DOUBLE JEOPARDY

TWO HARROWING TALES OF WINTER PERIL

by DANIEL SPADA and MICK TARSEL

FALLING THROUGH ICE

BY DANIEL SPADA

JANUARY 3, 2015, WAS A FANTASTIC ICE DAY ON LAKE CHAMPLAIN. SEVEN OF US, ALL VETERAN WILD-ICE SKATERS, PUT IN AT LAMPHAM BAY FISHING ACCESS JUST SOUTH OF ADDISON, VERMONT. We skated north on ice that was incredibly smooth and averaged around three to four inches thick—plenty thick enough to support our weight. There were plates of thinner ice that we were able to detect by using ice poles; we avoided these places by taking our skates off and walking across narrow points of land or along the shoreline.

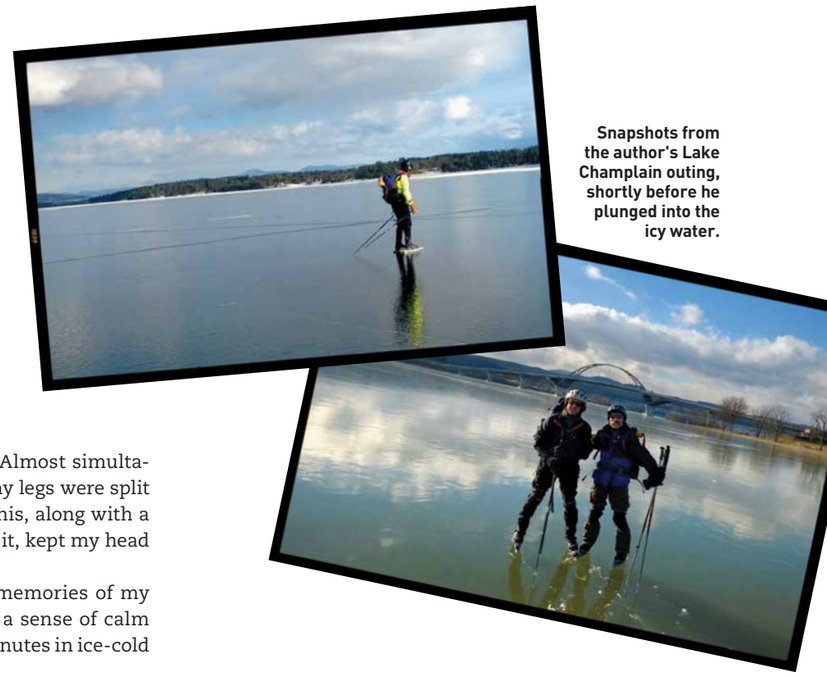
We made it to the McCuen Slang Fishing Access site and halted for lunch on shore. One of our company decided to turn back due to afternoon appointments. The rest of us skated farther north to the Crown Point bridge for a one-way total of about seven miles. (On Nordic skates it's easy to pile up the distance; my personal high is 27 miles in one day with a New York to Vermont to New York crossing. I know others have skated well over 30 miles in a day.) We turned back after tourist photos with the bridge and the Adirondacks in the background.

As we skated south, a north wind pushed us from behind so we had quite a bit of speed. I was on the lake side of my friend as we approached a point of land.

Suddenly, in my left periphery, I saw him break through. I veered out and away from him toward the center of the lake. Almost simultaneously I broke through too. As I fell in, my legs were split and I spread my arms to break my fall. This, along with a pack on my back with a sealed dry bag in it, kept my head above water.

I knew I wasn't going to die because memories of my life didn't flash before my eyes. Instead, a sense of calm covered me like a blanket. In those few minutes in ice-cold water, I felt the cliché of having time and movement slow down, and I saw all my actions as if my consciousness were separated from my physical self. I focused totally on what I needed to do to get myself out of this wet hole in the ice.

I threw my ice poles toward shore because I didn't want to lose them. Then I grabbed my ice claws, which were attached to my chest on a rope, and dog-paddled to the fresh ice edge. I realized that I had to turn around and get back to the ice that I had come from; the edge ahead was too thin. I made my way back to thicker ice and attempted to pull myself up by kicking my feet and hand-over-handing with the ice claws. The first attempt failed as the ice collapsed under me. I gnawed my way closer to the ice sheet and clawed again. This time the ice held and I was able to pull myself onto the ice and claw my way to shore. Once there, I unclipped my one remaining skate and walked onto



Snapshots from the author's Lake Champlain outing, shortly before he plunged into the icy water.

