

# Why good skiers do dangerous things

By Gordy Megroz, Skiing

It was April 19, 2011, and Ian McIntosh, then a 29-year-old skier from Pemberton, B.C., felt invincible. His confidence had been building as he conquered steep Alaskan faces while shooting scenes for Teton Gravity Research's One for the Road. Each run he took was more treacherous than the last.

And so it went until McIntosh decided to ski a line he had initially eschewed as too hairy. He even skipped inspecting the line from aboard the film crew's helicopter, a precautionary step he normally took.

As McIntosh approached the rollover, he realized he wasn't moving fast enough to air beyond the huge field of jagged rocks below. He hit hard, lost balance, and cartwheeled 400 yards. By the end he was alive, but he'd torn the labrum in his hip, broken his left femur, shredded his quad muscle, and torn his meniscus.

"We use fear to judge what is safe and what isn't," he says today, still rehabbing from all his injuries. "My mistake was getting complacent and forgetting about the risks."

These days, McIntosh isn't the only skier making that mistake. Across the sport, top athletes are ending up maimed and worse. A number of stars have died in high-risk circumstances – Shane McConkey, Doug Coombs, Billy Poole, Ryan Hawks, Arne Backstrom, Jamie Pierre, Kip Garre, and more. All the carnage has some wondering why so many experienced skiers are taking such extraordinary risks.

"Nobody wants to die," says Robb Gaffney, a Squaw Valley psychiatrist and veteran big-mountain skier. "But people have

ways of convincing themselves that what they're doing isn't that dangerous. They'll come away from a few dangerous situations successfully and begin to identify as the guy who takes risks and can conquer them."

But it's not just hubris that's getting skiers into trouble.

Last season, 12 experienced skiers trekked into the backcountry near Stevens Pass, Wash. Despite considerable avalanche danger, a few felt the terrain would be safe to ski. They rationalized that they'd skied it many times before in similar conditions without incident. Then a massive slide broke loose, killing three.

"The data shows that familiarity appears to create tolerance for high avalanche conditions," says Ian McCammon, a Utah-based avalanche researcher and educator. "People think there's a risk reduction because they know the terrain so well. But the snowpack is always different."

Equipment designed to make the backcountry safer may also play a role. Pro skier Elyse Saugstad was caught in the slide. She survived by deploying an air-bag backpack. But Gaffney warns against the bloated sense of security that gear can provide.

"It remains to be seen if the air bag will actually save more lives or drive people into more dangerous situations."

Then there's ski-porn, now easily accessible via mouse-click or iPhone.

"In the past, two or three guys went out did a few tricks and that was it," says Gaffney. "Now they go home and put a video of those tricks on Facebook. Other guys see that and try to outdo those tricks. There's an instinctual drive to push things to the next level."

Riley Bergseng, 27, was trying to find that next level while competing in the Freeskiing World Tour in Kirkwood last

season. Instead, he cartwheeled through rocks and tumbled over a 30-foot cliff, tearing ligaments in his knee and nearly losing his leg.

“I wouldn’t have normally skied that line,” he says. “I pushed myself because it was being broadcast, there was a big crowd, and I wanted to win.”

Still, Bergseng says he’ll be right back out there next winter. “My mom asks, ‘Why are you doing this?’ Because I love it,” he says. “There’s no better feeling than flying over a gap.”

Ian McIntosh has a similar perspective. “That accident isn’t gonna hold me back,” he says. “What brings me joy is risk taking. It makes me feel more alive than I ever have before. I crave it. I need it in my life or I become depressed.”

If that sounds like an addiction, well, it is. “For risk takers, doing crazy things is an experience not unlike taking a drug in the sense that it involves a dopamine high,” says Tom Schonberg, a neuroscientist at the University of Texas.

Adds Gaffney: “The feelings described by somebody who regularly skis off cliffs are the same feelings described by drug addicts that I treat.”

But there’s something else going on in the brains of risk takers, and it may be the most compelling explanation for the uptick in mountaintop audacity. Several recent laboratory studies show that the brains of risk takers function differently from the brains of more cautious people.

“In risk takers,” says Schonberg, “the region of their brain that responds to value or reward becomes more active with increasing risks, whereas the self-control regions of their brain are not active enough to suppress the pursuit of greater risks.”

Given that skier numbers have risen sharply in the past 20 years, it just may be that more people biologically predisposed to taking risks are skiing.

For those people, can the urge to go big in dangerous situations be controlled? Julian Carr, the man most famous for hucking a front flip off a 210-foot cliff in 2006, believes it can. Carr says he has the ability to make rational decisions about the risks he's about to take.

"I go through a checklist," he says. "Do I have the skill set to do this? Are the conditions right? If something is off, I'll walk away. That's only happened once, at the Gargoyles near Alta. All my friends hugged me. I think it was because they were happy to know I had the ability to say no."

But Gaffney sees Carr's calculated approach as an anomaly within the sport.

"My prediction is that we will see an increase in the rate of deaths and injuries," he says. "I can't say comfortably that we won't."