

# Broken & Blue

The incredibly destructible man copes with the five stages of mountain injury grief

By Thomas Chalmers



**DAVE HAD ALREADY HEALED FROM NUMEROUS CHILDHOOD SPORTS INJURIES: A SHOULDER SEPARATION, TORN KNEE LIGAMENTS, AND FRACTURES TO ONE ARM, ONE HAND, FOUR FINGERS, TWO RIBS, TWO TOES, ONE EYE SOCKET, ONE LEG, AND THREE CHUNKS OF TAILBONE.**

## Stage One: DENIAL

It is 1994, and at the tender age of 17, Dave Burns is having a profound initiation into the first stage of grieving for his broken corporeal existence. His brain blacked out when he slipped skiing down an icy Nova Scotian run, and now, woozy from anaesthetic, he cannot comprehend that the three metal plates and 21 screws freshly fastened onto his abjectly smashed cheek, hand, and heel make for a poor prognosis. Denial of

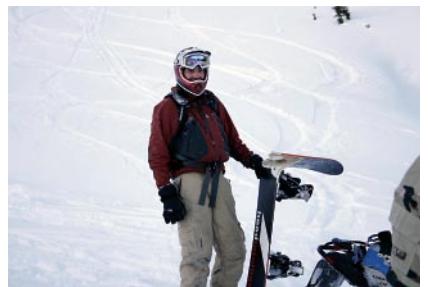


Jaws wired shut

over the next two months, at his blender, for turning his beloved meat and potatoes into textureless mush that just plain sucks through a straw. Nonetheless, sporting a new full-faced helmet, Dave is back on boards within two weeks of discharge, though he will never be able to properly bite through the onions on a cheeseburger again.

## Stage Three: BARGAINING

In 2005, Dave Burns is co-owner of Golden, British Columbia's Dogtooth Log and Timber Products and a successful craftsman of wood furniture. With merely a broken collarbone in four years, due to downhill biking, life is a cruise until another ski crash at Lake Louise totally crushes his good heel. In the Banff ER, he bargains with grief. "I'm still a young man," he thinks. "I've got a lot of fun years ahead, just let me bounce back from this. Just one more chance." When Dr. Mark Heard walks in sporting his



## Stage Two: ANGER

Seven years later in 2001, with an additional broken collarbone, some dislocated fingers, three cracked ribs, a fractured foot, and a degree in physics and biology, Dave has met his goals, now two years into teaching skiing



scrubs, Dave swears a voice answers his call: "Gentlemen, we can rebuild him. We have the technology. We have the capability. Dave will be better than he was before. Better, stronger, faster." Maybe it's the high-test haze of opiates talking, but Dave is stoked nonetheless.

Backed by the Banff Sport Medicine Clinic's reputation as having the best, most innovative mechanics in the broken-body

and snowboarding at Alberta's Lake Louise, soaring through mountain freedom. That is, until an over-spun 720 in a bulletproof Rockies terrain park plows his cakehole into the next stage of grief from twenty feet up. After an emergency stay in the Calgary hospital to have a few more facial screws installed and a wire to hold his jaw shut, he seethes with anger: first at himself for pushing a new trick too big too soon, then,



business, Dr. Heard performs 700 to 800 orthopedic surgeries a year, with the highest percentage of patients — and the most severe cases — coming from resort alpine skiing and snowboarding injuries. Dave's present trauma is a bit abnormal, as skiers mostly show up with blown knee ligaments (snowboarders and mountain bikers typically have upper-extremity fractures), which, along with mid-bone fractures, generally have the best shot at full recovery. Still, as Dr. Heard performs a signature procedure, replacing the gravelly remains of Dave's heel with a five-inch steel spike driven into the lower leg, the good doctor states that ongoing improvements in



Gross!

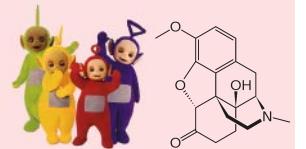
arthroscopic surgery and fracture management mean historically high odds for active, zesty hedonism in post-wipeout life. For Dave, that first requires 14 weeks of dreadful crutching boredom, but, with a little old-school inspiration, he soon nimbly thumps around his shop on a stylish new peg leg he designs.

#### Stage Four: DEPRESSION

Waking up in the scorching flatlands of Saskabut with a hangover and a pair of freshly cracked ribs is a bummer for any mountain man, but it weakens Dave's resolve enough for the black dog of depression to close in and bite down. Two summers past, during a full-suspension glide down a bunny line on Golden's Mount 7, he went over the bars of his bike and snapped both left forearm bones. Last summer, same mountain, different bunny, other arm. Now 2009 has brought falling off the dock at a wedding, pissing blood, and hurting when



#### A CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO PAINKILLING



By Dave Burns

**"I have avoided many symptoms of shock by joking and laughing during the cruise to the hospital. To that end, a little bit of nitrous oxide goes a long way."**

**"When admitted, I get pharmaceutically choosy. The typical shot of morphine is kinda mellow, given regular dosing, but I feel that an upgrade makes things go better for everyone in the ER. Demerol is strong but steals my ability to communicate. With the proper cocktail, I'm ready to deal a hand of cards with a bent-noodle forearm, tell the funniest stories ever, then grab a pleasant nap on a fluffy cloud until I get fixed up."**

**"Post-discharge T3s don't work for me. A little prescription jar of brand-name oxycontin gives me all the rest and relaxation needed for a full recovery, and I am careful to stop taking them when I heat up. Not for recreational use!"**

**"Being busted is a bummer, so staying positive is crucial. I like to take the high road and make the best of it."**

Heel be back. Dave built himself a beauty leg brace after smashing his heel to bits. The woodworker owns and operates Golden's Dogtooth Log and Timber Products — and yes, that's an advertisement for the company in the peg leg's nether regions.



he laughs — this is so not funny anymore. Godforsaken bogus bullshit. Sure, Evel Knievel had over 400 breaks in a lifetime, but he was pretty much asking for it. Dave's 30 years feel really old when around 40 previously broken bones throb every time the weather changes. What are the odds of life dishing him such a big bowl of crap stew?

