



PARADOX ICE

a Personal Journey of Badassdom

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT

*i*f Chad Jukes looks a little familiar, it might be because you saw a picture of him in *Penthouse* magazine last year, hanging out (fully clothed) on an icy cliff in the Uncompahgre Gorge, his claw-like prosthetic foot kicked rakishly into the ice.

Hardly the image of a wounded warrior that most of us carry around in our minds.

"It was an article about organizations that help veterans," explained Jukes, a bit embarrassed about his newfound notoriety, on a blustery Sunday afternoon at the Ouray Ice Park last March.

The 30-year-old army veteran and lifelong sport climber who served in both Afghanistan and Iraq lost his foot in 2007 after a bomb blew up under his truck in northern Iraq. He now works as a climbing guide and ambassador for Paradox Sports, the Boulder-based organization founded by Army Captain D.J. Skelton and climber/comedian Timmy O'Neill that helps integrate the physically disabled into the outdoor community.

The organization's flagship event is its annual adaptive ice climbing weekend at the Ouray Ice Park, now known as Paradox Ice, designed to challenge the common misperception that an amputee is handicapped, or that a blind person must by default lead a second-rate life.

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Missing limbs are no problem for adaptive athletes like Pete Davis who overcome their disabilities to reach new heights during the annual Paradox Ice event at the Ouray Ice Park. (www.claudialopezphotography.com)

Last year's late-February/early-March event brought 26 participants and a large team of volunteers, including eight amputees, five paraplegics, four veterans and five participants with various neurological and neuromuscular disorders who overcame their disabilities to find their way up vertical walls of ice.

From the whoops of victory down in the Scottish Gullies (an easily accessible beginning-to-intermediate part of the Ouray Ice Park) to the huge smiles on the faces of volunteers and participants alike when they returned to the top, it was obviously a transformative experience for all involved – whether they were stomping around in boots with crampons or on wickedly spiky prosthetic feet.

As Paradox Sports' former Executive Director Malcolm Daly explained, "Ice is the great equalizer. None of us can climb it without adaptive equipment. We just go one step further."

Paradox Ice instructors, many of whom – like Jukes and Daly – are themselves missing various parts, use an ingenious variety of techniques and equipment to get participants up the ice. Tools range from adaptive custom-made crampons and ice axes that double as prosthetics (many designed and made here in Ouray) specialized gear that gives paraplegic climbers a mechanical advantage as they ascend vertical ice using only upper-body strength.

"It's an activity that helps them take that step and accept what has happened, and be happy with it," said Jukes. "A lot of people think that becoming disabled is life-ending, but it's just life-changing. And life change can be a positive thing. It can be a catalyst for post-traumatic growth, instead of post-traumatic stress."

Post-traumatic Growth

It was only after Jukes' foot was amputated following his encounter with an IED while on patrol in northern Iraq that he discovered his own love for ice climbing, largely thanks to Daly.

While struggling with the decision of whether to have his foot amputated or undergo years of painful (and likely unsuccessful) reconstructive surgery on his shattered heel bone, Daly planted the seed that changed Jukes' life.

Jukes described his situation on an online forum for amputees who climb, asking what he should do. Daly, who lost part of his right leg in a climbing accident while attempting a new ice route in Alaska with Jim Donini in 1999, wrote back within minutes: "You know, if you amputate, you will still be able to climb. Dealing with a prosthetic is a pain in the ass. But I'd rather be an amputee than a cripple."

The advice hit home. When Jukes saw his doctor again, he said, "When can you chop this thing off? I want it off." One day after getting his first prosthetic, he went to a climbing gym, and realized that "getting rid of a bad limb could be a gloriously freeing experience."

A year later, Jukes showed up in Ouray, at Daly's invitation, for his first Gimps on Ice event (the name has since been changed to Paradox Ice). From the first swing of the axe, he was hooked.

Ice climbing has given Jukes' life new meaning. Now a familiar character around Ouray, with his long sandy mane of hair, bushy beard, Indiana Jones-style hat and completely disarming person-

ality, Jukes has become a sponsored climber who in September 2010 was part of the Soldiers to the Summit expedition led by Erik Weißenmayer of Golden, Colo., a blind mountaineer who summited Mt. Everest, to climb the 20,192-ft. Lobuche East Peak in Nepal's Khumbu Valley in the Mt. Everest National Park.

High Ground, a film by Academy award-nominated producer Don Hahn (*The Lion King*, *Beauty and the Beast*) and award-winning director Michael Brown tells their story. The movie has won accolades at the Boulder International Film Festival and Telluride Mountainfilm.

Jukes has seen ice climbing change the lives of others in the disabled community, as well – most particularly, his fellow veterans – at the weekend intensive in Ouray.

"At the beginning of the weekend, they don't want to talk about what happened," he said. "You can see it in their eyes. After a couple days, they're letting it all hang out. It definitely helps with a sense of pride. It can be fun to be different. You know, 'I get to wear a pegleg!'"

HQ at the Ouray House

Unofficial headquarters for Paradox Ice are at the Ouray House on Main Street in Ouray, where brewmeister James Paul Hutchison (aka "Mr. Grumpy-Pants") brews up a "One Arm, One-leg IPA," which may be imbibed (if you ask nicely) out of a couple of old prosthetic legs donated by Jukes and Ouray's own U.S. Paralympic snowboarder Heidi Duce.

Prior to last year's Paradox Ice event, Jukes and fellow veteran Dan Sidles were hanging out with Hutch one snowy night, nursing a couple of beers, swapping tales of near-death experiences...and laughing about it.

Sidles may not wear a peg leg, but he suffers from a different kind of loss.

