

Don't Brace Yourself To Fall

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In my senior year of college, a couple of buddies and I had ski fever. The nearest legitimate ski resort was about six hours away, but we were dedicated to packing up my friend's truck and heading out for the weekend.

I had been an avid skier since I was 13 years old and felt comfortable on all types of terrain. This trip was going to be a little different, though—it was going to be my first attempt to snowboard. Both guys I was going with just had bought new snowboards during the off-season and were chomping at the bit to get some time on the slopes. They were fairly new to the sport, so I figured my skiing experience quickly would catch me up to their speed.

Our trip started uneventful. We left after class on Friday afternoon and hoped to make it to my one friend's family cabin about 10 o'clock that night. We planned to get a good night's sleep and be on the slopes for first snow.

When the sun came up the next morning, we awoke eager to get started. It's hard to harness the anticipation of that first run in the morning. On the way to the slopes, we stopped at a local rental shop to rent my snowboard and some other odds and ends for the day. The rental process was typical: After signing a lot of liability paperwork and getting a quick fitting, we were out the door. While I was being fitted, I had asked the worker his best advice for beginning snowboarders.

He replied, "When you fall down, don't brace yourself with your arm. Try to fall on your butt, your side, or your elbow." He went on to explain that the most common injury for beginning snowboarders is bracing with their arm when they fall and hurting their wrist. I listened carefully because I knew, with finals and a long Christmas vacation coming up, the last thing I needed was a broken wrist.

Minutes after getting to the slopes, we had our lift tickets and were ready to go down. My friends told me I might want to take a quick lesson before starting down, but I said I didn't need one. After all, I had been on the slopes for the past eight years with no problems.

I must have fallen 30 times during my first run. It turned out that snowboarding wasn't as easy as it looked—it certainly wasn't anything like skiing. With that humbling experience, I told my buddies I didn't want to hold them up any longer. I then headed to a bunny hill to conquer this sport. It took about an hour and a half, but I finally got to where I could go down the hill without falling. It was time for something bigger.

I caught up with my friends, and we worked our way to the top of the mountain. They had found a couple of nice runs that weren't too difficult and would be good practice for me. After two runs, I finally was feeling somewhat comfortable and was getting a bit more adventurous. "This time, I'm going to hit one of the steeper hills," I told them.

It was a great run all the way down. I really was starting to carve and understand how to control the snowboard. The last part of the run was the steepest hill I'd seen, but it ended at the lift to take me back to the top. I figured I just would point the nose of the board and ride it straight to the lift. All was good until Wham!—the next thing I knew, I was on the ground, sliding down the mountain on my face. I had caught the edge of my board and had done a face plant right into an icy section of the hill.

I quickly regained my composure (and pride) and tried to push myself up to finish the rest of the ride. However, I realized my right wrist was hurting badly and couldn't take any pressure at all. After getting back to the lodge, I rested a little, while my two



friends continued their fun on the slopes. I eventually made it back to the slopes but never felt comfortable with my wrist.

We packed up the truck and headed back to school the next day. On the way, I noticed my wrist getting bigger. When we arrived, I went to the campus medical and had my wrist checked. The doctor confirmed my suspicions: My wrist was broken. I spent the next eight weeks with a cast on my arm up to my elbow. Because it was my right hand, I had to make special arrangements for all my finals that semester. My chances of doing anything too active on Christmas break also were ruined. The broken wrist didn't hurt too bad, but it created more stress for an already stressful part of the year.

I learned three lessons from that experience. First, you never should be too confident when trying out a new physical activity. Humble yourself, and it will allow you to be safe, to learn how to do it correctly, and to have fun at the same time. Second, listen to the advice of people with regard to safety. I knew that falling down and bracing myself could

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put me in danger of hurting my wrist, but I didn't concentrate hard enough on that risk. Last, don't bite off more than you can chew when dealing with a new activity. I wasn't ready for steep slopes and advanced terrain, but I tried it anyway—putting myself and other skiers at risk. From now on, I'll play it conservatively when I try something different. ■

The author was assigned to VAW-117 when he wrote this story.