With the Winter Olympics just weeks away, many service members and their families are inspired to hit the slopes and trails (pun intended). If you’ve followed our lessons learned series on the topic, you know that more than 300 Sailors and Marines are injured in winter sorts annually, according to a 2018 Naval Safety Center study. Our database nearly mirrors the national numbers showing that skiing, snowboarding, and skating are the top three winter sports for injuries. For the breakdown of our stats, check out Winter Sports Mishaps, LL 20-02.

As you'll read here, we continue getting hurt out there on the slopes, and many of the mishaps are preventable. With a bit of practice, patience, and common sense, you can avoid injuries from slips and tumbles like the winter warriors we discuss below. We’ve captured some examples from the most popular winter sports events for our very own naval safety winter “Oh-nolympics.”

- **First time Snowboarding.** To kick the competition off, this report begins with a Marine who “went on their first snowboarding trip ever.” The report says up-front that he “did not attend a class nor training for snowboarding,” so you know that’s not a good sign for what’s to come. On one of the slopes, the Marine lost control and ran into a tree-line—and then a tree—(and there ya’go). The ski patrol transported him to the emergency room, where he received stitches and staples to close a laceration in his forehead, but no lost workdays (Oorah!). — *The report doesn’t say if this Marine was wearing a helmet, but one would likely have prevented his head laceration. Wear your PPE, and go easy the first time. And, Marine or not, it’s really okay to take a day off after a head injury and staples.*

- **High Traffic Ski Jump.** “As an experienced snow skier, a Sailor skiing on an intermediate run went off a small jump,” according to the report. Seems easy enough for an experienced skier, right? During the landing, the Sailor attempted to avoid another skier and fell, twisting their skiis. Complicating matters, the toe binding didn’t release. When the Sailor’s upper body rotated, the skiis didn’t, causing a spiral leg fracture (which sounds horribly painful). — *Not everyone on the slope is experienced, even if you are. Maintain situational awareness, and ski at a safe speed for the traffic.*

- **Downhill Saucer Sledding.** A Sailor was sledding with their children on the snowy hill near their residence. On one of the runs, the Sailor lost control and was thrown from the sled, immediately feeling pain in their foot and ankle. X-rays later revealed the Sailor broke their foot. — *The report doesn’t say if the Sailor used Clark Griswold’s patented “non-caloric silicon-based kitchen lubricant,” but it did say that “it is possible that member was going too fast down the hill…”*. It’s fun sledding with the kids, but perhaps refrain from attempting an “amateur recreational saucer land speed record.”

- **Singles Ice Face Skating.** On his first time ice skating, a Sailor attempted to stop, but hit a crack in the ice, “which sent him flying and caused him to land on his face.” The face-landing was so hard that it knocked him out for a few minutes! The report recommended that the Sailor get more practice building his skill level, instead of doing too much on his first day of ice skating. — *Yes, knocked out on the first day! Perhaps first learning how to properly fall would be a good start. There really is a technique; just web search it and voila!*
In this third installment of winter sports mishaps, we’ve seen a couple of common themes that, if mitigated, could have prevented mishaps or at least minimized the injuries. We encourage you to view editions one and two (LL 20-02 and LL 21-01) for more examples and key takeaways. Here are a few from this year’s events.

1. Learn how to fall. It may seem odd to factor in taking a fall while on the slopes, but it happens to the most seasoned athletes. If you plan for the inevitable fall by learning how to do it correctly, you’re less likely to suffer serious injury. There are plenty of resources to show you how to properly fall while engaging in your favorite winter sport. Just head to “them internets” for tutorials and in-person training.

2. Know your limits. This takeaway appears in nearly all lessons learned where physical activity is involved. In this case, choose slopes and maneuvers that match your skill level. You’re not in a James Bond movie, slow down.

3. Monitor the traffic and conditions on the slopes. Ski resorts and sledding hills can get more crowded throughout the day. The snow conditions can change with temperatures changes. Taking these conditions into account can help keep you on the slopes and out of the emergency room.

4. If there is PPE for the event, wear it. Whether it’s a helmet or a face shield, you’ll be glad you did.

Key Takeaways / Lessons Learned

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And remember, “Let’s be careful out there.”

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