



Naval Safety Command

SAFETY AWARENESS DISPATCH



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OBSTACLE COURSE MISHAPS

Some of the more rigorous training conducted in the military is on various obstacle courses. It makes sense this training is challenging, obstacle is right there in the name. In addition to being physically demanding, these courses pose another challenge, that of keeping our Marines and Sailors from getting injured. Each year, many personnel get hurt on obstacle courses because they were either not physically prepared, not trained well enough, or the course was not adequately safe. The following examples show how some Marines and Sailors didn't quite make it over the obstacle.



Not so secret squirrel. In this incident, a member of the special warfare community proved that, not even Navy SEALs are impervious to the risks present on obstacle courses. As the Sailor attempted to execute the "Squirrel Jump," he slipped and fell off. As he extended his arm to catch himself, he fractured his wrist. Per the report, the Sailor was wearing shoes that were not broken in, which hindered his performance on the obstacle. *Maybe wait for a less kinetic event to try out the new kicks.*

A lesson learned. Leave it to the Marines to underemphasize a mishap that resulted in a fractured leg and 30 lost workdays. The mishap narrative simply read, "While negotiating an obstacle course, Said Named Marine (SNM) failed to maintain positive contact with the rope and fell to the ground." They actually made a pointed observation and recommendation, though. The report did contain a recommendation (*that was longer than the mishap narrative, by the way*). It states that trainers shall ensure all personnel are familiar with required techniques (and demonstrate them) and briefed on course hazards before high-risk training. *The narrative may have been short, but at least there was a lesson learned in there. We'll take that as a win.*

"Slip" for Life. Returning to the special warfare community, this mishap involved a student, not a full-fledged SEAL, so maybe it is more excusable. The student was executing the "Slide for Life" during the obstacle course evolution of his class. The report states there was a liberal timeline and students were told to complete the course in a controlled manner. However, being a good prospective SEAL, the student pushed himself to excel and became fatigued. While 14 feet off the ground, he missed the roped as he reached for it, due to fatigue, and fell to the ground, landing on his head and shoulders, briefly losing consciousness. Apparently, this was not enough to keep him down, though, the good SEAL candidate regained consciousness and crawled from underneath the obstacle under his strength. *If Navy SEAL instructors are telling you to take an event easy, maybe trust them and take it easy. You won't hear it often from them, so embrace it.*



Darned civilians ruining the fun. This incident wasn't on a formal obstacle course, but the lesson is still relevant. During a morale event, a civilian employee participated in what was described as a wet obstacle course on a four-person team. As participants executed certain events, they were sprayed with a standard garden hose. While on the first obstacle, which involved weaving through cones while holding a medicine ball, the civilian felt a twist in his knee and sudden pain. He tried to push through the pain, not wanting to hold back the team. He executed the next two obstacles: a bear crawl and a crab walk, before the pain

turned excruciating. He fell onto his back and had to be carried from the event on a stretcher.

Understanding this civilian *wanted to keep up with the active-duty buddies, but the pain is your body's way of telling you to stop. Trying to "fight through the pain" is just asking for a more severe injury. This lesson goes for active-duty personnel as well.*

Broken Neck Fall. This last incident is not one to make light of. While executing a cargo net obstacle during the Crucible at Marine Corps Boot Camp, a recruit fell 14 feet, resulting in a fractured vertebra and paralysis. After the mishap investigation concluded, two primary causal factors were assigned, one relating to why the recruit fell and another to why the injury was so severe. It was discovered that the recruit was unfamiliar with the obstacle because she was not present for the three separate training evolutions that were supposed to take place before the Crucible to familiarize recruits with the obstacles. The investigation also revealed that the rubber mulch, which was supposed to limit the impact of this fall, was only half as deep as it should have been, leading to the severe injury. *This incident is a testament to why the risks present during obstacle courses must be taken seriously.*

Key Takeaways

Obstacle courses are motivating and highly useful training. They provide physical and mental challenges to push through, but we must recognize that, as we jump over these logs and climb these ropes, there is a significantly higher risk present than in standard physical training. The most present risk is falling off an obstacle, and fortunately, most of the injuries incurred are minor. But these still take our Marines and Sailors out of the fight and can potentially have more long-term effects. We shouldn't be afraid to take advantage of the obstacle courses at our disposal, and we may have to accept that some people are going to fall off an obstacle, but we also must ensure we impose the correct mitigations to limit injuries. With that in mind, we encourage the following.

Know the obstacle. Most obstacles have a specific technique used to execute them. Ensure these techniques are taught, demonstrated and understood. Also, ensure emphasis that if someone is unsure of how to complete an obstacle properly to speak up. The last place to try to figure something out is while 15 feet in the air.

Come Prepared. Be physically ready and in the right equipment. Obstacle courses are physically demanding. Some of the events may need to be worked up to for personnel not in the best physical shape. Additionally, make sure you're using the right equipment and proper footwear.

Ensure appropriate safeties are in place. There are specific guidelines for things like the depth of impact mediums such as rubber mulch and the frequency of facility inspections. Take these items seriously and ensure they are adhered to. Most obstacle courses also require a corpsman to be present. It's a good idea even if not required, as there is a much higher chance of injury and a need for a quick first aid response.

And remember, "Let's be careful out there."