CRACKED ICE PHOTOGRAPH FROM ISTOCK. LAKE CHAMPLAIN SKATING PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF DANIEL SPADA

Get in **Gear:**

If you're on the Cascade Lakes and you've got 18 to 20 inches of ice, or on Lake Placid's Mirror Lake on the groomed track, most safety equipment is unnecessary. However, on wild or thinner ice, always carry safety equipment and know how to use it. This includes:

ICE CLAWS
My daughter got me a pair with holders that put them in reach on my chest. When I fell through the ice, my gloves were soaked and slippery, and I couldn't grasp a pole my friend extended to me, so the claws were essential.

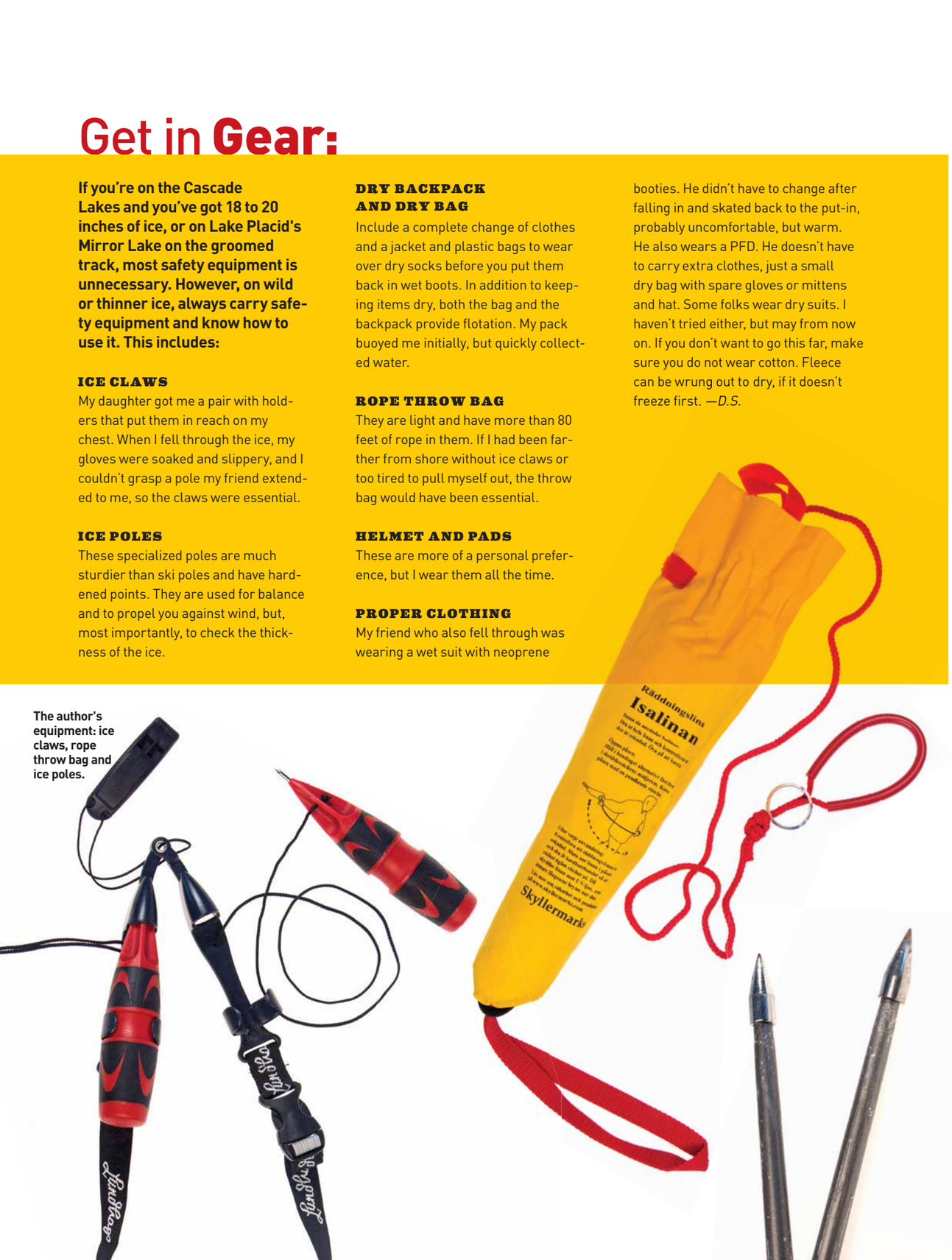
ICE POLES
These specialized poles are much sturdier than ski poles and have hardened points. They are used for balance and to propel you against wind, but, most importantly, to check the thickness of the ice.

