiling photograph of McNeely and his partner, a fellow jumper wrote, "There is nothing cooler than having a girlfriend...who will jump off a building with you! Have fun dudes."

One of the first on scene to aid McNeely was his friend and fellow BASE enthusiast, Daniel Moore. A month later, Moore would be dead. On November 24, during a routine jump along the river road, he lost stability as he leapt from a ledge above the Colorado River and was seen flailing his arms wildly as he sought to recover. He reached for the chute release, missed, and tried again. The chute deployed but it was too late. Moore was dead on impact.

Moore died in front of his friend and mentor Andy "Sketchy Andy" Lewis. Lewis is an iconic figure to extreme recreationists around the world. I first heard of his highline stunts when he appeared with Madonna at the Super Bowl a couple years back. His notoriety and, to his followers, fame spread as quickly as a jumper chasing terminal velocity. Since then, Lewis has expanded his repertoire to include the most daring aspects of BASE jumping. And he has become a drawing card for Moab's exploding extreme sports community and the latest component in its ever-expanding tourist economy.

Sketchy Andy Lewis is extreme sports' mythic figure. But on the evening of Moore's sudden death, a devastated Lewis shared his feelings with his 5000 facebook followers:

"Daniel Moore, I cried for you over your lifeless body last night. Gasping through tears in the beautiful fresh snow, i left you on the talus, too upset to help your body down. AS your best friend, i still can't understand my weakness in the moment. I can't believe how much I loved you, how much you inspired me, and I will forever live differently in my day to day life trying to be more like you were. Always happy, always positive, always full of life, spirit, and stoke. As the car with your crying parents and absolutely crushed girlfriend rolled away at 7am this morning... I am only left with one question. Is this really worth it?"

"Is it really worth it?" Lewis posed the question that I wish more recreationists and the friends and families that love them would consider. Thanks to the social media, sharing grief and the loss of a loved one is becoming a universal experience in the 21st century. As the months passed last year and one fatal accident after another made its way to the headlines, it was possible to experience the horror and the grief, but also the rationalizations and the explanations and the justifications for the risks they pursued. Friends and lovers and mothers and brothers sought comfort in assuring themselves that they died, "doing what they loved." That their deaths exemplified their "free spirits." That to live more cautiously would be a denial of "who they really were."

The outpouring of support for Lewis after Moore's death on his facebook page was heartfelt but diverse. One young mourner wrote, "It was one f--king hell of an exit brudda! Footage can attest. RIP Daniel: His legend lives and loves on."

Another quoted Helen Keller who once observed, "Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding



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danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing."

And many others assured Lewis that, "he'd want us all to keep living life to the fullest" and wondered if "you or us (would) be the same person/people if we didn't push our life's limits."

But one father urged Sketchy Andy to heed his own warning. He pleaded, "This breaks my heart. I'm assuming an accident from some extreme sport. Andy, keep asking yourself the question, 'is it worth it?' Chasing adrenaline highs has the potential to lead us here. I fear daily that I'll get a call about my son needing to be picked up from the bottom of a canyon or from the morgue. Nothing, nothing will break a parent's heart more than the loss of a child. I pray for his family and you all, his friends. So sorry for this loss."

Finally one person said simply, "We are all here on borrowed time. Each moment is precious."

Exactly. Just how precious is that moment, leaping from a 1200 foot cliff, when suddenly everything goes terribly wrong and, as the ground comes up to meet you at over 100 miles per hour, you know this moment is your very last? Is it worth what you're about to lose?

Let me tell a story. When I was almost 20, like most young men of that age, I had no sense of my own mortality. Death was an abstraction. It's true, a few years earlier, I had

lost a cousin in an auto accident. JB wasn't wearing a seat belt and was thrown from the car. His body hit a stop sign and he died instantly. But we weren't that close and I didn't feel a great personal loss. It couldn't happen to me.

Then I quit school, sold my car, bought a Yamaha 350 2-stroke cycle and headed west from Kentucky. I'd even bought a red metal-flaked Bell helmet, not for safety concerns, but because I thought I looked so damn cool in it. Exactly four weeks after I left home, I was driving north on Broadway in Santa Maria, California at about 45 mph, looking for a place to eat. A southbound car suddenly turned left, in front of me. I didn't even have time to brake.

I plowed into his right front fender, sailed over the handlebars, hit something hard, then went flying through the air. I was doing horizontal cartwheels and was facing straight up at the early evening sky. I still recall the color of that sky. Two distinct



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thoughts crossed my mind: "I wonder how long I'll be up here?" And, "I hope I don't hit the stop sign."

I came down hard, more than eighty feet from my bike. I could see my mangled 350 under the wheels of the Buick. One kid, my age, got me a blanket and a classic gawking crowd began to form. Within minutes I heard the sirens. A cop pushed his way through the bystanders and stopped in his tracks when he saw me.

He shook his head and said, "Damn kid. You should thank god you're wearing that helmet. You shattered his windshield with your head. You should be a DOA right now."

That's exactly what he said. I ended up in surgery with a shattered leg and to this moment, right now, it hurts like hell. But I'm alive. And not because I was trying to be cautious or careful. But because of a red helmet that I thought might impress the girls. Dumb stupid luck. I got a second chance that I didn't deserve.

A gravestone caught my eye. On it was the name of a young man—he had been a young man when he died—who shared the same birthday as me. Same day, month and year... The grave looked neglected, as if no one had been to visit it in years.

Decades later, I was wandering through a remote cemetery in a little village in Western Australia. A gravestone caught my eye. On it was the name of a young man—he had been a young man when he died—who shared the same birthday as me. Same day, month and year. He had died at 23, just a few years after my own near-miss. How he died, I couldn't say. The grave looked neglected, as if no one had been to visit it in years. Decades had passed since his passing, other lives had moved on, memories had faded. The connection was lost, as it must be lost if we are to survive these kinds of tragedies.

And it made me reflect on my own life and that moment so long ago, at the junction of Broadway and Williams in Santa Maria. I thought of the future I almost missed, of friendships never made and heartbreaks never endured and memories never created. I thought of the stories I would never hear or be able to share. I thought of sunsets never seen and popcorn never consumed and journeys never made and epiphanies never discovered and computer glitches and flat tires never cursed over, and failures never pondered And I thought of a soulmate I would never have found.

So, is it 'worth it' to give up a life? *Your own life?* So soon?

Your choice...your call. But for me, I'm so damn grateful I got to stick around.

WHY READ THE ZEPHYR?

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be... The people cannot be safe without information. Where the press is free and every man able to read, All is safe."

Thomas Jefferson