

From the Other Side: Tales of a Former NOOb

BY SYDNEY OWEN WILLIAMS

On July 11, 2011, as Barry stamped my A-license proficiency card, he told me, “If you stay in this sport long enough, you will lose a friend, or you will see a friend die.” It’s just part of the gig. He told me that when he stopped counting, he had lost 30 friends after 10 years in the sport.

Secretly, I was hoping that I wouldn’t have to ever write this column. I thought maybe I’d be one of the lucky few who never lost someone they knew in the sport. But on Aug. 1, my good buddy Adam Rubin died doing what he loved: jumping off things.

NOObS, this will happen; it’s a matter of time—a reality I was aware of but had not yet accepted. I’d like to share how I found out and how I have dealt with Adam’s passing so far. It’s only been 8 days since I found out about his accident at the time of writing. Hopefully I’ll have something more profound in the coming months. For now, it’s still raw; I’m still walking the line between denial and acceptance. Maybe it will help you get through your first loss in the sport.

I woke up Saturday, Aug. 2, and did the normal scroll through my notifications and mindless Facebooking before committing to waking up for the day. I noticed that my buddy Eric had changed his profile photo to a picture of him and Adam. I liked it. I even went so far as to say something about how I’m so glad Adam found Eric and the CRW dawgs at Elsinore, because he has never been so happy in the sport. I then sent Adam a message asking how he was doing, knowing he was in Idaho, and saying, “NATIONALS HERE WE COOOOOOOME!” We were excited about the

If You Stay

trip, because it would be a chance for him to compete with Eric and Mark, and a chance for all of our Midwest crew to get back together.

I continued to scroll and noticed Dojo posted a picture to Adam’s timeline—one of him, his son and Adam. The caption read, “Love you buddy.”

This year has been absolutely terrible for me as far as skydiving goes, and losing friends who are skydivers/BASE jumpers. Statistically, I’m sure it’s probably not far off where we were this time last year, but it seems like every fatality is hitting closer to home. So much so that I rolled over to Barry and said, “Babe, I think something might have happened to Adam.”

I sent Eric a message with a pit in my stomach, asking if Adam was OK and desperately hoping that his and Dojo’s posts were coincidental—and posted only because they love Adam. Because really, everyone who ever met Adam loved Adam.

I got to work and my phone starts vibrating on my desk. It’s Eric. I don’t even remember how I answered the phone or what I said, I just remember him saying, “Adam isn’t OK. He struck a cliff last night and he died.”

I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t feel anything. I was in total shock and disbelief. We talked for a couple more minutes and I told him to call me if he heard anything more and to keep me posted. And I thanked him for the call, because I’d rather hear it on the phone than see it on Facebook.

Eric and Dojo came out to the drop zone later that afternoon. We were telling Adam stories, and Dojo put it best, and most succinctly, “Adam was everything to everyone.” I’ll add to that, “And he never expected anything in return.”

To me, Adam was one of Barry’s students in Illinois—one of “Barry’s kids” and by default, one of our closest friends. He was the kid with the (completely badass) full-sleeve tattoo, and all the tips and tricks for how to maintain tattoos when we’re outside all the time. He was like a little brother. He was the first of six to move from CSC to SoCal after Barry and I did, and he was our roommate when he was in transition. He was Jezebel’s favorite guest, dog sitter, walker and treat-giver. He was one of the biggest dreamers I ever had the chance to meet, and we were lucky to know him, because not only was he dreaming big dreams, but he was out living them, every day.

So, nOObS, what do you do when you lose your first close friend? How do you deal? Where do you go? I can’t really touch any more on this than Douggs already did in his perfect article, “Death



in the Sport of Life” (<http://tinyurl.com/ditsol>). I read it Sunday after Adam’s accident. It was helpful, but I was hoping for a checklist of “How the fuck to navigate life knowing this person will never come back” and found nothing. And that’s OK. I mean, at the time I was pissed that people aren’t writing about this, but really, it’s not as simple as a little checklist.

I can’t promise this will help you, but these have been parts of my process so far:

Know yourself.

I asked my father for advice, as he had a friend die suddenly when they were both about our age. He said, “It gets better with time,” but for the future (because this isn’t the last time this will happen) to know your preferred methods of dealing with tragic news. Where do you want to go after you get the news—would taking a hike in the woods calm you or do you need a busy downtown, or just your own bed? Do you prefer to process feelings alone or do you want people with you to

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talk to? Are you the kind of person who feels better with a task—like helping plan funeral arrangements or cooking for the family—or do you need to rest and let yourself cry it out? Sometimes you can control these things, sometimes you can't, but knowing how you prefer to handle bad news can help you feel more prepared for the next time.

Be honest about what you need.

Be true to yourself about what this person means to you. Allow yourself to FEEL. When we got word Monday that Adam's memorial was that Friday in Illinois, we knew we were going. Flights were outrageous but fortunately we figured it out. I knew—after deciding to train instead of going to the first memorial this year and completely regretting that decision—there was no choice. It wasn't even a conversation, really. Barry and I needed to see all of our Midwest SkyFamily and get through this together. All of us.

Everyone deals with this stuff differently.

Some people can jump right back into their day-to-day lives because the routine keeps them calm. Personally, I need some time and space to sort out how this changes the game for me, and to respect

and reflect on how Adam changed my life for the better. Some people will be wildly insensitive about it, as if I was overreacting or pretending. It hurts, but that's how they deal, and it's no reflection of you or your relationship with your friend.

Share stories.

After Adam's memorial (a story better told in person), we went back to one of my AFF instructors' houses and sat around the fire pit. We went around the circle, all sharing our favorite memory or thing about Adam and something we learned from him that we can (or maybe already have) put into practice in our own lives. We continued to share stories all weekend.

This loss thing sucks. But when it's all said and done, I was honored to be able to attend Adam's services. I was honored to call him a friend. We were so lucky to get to know him, to share that megawatt Shark-smile, and to be a part of his life.

N00bs, I hope you never need this column. But as a wise man once told me, "If you stay in this sport long enough, you will lose a friend, or you will see a friend die." Fortunately or unfortunately, you'll have lots of company in your own SkyFamily to help you with your loss. 🙏

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