According to the government-sponsored SmartRisk Canada foundation, there are about 19,000 injuries annually in British Columbia from accidents involving bicycle and board sports. With a population of 4.2 million, that makes for a less than 0.5 per cent chance of anyone incurring even a minor injury in a given year. The chance of being struck by lightning in the same period is 0.0002 per cent. The chance of winning the Lotto 6/49 jackpot is 0.000007 per cent. Dave recalls some university stats class and calculates, at best, a 1.5 per cent chance — with 57 goddamn zeroes in front — of someone breaking 40 bones since age four.



Despite medical wizardry packing him full of enough hardware to set airport metal detectors howling, Dave does not feel like the Six Million Dollar Man in the least. In fact, with the average bike injury in British Columbia costing about \$9,000 and the average board sports injury costing about

**WITH THE AVERAGE BIKE INJURY IN BRITISH COLUMBIA COSTING ABOUT \$9,000 AND THE AVERAGE BOARD SPORTS INJURY COSTING ABOUT \$8,000, HE CONSERVATIVELY RECKONS HE IS AT LEAST A \$340,000 DOLLAR MAN.**



**"My first meals with a wired-shut mouth explored the realm of meat-based blendable delectables, which were sometimes almost exotically delicious, but often induced very... umm... awkward vomiting. I eventually fastened my lips around this worthy staple to fuel continued riding."**

#### MEAL SMOOTHIE

**3 cups frozen fruit/berries  
3 eggs  
2 cups yogurt  
2 bananas  
2 cups whole milk  
1 serving packaged liquid meal replacement  
1 big-ass scoop vanilla ice cream  
Blend till the raspberry seeds almost fit through your chompers.**



\$8,000, he conservatively reckons he is at least a \$340,000 dollar man, and it no longer feels like a cheque his body can cash.

Dave Burns gladly takes the licks he's earned playing stupid mountain dude, but that still leaves a lot to be accounted for. Where is the karmic appreciation for his statistical sacrifices, when so many unskilled punters try and fail to do dumb shit and walk away? Life on the extreme end of the bell curve sucks, and the longing to be merely average gnaws at his guts.

#### Stage Five: ACCEPTANCE

Today, at age 33, Dave is on the mend once more. Last spring, turning onto the Trans-Canada at the edge of Golden, he was t-boned at high speed by a driver running a red light and fractured his C6 neck vertebra. During the scariest hospital trip of his life, he had to put it all in perspective, preparing his soul for the worst.

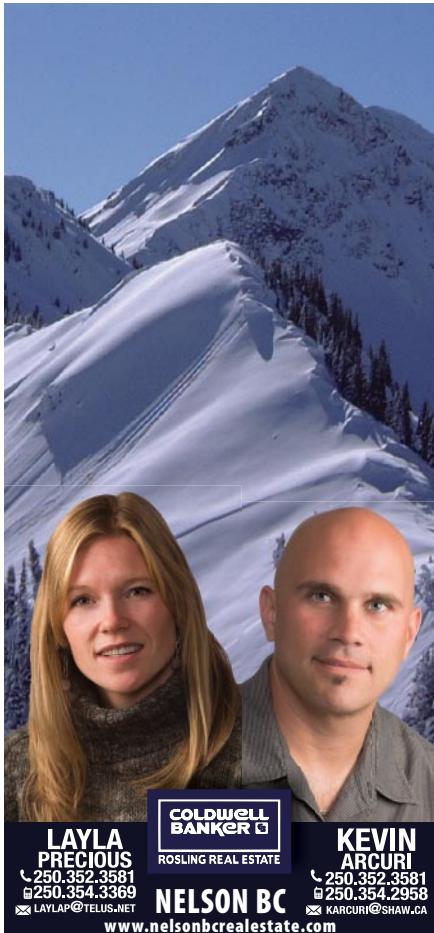
According to Statistics Canada, people like Dave might seem vulnerable to bonking out on life's uptrack during such a spiritually-troubling time. After all, he is among the 44 per cent of the country's 30 to 44 age bracket that either have no religious affiliation or do not attend religious services, even more at home among the 57 per cent of British Columbians with the same religious predispositions.

When the doctor finally reported that his spinal column was intact, he felt like he had beat the odds at long last. Knowing he would go on to shred his beloved moun-



tains again let him finally Accept all the cumulative pain in his heart. Despite a lack of formal dogma, mountain folk, pilgrims of the high, wild places, are nothing if not devoted worshippers of life's pure joy. Dave's grief, worry, and stored potential energy will always find release by the time he touches down on a steep, soft, well-scoped tranny below the next huck.

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