



Dan Gross and his fiancée
Stacey Graf visit CALSTAR-3

A Spring Snowmobile Mishap: Close Call For A New Rider

by: *Laura Kaufman*

DAN GROSS ADMITS THAT HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A BIT OF A THRILL-SEEKER. In his younger days, he and his friends learned to water-ski barefoot; he tried skydiving a couple of times; got the chance to ride in a blown fuel, hydro racing boat; and on his 50th birthday, he and some friends enrolled in the Mario Andretti Racing School in Las Vegas. “The opportunity to drive a modified Indy car at over 150 MPH was extreme. It was a feeling I will never forget,” he says.

Things are a bit less intense for Dan now. He continues to have a passion for excitement, but now it’s on his Harley Davidson. He has settled into a very active lifestyle in Placer County.

Still, Dan recalls a bright, blue-sky day in April of 2009, when his quest for high-altitude adventure almost put him on the sidelines, permanently.

It was a beautiful family weekend up at Bear Valley, featuring the spring *Reggae on the Mountain* concert, a pond-skimming competition for skiers and boarders, and perfect snow conditions.

While most of his family was up skiing, Dan, a former firefighter, took off with two friends on snowmobiles to the backcountry at Highland Lakes. The group was going hill climbing, or “high-marking”—running their snowmobiles high up the side of a mountain, and then turning around and coming back down, an activity which can be



From top:
Hill climbing (or high-marking).
The multi-agency team works to prepare Dan for transport.
Paul Peterson grooms the landing zone for CALSTAR.
CALSTAR arrives on scene.

extremely dangerous because the high-mark terrain is typically in areas where avalanche danger is extremely high.

Dan was new to the recreational maneuver of attempting to reach the highest point of a snow-covered feature, and he was riding his friend's sled. To introduce him to the climbs, they led him first on low-elevation runs. He followed their tracks uphill, and got used to the rhythm of the climbs.

But later, "we attacked this huge mountain," Dan recalls, and he wasn't sure if his sled had enough power to make it to the very top. It did. "When I reached the ridgeline, I was awed by the exhilarating feeling of literally being 'on top of the world,' and the incredible views." Then came the downhill trip - which is where everything went south. As Dan ran briefly along the ridgeline, his sled's ski caught the edge too early, and he was suddenly headed straight downhill into a rocky outcropping.

"I had to choose to either jump off and roll into the rocks, or try to ride over them," he says. "Deciding to stay on was a BIG mistake." He got bucked

off, and thrown into the air. His landing, by pure chance, was in a small dirt patch completely surrounded by jagged shale. Dan watched the sled tumble down the mountain.

"The pain in my lower abdomen was so severe, I thought I would pass out. I thought I had ruptured something, or possibly fractured my pelvis," he says.

Dan remembered his EMT training from years prior and started to do a minimal assessment, wiggling his toes and monitoring his pulse and breathing. He knew that he had not hit his head. He heard his friends on the radio asking "are you OK?"

"There began the rescue," Dan retells. His friend Joe raced up the mountain on his sled, made a U-turn, and tried to pull up next to Dan, but could not stop the sled due to the steep slope. After many unsuccessful attempts, it was decided that Dan would have to make his way out of the rocks. He crawled painfully through the shale, and ultimately made it onto the back of Joe's sled for the ride down the hill. The pain got increasingly worse. Dan's friends—Joe and RJ—wrapped his lower abdomen snugly in webbing from a tow strap, "like a big kidney belt." They patched up the damaged sled with duct tape and knew they had to get him off the mountain, back to cell coverage and emergency treatment.

After the painful two-hour, 25-mile ride back to the truck and trailer, the trio arrived at the fire station, where the nurse for Bear Valley was on duty. She did an initial assessment and put in the call to CALSTAR. The firefighters on duty got Dan on a backboard, into a C-collar, and equipped him with an oxygen mask. He was transported by the Bear Valley Fire Department out to Highway 4. "They were thinking of closing the highway, but decided to clear a large landing zone next to the Bear Valley Cross Country store instead," he recalls. Friends Paul & Diane Peterson, who own the store, fired up their Snow-Cat and cleared the space. When the helicopter arrived from CALSTAR-6, Dan was starting to go into shock. If he had obtained damage to his spleen and/or liver, this could have resulted in severe internal hemorrhaging.

He doesn't remember much about the transport, except being slid into the aircraft and staring at the ceiling. The crew went right to work.

That day, Jennifer Drennan and Christine Gregor were the flight nurses; Mark Alley was the pilot. The crew raced Dan from the scene of the call to Sutter Roseville Medical Center. When they landed, Dan was rushed to the ER and quickly underwent a CAT scan. The official diagnosis included a tear in the intercostal area of muscles, those which form and move the chest wall. "When I landed after being thrown off the sled, I was extremely lucky, and there was no fractured pelvis, no internal bleeding, no severed arteries. What could have happened didn't happen," Dan says. ✱

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