



Naval Safety Center

LESSONS LEARNED



LL 20-02

WINTER SPORTS MISHAPS

The winter sports season has begun, with January and February being the window for the best snow conditions on the slopes. Unfortunately, with the snow comes increased risk and, you guessed it, injuries. There's a reason that more Winter Olympic sports require a helmet than the Summer Olympics. You strap your feet onto awkward planks or blades, and off you go on a low-friction, high-speed run to glory — or to the emergency room and a VIP spot in our mishap database.



The Naval Safety Center conducted a study of winter sports mishaps that occurred over three years between 1 December and 28 February (dubbed the “Winter Campaign”) and found (unsurprisingly) our Sailors and Marines are not shatterproof. The results showed that snowboarding won the gold medal with 359 mishaps. [Note: for comparison, snowboarding mishaps were nearly tied with basketball injuries during the study period, but way more folks play basketball. The chance of getting hurt if you get on a snowboard is huge]. Skiing took the silver with 153 mishaps, and the bronze went to ice skating with 25. Collectively, winter sports injuries led to 295 lost workdays and 474 days of light duty. The number one injury - fractures - accounted for 62 percent of the total, and, as you might guess, snowboarding accidents tallied the most broken bones with more than 40 percent of the fractures reported. So before you head out to your favorite wintery sport, take a few moments and learn from those who's winter excursions went “downhill” in a hurry. — *Cue ABC's Wide World of Sports announcer, Jim McKay — “...the thrill of victory, or the agony of defeat.” (The younger crowd may need to do a web search for a video of that intro. It's worth it).*

- A Sailor was snowboarding at a local ski area. He had been snowboarding before, but not recently. In an apparent attempt to assess his skill level, he headed for the “terrain park,” which is designed for total “sick” snowboarding (or “rad” for the over 40 crowd). The Sailor headed straight for the massive jump, and his non-sick performance ended with a landing on his left arm, followed by immediate pain. He continued to the bottom, and then to the hospital where an x-ray revealed a fracture of his upper arm. — *One lost workday and 58 days on light duty later, he probably realized why snowboarding is a “sport” and not a “pastime.” Know your limits shipmates.*
- On his first time snowboarding, a Sailor started down the hill and picked up speed. Unfortunately, he forgot (or never attended) the lesson on how to stop a snowboard and continued his best imitation of an Olympic men's snowboard cross. Instead of crossing the finish line in victory, he caught the front of the board and flew forward, landing on his back. Quoting from the report, “Then I unstrapped my board, limped down the rest of the slope, and continued to be merry the rest of the weekend.” Well, this Sailor's merry weekend ended with a painful strained knee, difficulty negotiating stairs, and seven days on light duty. — *It may look easy on TV, but please don't find out the hard way that it isn't.*
- A Sailor was skiing at the resort alone (and must have left his ORM quick guide at home). While skiing downhill, he gained speed to an estimated 25 mph. We're not sure if he achieved “ludicrous speed,” but at some point, he fell, landed on hard-packed snow and ice, and felt immediate pain in his shoulder. The following day base medical found a fractured clavicle. — *Skiing tip: Starting is easy. It just takes gravity. Stopping takes skill and practice. Make sure you master both before tackling the giant slalom.*
- A Marine decided to go snowboarding while on temporary duty. During his first run, he began to pick up speed (anyone see the trend here?). As he continued down the mountain like James Bond in the ski scene from “Spectre”, he tried to maintain control, but the speed got the best of him.

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The board's edge caught in the snow, "flinging him into the air." Unlike 007, he failed to complete the mission and landed on his shoulder, breaking his clavicle and receiving 27 days on light duty. — *The Marine Corps has a reputation for being good at "breaking stuff," but we'd prefer it weren't themselves.*

- A Sailor stated that while snowboarding, he was "trying to stop to avoid hitting a tree." As you can guess from him showing up here, he did hit the tree...and fell. What's more, he also fell while getting on the ski lift. The report noted that the Sailor "felt his reflexes were not the same as when he was younger." — *With a fractured ankle, 22 lost workdays, and 29 days on light duty, we agree with his assessment and recommend a slower sport in a treeless environment. Once again, know your limitations shipmates.*

- A Sailor was using the tow lift going up the ski slope when one of his skis fell off. He fell but kept holding the ski lift rope "for a little." As the ski tow dragged our mono-skied Sailor up the mountain, it was decision time — continue the ride up with one ski, or bailout and hope for the best. Our uni-skier opted for the bailout and let go, fell on his face, broke a finger, and started his downhill trip. At some point during the descent, he caught up to his wayward ski and used it as a brake to stop. — *Our Sailor may never know if he made the right choice, but his 27 days on light duty may be an indicator.*

- As a Sailor was riding down a national park sledding area with his family, he departed the edge of the run. Building speed and launching from a drop off like the sledding scene from "Christmas Vacation," he "caught some air time" according to the report. Upon landing, the impact fractured a vertebra in his back. — *Fortunately, he didn't apply Clark Griswold's patented "non-caloric silicon-based kitchen lubricant" to his sled or his recovery could have been much longer than a couple lost work-days and some light duty. Despite the limited effects to duty status, we're cringing at the long-term pain repercussions of a fractured back.*



- Two Marines were ice skating. No, this wasn't the pairs skating competition; they actually were two different Marines at different local skating rinks at unrelated times. What does relate them is their skill level and landing style. They both slipped and landed on their faces. You'll have to judge which one took the gold. Skater #1 earned seven stitches in his face and a concussion, but the report said not to worry, that he was "functioning normally." (*That begs for a Marine joke, but we'll refrain*). Skater #2 absorbed the impact with his teeth, breaking off three of them. He wasn't concerned enough to visit a hospital or dentist, instead electing to contact the company corpsman, "who gave him guidance on seeking care". (*Our guess is the guidance was something like, "Dude! Go to the dentist! Now!"*). — *Ice skating is fun, but hazardous. The blades are sharp and the ice doesn't give. We aren't ice skating safety experts, but as usual, the internet comes through again. Check out videos by professional skaters for tips on how to properly fall — because you will.*

Key Takeaways

1. **Know yourself and your skill level.** If you've never snowboarded, skied, or skated before, take it slow. Staring down the slope, wondering, "how do I turn and stop this thing?" should set off the ORM alarm. Heading downhill at 25 MPH is not the time to realize you don't have the skillset for the task. There's no shame in taking a lesson.
2. **Just because you could doesn't mean you can.** Winter sports take physical conditioning and practice to stay proficient, so you probably shouldn't try a "540 Lando-roll" in the halfpipe on your first run of the season. Warm up, start easy, and work your way up to moves and speeds that are in your comfort zone. From the CNO's guidance to the fleet, "Our nation expects a ready Navy." A great start toward that end is to stay crutches-free. Enjoy the slopes safely and responsibly.

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