

OUTDOOR EXTREMES — HIGH LIFE

Willoughby: McConkey transcended limitations

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The Denver Post

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Despite an arrested adolescent fascination with the notion of superheroes, to this day I own only a single comic book. Morbidly enough, it's a 1993 edition of DC Comics' "The Death of Superman."

Why this particular publication sits on my bookshelf and not the premier issue, or any other, for that matter, is difficult to say. But if I had to give a reason, I suppose it's the implausible finality of it all, the astonishing demise of The Man of Steel at the hands of an otherworldly power known simply as Doomsday. Superman was never supposed to die.

Of course, Superman had all the advantages of immortality, certainly not the least of which was a conception from ink. True mortals face the more immediate and dangerous realities of life. Among them, the absolute certainty of death.

But between womb and tomb, any associated certainty lies dormant as each confronts his or her own reality. We don't choose how we die, only how we live.

Such was the case for big-mountain freeskier Shane McConkey, a guy who had been tempting fate in the mountains long enough to be labeled an "extreme skier" by anyone remotely familiar with the term. McConkey, 39, died Thursday while performing a ski base jump off the Sass Pordoi cliff in the Dolomite Mountains of Italy.

J.T. Holmes, a close friend and longtime jump partner who had jumped the 600-meter cliff moments before, said McConkey performed a double backflip from the cliff and planned to release his skis and then fly away in a cape-like wing suit, a stunt he had executed a number of times. When his skis failed to release properly, he spent precious seconds attempting to remove them in order to avoid tangling with his parachute. But after 12 seconds of free fall, he struck the snow before the parachute could fully deploy and was killed upon impact.

There are more than a few who might argue that anyone who skis off an 1,800-foot cliff with a parachute deserves whatever he's got coming to him. But that's a bit like saying anyone willing to strap himself or herself into a rocket-powered space shuttle deserves to blow up, or that those who attempt to climb Mount Everest don't deserve to return home alive.

It comes down to individual calculations of risk and reward, and for a guy who had made a career of more than 15 years from similar feats, the risks had long ago been considered. This was the life he chose. Yet somehow the outcome remains unthinkable.

There are several larger- than-life athletes in the outdoor adventure world, many of whose feats are regarded equally as amazing and insane. But however people choose to label his actions, McConkey was an innovator who pushed and redefined limits.

He pioneered the tools — reverse-camber and reverse- sidecut skis — that big-mountain riders now rely upon to accomplish feats previously considered impossible. With the addition of a parachute, he took the sport to places others never imagined.

"Everything he did just shows you that there's still room for the future, something new technology-wise to help bring you to the next level," K2 Ski teammate Seth Morrison said. "A lot of people think it's crazy, but there are a lot of people that know and aspire to do those kinds of things themselves. Bottom line, that kind of skiing wouldn't be where it's at without him."

Julian Carr, a big-air specialist who has skied jumps of more than 200 vertical feet without the aid of a parachute, shares a similar notion of infinite possibility.

"There have been rules, regulations and limits provided by society throughout all of time, and they've always been broken and set at a new standard. It's fun living in a world where you're transcending what's considered unsafe or unadvisable," Carr said. "I know I'm this way and I'm sure Shane was too, but I'm not interested in physical prowess. I'm interested in the mind leading the body. I don't expect other people to have the mental ability or the clarity to do what I do safely and have fun, and I don't blame them for thinking I'm nuts. But it's what I love doing."

A record of McConkey's defiance of the perceived limits of his sport remains in more than 15 skiing films, including the Matchstick Productions classic, "There's Something About McConkey." Somewhere out there a handful of Shane McConkey Huck Doll action figures are still floating around, at least one of them owned by the son of an old friend who still idolizes Mc- Conkey's feats of skiing and flight like those of a superhero.

In a way it seems like Superman is dead. The reality is he's yet to be born.

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