DRY BACKPACK AND DRY BAG
Include a complete change of clothes and a jacket and plastic bags to wear over dry socks before you put them back in wet boots. In addition to keeping items dry, both the bag and the backpack provide flotation. My pack buoyed me initially, but quickly collected water.

ROPE THROW BAG
They are light and have more than 80 feet of rope in them. If I had been farther from shore without ice claws or too tired to pull myself out, the throw bag would have been essential.

HELMET AND PADS
These are more of a personal preference, but I wear them all the time.

PROPER CLOTHING
My friend who also fell through was wearing a wet suit with neoprene booties. He didn't have to change after falling in and skated back to the put-in, probably uncomfortable, but warm. He also wears a PFD. He doesn't have to carry extra clothes, just a small dry bag with spare gloves or mittens and hat. Some folks wear dry suits. I haven't tried either, but may from now on. If you don't want to go this far, make sure you do not wear cotton. Fleece can be wrung out to dry, if it doesn't freeze first. *—D.S.*



The author's equipment: ice claws, rope throw bag and ice poles.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF DANIEL SPADA'S GEAR BY MATT PAUL. ILLUSTRATION FROM ISTOCK

land. My friend who had also fallen through the ice used a similar technique to free himself. He and the others ushered me to a sheltered spot and I stripped down. The dry bag in my pack contained a set of dry clothes. Within 10 minutes I was dry and warming quickly. Because I lost a skate I began to walk the road back to the put-in while my friends skated ahead and met me with a warmed vehicle.

HOW DID IT HAPPEN that two experienced wild-ice skaters fell through the ice? What mistakes did we make? First, we were tired and it was late in the day. Our focus, which had been laser sharp, was slipping as we looked forward to getting back to the cars rather than looking for potential hazards. We had detected and avoided thin ice all day in situations just like this where a small point of land jutted into the lake, causing more water movement and, consequently, thin ice.

FROM THE POINT OF IMMERSION YOU HAVE ABOUT 10 MINUTES TO GET YOURSELF OUT BEFORE THE FRIGID WATER SAPS TOO MUCH OF YOUR ENERGY.

Second, we were going too fast. As we skated, we poked the ice in front of us with our ice poles. This is an excellent way to judge whether ice is too thin. As a rule of thumb, if you can't go through the ice on three pokes it's safe; two pokes and you should slow down and consider finding a new route; one poke and you should do an immediate about-face, going back the way you came. However, you can overrun this system by going too fast just like you can overrun the effective view provided by your headlights.

Third, we allowed our friend to turn back unaccompanied—probably the most dangerous thing we did all day. If our friend had fallen through on the way back and hadn't been able to extricate himself we might never have known until we got back to the cars. In my opinion, two skaters is the minimum party size for wild-ice adventuring. Three skaters is preferable.

After all this, was it worth it? For me the answer is absolutely yes. There is little to compare to being pushed downwind on glassy, black ice on a cold, Adirondack bluebird day. Falling through ice may be scary and uncomfortable, but it does not have to result in death. Being properly prepared physically and mentally reduces the risk to acceptable levels. It is often on that fringe of adventure that I feel most alive.

