

## Head: Torn, But Not Broken

By Davis English



The danger of snowboarding: do the benefits outweigh the risks?

*“I’ve been through some shit in life. You’ll never have the day back. You can’t feel bad for yourself. You just need to be positive and accept what’s going on – that’s all you can do.” –Jake Schell*

It was the first Tuesday of winter break at Keystone resort in Summit County, Colo. A long drive up to the mountains fueled by coffee and donut holes was finally in the backburner as 21-year-old Jake Schell exited the gondola. Through foggy morning eyes, he surveyed the countless back bowls and glades on the backside of the mountain. With a series of hoops and hollers, he strapped into his snowboard and carved through the groomer ahead of him; the past was forgotten and the future unknown. All that existed was the present.

I sat in Jake’s living room as he recounted the story – the soothing sound of a faint hockey game played in the background. He was swinging his left leg from side to side like a pendulum while he spoke to me. I noticed the fresh scar on his left knee and the swelling that accompanied it.

The trees on the side of the trail whizzed by him as he inhaled the crisp alpine air deep into his lungs. Quickly pivoting to his right, Jake decided to enter a patch of trees. He cut deeply into the already worn tracks between the pines – an expert in familiar terrain. His board slipped into a lower track and his body jolted forward. Without warning, he was brought to a halt in the middle of the trees. A small tree in the middle of the trail had caught Jake by the knee and brought all of his momentum to a stop.

Schell took me through his initial thought process. “At first, I was in shock,” Schell said. “The pain was fueled by fear rather than the incident itself, though, so I guess that’s good.” He smiled and cracked a beer with his worn climbing carabiner.

As he sat on the slope screaming, Jake was brought to the realization that he had severely injured his knee. He laid on the ground for the next five minutes to catch his breath before he decided that he needed to try to walk on it. The first step was wobbly and weak and the ones that followed only aggravated the feeling. “Ah man,” he said. “Well, at least we got to come up here on an awesome bluebird day.”

Schell had already suffered a partial ACL tear on that same knee about 5 years prior and knew that the immediate outlook for his leg was bleak. He sat on the side of the slope and waited for the ski patrol to bundle him up like E.T., lay him down in their sled and take him to the clinic at the bottom of the hill. It didn't seem to faze him all that much though. His characteristic and unmistakable toothy grin was still painted across his wind-burnt face as he was strapped in to the ski patrol sled.

After a week or so, the swelling on Jake's knee had gone down enough to permit doctors to carry out X-rays. Sure enough, Schell had fully torn both his anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and medial collateral ligament (MCL) in his left knee. With the ACL located under and beneath the kneecap near the middle of the knee and the MCL running the length of the inner knee, Jake had lost most of the strength and balance in his left knee.

“Good thing I'm a righty,” Schell joked.

Jake met with a few orthopedic surgeons before deciding on how to repair his ACL and MCL. His best bet was to use two of his hamstrings in his left thigh to repair the ACL and to simply sew the MCL back together with what was left. The surgery date was set for Friday, January 16, 2015.



Jake's knees five weeks after surgery: the left one still noticeably swollen.

“You know, the biggest bummer of it all isn't that I hurt my knee,” Schell said. “It's that I did it at the beginning of the season. The beginning of the season is for looking forward

to how much fun the next few months hold for you on the mountain, not for rehabilitating a bum knee.”

Jake left the hospital all sewn back together, but knew that the road ahead would be anything but a cakewalk. He spent the next week at his mother’s house eating, sleeping, playing video games and lounging around – every 21-year-old’s dream.

After scrambling to keep his job as a line cook at the Rustic Oven American Bistro in Fort Collins, Colo., Schell started basic physical therapy and rehab on his left knee. Although his job and attending classes at Front Range Community College are time consuming, Jake finds time to better his knee. In just four or five short weeks, he can now bend his leg up to 125 degrees and is no longer on crutches. He mainly walks around with a brace on his left leg that limits the amount to which he can bend it, but it hasn’t stopped him from being his goofy self.

“Rehabilitating a knee is hard work, but I’m doing everything my physical therapist is permitting me to do,” Schell said. “I want to play sports this summer and climb mountains. I’ll be ready.” He cracked another beer. “Going to the bars on weekends and dancing like a dumbass probably isn’t helping though.”

Jake’s rehab schedule is far from simple. He has only recently been allowed by his physical therapist to ditch his knee brace, but he’s been pushing himself every step of the way. He would go to physical therapy biweekly for the first month of recovery, but has been going once a week since then. It’s been five weeks since the surgery, and Jake is limited to three ten to fifteen minute workouts per day that consist of workouts designed to bring back the range of motion in his leg. Some of the workouts include: swinging his leg back and forth as well as side to side, stepping up 2-3 stairs at a time, pedaling on a bike with no resistance at the gym, and bending his knee as much as he’s comfortable with. Unlike many knee injury sufferers, Jake isn’t the kind of person to let the daunting task of rehabilitation get him down.

“My doctors said that I’d probably get about 90 percent of the total strength back in my left knee,” Jake said, “so I’m pretty excited. There’s not much difference between 90 and 100 percent. Like I said, I’ll be climbing mountains by summer.”

As our conversation wandered into the snowboarding aspect of the injury, Schell began recounting his early days as a snowboarder. He and his mother had moved from Seattle to Telluride, Colo. when Jake was 13. “Ski P.E.” was a class offered by his middle school in which kids would go to class until lunch and ski the rest of the day with their instructors. This was the beginning of his love affair with the snow.

“Skiing and snowboarding is the only time that I feel completely at peace,” Schell said. “What’s better, man? You get to be up on a mountain with your best buds and be completely in the present. It’s pretty tough to get caught up in other problems when your staring across a mountain covered in two feet of fresh powder.”

We talked for another hour about skiing, school, girls, life and beer. The six-pack I had brought for us was a distant memory at this point. We no longer talked about his knee – not because he didn't want to, but because he had bigger fish to fry. Jake's snowboarding career is far from over and he knows it. That big toothy grin was still painted across his face.

#### **Sidebar:**

##### Snowboarding Injuries: The Numbers

- 17% of snowboarding injuries are to the knee (vs. 39% in skiers).
- 73% of lower extremity injuries occur on the lead-foot side (leg that is most forward on the snowboard).
- 80% of knee injuries occur on the lead-foot knee.
- 67% of knee injuries occur during forward falls.
- 49% of injured snowboarders are beginners (vs. 18% in skiers).
- 15% of snowboarding injuries occur during the course of a jump (vs. 5% in skiers).
- 19% of snowboarding injuries are wrist injuries (most common injury site in snowboarders).
- 16% of snowboarding injuries are to the ankle.

\*data based on 4-year study of ski and snowboard injuries at Mammoth Mountain Ski Area in Mammoth Lakes, CA

Source:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1303417/?page=4>