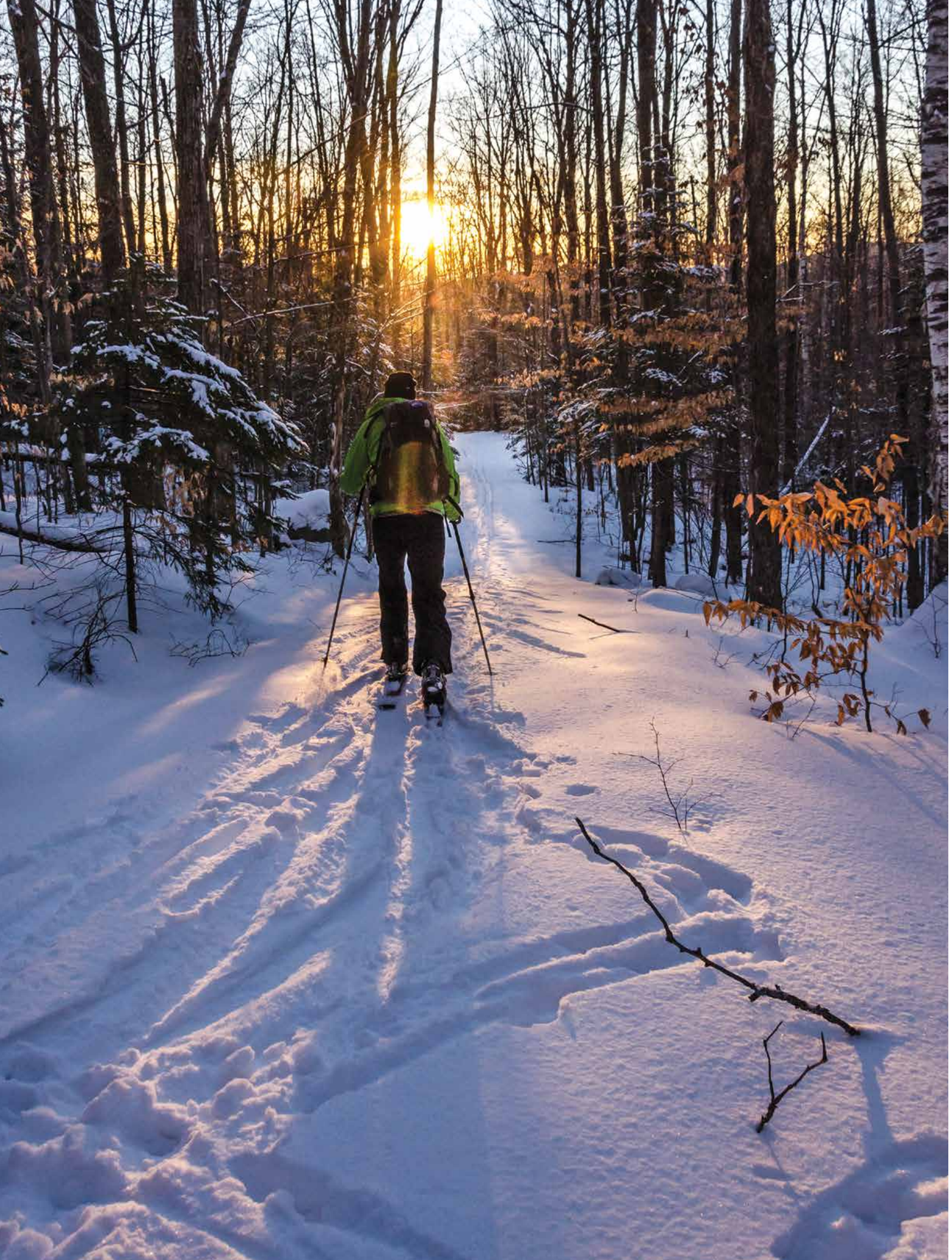
One Weird Survival Trick

Visualization is probably the most important thing you can do to enhance your safety. When I fell in, I did not panic—I knew how to use my safety equipment and how much time I had. This was all because I have watched Dr. Gordon Geisbrecht's cold-water escape videos many times and visualized in my own mind what I would do if I fell in. Geisbrecht is a physiologist and the director of the Laboratory for Exercise and Environmental Medicine at the University of Manitoba.

According to Geisbrecht, the initial gasp as your body feels the cold water is the most dangerous point in an immersion. If you gasp under water, you will drown. You must hold your breath if you go under and then work to control it when you emerge. From the point of immersion you have about 10 minutes to get yourself out before the frigid water saps so much of your energy that you won't be able to extricate yourself.

If you are unable to pull yourself out, you should devote your efforts to freezing your coat sleeves (or even your beard!) to the ice. You still have another hour or so before your core temperature drops to the point where you will die. If you can freeze yourself to the ice so that you don't slip back into the water if you lose consciousness, others may be able to retrieve and revive you in time. It's your best chance of survival.

Go to lakeice.squarespace.com for videos, more on safety devices and their uses, and fascinating information regarding ice types and formation. *—D.S.*



JACKRABBIT TRAIL PHOTOGRAPH BY BRENDAN WILTSE

CROSS-COUNTRY CONCUSSION

BY MICK TARSEL

I SKIED AS A KID BUT LOST TOUCH DURING HIGH SCHOOL. LAST WINTER, WHEN I WAS A SENIOR AT CLARKSON UNIVERSITY, IT WAS A TREAT TO GET OUTSIDE ON MY ALPINE TOURING SKIS.

One Tuesday early last April, I mapped out a route that started from Whiteface Inn Lane in Lake Placid, went over Little John and Big Burn Mountains, and intersected a hiking trail going to Mount Haystack. I would then get on the Jackrabbit Trail heading back to Saranac Lake.

It was a sunny afternoon with no wind. It was warm and there were about two inches of snow at low elevations. Once I skied up about 1,000 feet, the snow was up to my waist. I put my skins on and headed over Little John Mountain. At the top, I took my skins off, locked my heels into the bindings and skied down the other side. I tried to gain some momentum for the next uphill. At the top, the trail ended, and it appeared the person whose tracks I was following had turned around. I decided to go a little farther despite the very thick brush.

I saw several bobcat tracks. As I continued, the tracks became more frequent. I looked behind me and saw fresh tracks right on the ski trail I had just created. I was not at Mount Haystack yet and was approaching my turnaround time. From the top of Haystack it would take me less than 30 minutes to ski home, even though it had taken me nearly five hours to ski up. I decided to head back to Lake Placid and ski the familiar Jackrabbit Trail home rather than continue through the brush.

I reached Lake Placid and prepared for the downhill run that would take me to the Jackrabbit Trail. I must have skied this small mountain more than a dozen times. There was a straightaway leading to a nice little jump I knew I was comfortable with. I pointed my skis straight at it.

I was flying downhill on a very narrow path. Right as I was about to launch off the ramp, I looked down and realized my ski had malfunctioned and my left heel was freely moving instead of locked. It was too late to stop. I tried not to lean forward too much but the ramp launched me very high. In the tuck position my toes were slightly pointed down and this made my left ski swing uncontrollably. When I landed, the tip of my left ski dug very deeply into the snow and stopped my forward momentum. My body was slammed to the snow-covered ground.

I couldn't breathe. I gasped for air but my lungs felt empty. I laid my head back slowly and prayed.

I THOUGHT ABOUT WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED IF I HAD ALLOWED MYSELF TO LIE THERE ON THE MOUNTAIN. THAT NIGHT THE TEMPERATURE DROPPED BELOW FREEZING. I DID NOT HAVE THE APPROPRIATE GEAR TO SURVIVE THE NIGHT.

MY EYES OPENED sometime later. I had no idea what I was doing or where I was. I was exhausted and dizzy and I really wanted to sleep. At the same time, my mind was racing: Did I break a rib? Are my wrists broken? How long have I been lying here? Would someone look for me? Something in the back of my mind knew I couldn't close my eyes because I would fall asleep and maybe not wake up again.

I was already getting cold lying in the melting snow. The sun was setting and I had to make the nine-mile ski back to Saranac Lake. I needed to make a decision.

I tried standing up but became extremely dizzy. Immediately I fell down. I yelled to myself, "Come on, Mick, you're not a wimp. You can do this." I tried again to stand up and fell down even harder. I pulled my cell phone out but there was no service. I knew there was no one around—I hadn't seen any other tracks besides the ones I had made. My stomach sank and my eyes watered up. I was completely screwed.

I tried to stand one more time and take a deep breath. *Finally.* I got my breath back after what seemed like hours. I patted down my chest, doing a thorough inspection. Luckily, I felt no severe pain and no bones poking out. No broken ribs.

One of my ski poles was badly bent. I checked my phone and confirmed I had been on the ground for roughly 45 minutes. The thought of skiing back to Saranac Lake made me want to throw up. There were no other options. I leaned heavily on my weak poles—I could barely stand.

I gazed at the trail ahead of me and began skiing. "Come on, Mick. You're not going to stay out here all night. You can do this." I kept talking to myself to *(Continued on page 55)*

DOUBLE JEOPARDY

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stay motivated, to just get up the hills. "Keep skiing up the next one, get up this hill, Mick. Keep going."

I reached a small dam with old ski tracks going over very thin snow. Fast running water spewed over the dam. I had to cross. The river appeared to be about 50 feet wide. I could turn around and add at least an hour to my ski time or cross this river and be on the Jackrabbit Trail in less than 30 minutes. I began skiing over the ice as fast as I could, hearing the cracks below my boots. My body ached. I began shouting at myself, "Move! Move! Keep going!" Eventually I made it to the other side and saw the Jackrabbit Trail. Finally, I was on an official trail and could get help. I felt like I had made it.

To my surprise, there was no one around. There were no fresh tracks. I had to ski the rest of the way to Saranac Lake. I knew I would have cell phone service once I gained more elevation, but at that point I could easily ski downhill home.

I was all over the trail and fell several times. The snow was very thin. I now knew why no one else was on the trail. I was very weak and tired. At some points I had to take my skis off because there was zero snow. About three to four hours after my accident, I finally reached Saranac Lake in the dark.

I thought about what could have happened if I had allowed myself to lie there on the mountain. It had seemed so easy at the time to just close my eyes. That night the temperature dropped below freezing. I did not have the appropriate gear to survive the night.

The next day I went to the hospital and got a CT scan. I had no broken bones or blood clots—just a severe concussion.

I learned my lesson—always go skiing with somebody else, but more importantly, stay motivated. Something in my head told me to keep going even though everything in my body told me to stay.

If I had closed my eyes and passed out in the snow, perhaps I wouldn't be telling this story today.