By the time he got out of the Marines at age 23 in 2006, he had already seen more action than most of us will experience in many lifetimes. He'd shot over a thousand rounds from a 50-caliber gun his first day in Fallujah, each one aimed at an Iraqi. He was blown up twice, ended up with shrapnel in his head, earned a Purple Heart, and in the process, a raging case of post-traumatic stress disorder.

He was discharged before the army started screening soldiers for traumatic brain injuries. But it turns out he's a "tibby," too.

When he first got out, he thought everything was alright. He had moved to Arizona, and was going to school full-time to become a firefighter. He had a girlfriend.

"There was no reason for me to think anything was wrong," he said. "But then, slowly but surely, I was drinking, acting like a fool. That's how I was with my buddies in the military. We were train-wrecks and we didn't even know it."

Things fell apart, with his girlfriend, and his life. Three years down the road, he found himself "sitting in my house, by myself, 26 years old and my mind is literally just going berzerk. And I realized, this is what happens. This is what happens when someone is about to hurt themselves. I am right there. I've been blown up, I've been shot, I've seen my life flash before my eyes so many times, but that was the scariest moment of my life."

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Ice is the great equalizer. Nobody can climb it without adaptive equipment. Paradox Ice participants like Maureen Beck just go one step further. (www.claudialopezphotography.com)

Shortly after that, he got a DUI and ended up briefly “in the klink.”

“I manned up,” he said. “I was like, this is your life. Yeah, it sucks. But somebody’s got it worse. You’ve seen worse. It’s not going to work out the way you thought it was but you’ve got to make it better.”

The problem was, his brain couldn’t settle down. As he put it, “I have the attention span of a circus monkey.” He needed something that would hold his attention, because otherwise, “I’ll be in la-la land in two minutes.”

He also needed a way to handle the black anxiety that kept him awake at night, chewing at his soul.

Help came from a surprising quarter, when a nurse he had been talking with at the Veterans Administration hospital called him up one day and said, “How would you like to climb a mountain in Nepal?”

“And I was like, are you fucking kidding me? Of course!”

It was for the movie *High Ground*. That’s where he first met and befriended Jukes. Sidles found magic in the Himalaya, he said: “I can do this. I am actually kind of good at it.”

And not just the climbing part. “The fact that it’s so intense and stuff, that’s what keeps me there,” he said. “And you have to go into selfless mode, because you are part of this team. You have got to be there because people are counting on you. I saw that, and was like, this is kind of like a mission, getting to the summit, relying on each other. It just made sense.”

Today, Sidles is a mentor for Veterans Expeditions (an organization focusing on getting veterans outdoors) and an apprentice climbing guide. He’ll never get back to the kind of person that he used to be.

“Life loses its flavor, to a certain extent. There is always going to be part of me that’s missing,” he said.

But climbing – ice climbing, mountain climbing, rock climbing, at events like Paradox Ice – helps to quiet the demons, focus his mind, and be around people in a way that makes sense.

“I don’t want anything to define me. I don’t want a mountain in Nepal to define me. I don’t want the Marine Corps to define me. I don’t want war to define me. I don’t want a wound to define me. You know? I don’t want any of that,” he said. “But I realized that it was. I was becoming my disability. I was looking at myself as this damaged person, when really, I think we all kind of are. You know?”

“We are all flawed. It feels like we all go through hell and we all just have to climb out.”

Paradox Ice Program One-of-a-Kind

One of the things that makes Paradox Ice different than organizations like VetEx and Soldiers to Summits is that it mixes up wounded warriors like Jukes and Sidles with folks that have lost limbs or the ability to walk in the battlefields of civilian life – car crashes, climbing accidents, natural disasters – as well as people with congenital birth defects, who have adapted to being differently-abled from day one.

“It’s important to note that unofficially what we like to do at Paradox is integrate vets with the civilian population,” said Paradox Ice Program Director Pete Davis. “The Armed Forces have a tendency to segregate soldiers with soldiers. But it’s really impor-

tant for these vets to be around civilians, some of whom have been disabled their entire lives and have got it figured out.”

Davis, born missing most of his lower right arm, is one of those guys, and he’s been rock- and mountain-climbing since age 12, jamming his stump in cracks and styling hard-rock climbs. “I was convinced I was the only one-armed climber,” he said, before he found his adaptive climbing tribe. Since then, it’s been full-on rock and roll.

He took second in advanced rock climbing at the 2007 Extremity Games. And in 2012, he was part of the first adaptive team in history to climb El Cap.

Last year, Davis helped T-12 paraplegic climber Shawn O’Neill (the brother of Paradox Sports Co-founder Timmy O’Neill) reach the top of the iconic 365-foot Bridal Veil Falls near Telluride just before the 2014 edition of Paradox Ice.

Shawn, who broke his back jumping off a bridge into the Mississippi River 23 years ago, is a pioneer of sit-climbing, and helped design an adaptive system of pulleys for ice axes and other equipment to get up pitches.

He pulled himself up the iconic Bridal Veil Falls using just his upper body, making history as the first paraplegic to ever send the climb.

“Make sure to get pictures of Shawn’s butt,” quipped his brother, before the climb, describing a sort of adaptive butt-crampon his brother would be using. “He’s got the most dangerous ass known to mankind.”

Got Stump?

Feats like his Bridal Veil ascent earned Shawn O’Neill the coveted Got Stump? shirt, a sort of traveling trophy of bad-assdom.

“This is a shirt that has traveled in the company of some of the most famous ice climbers and gimps in the world,” wrote Malcolm Daly in a chronicle of the infamous garment in 2011. “It’s lived in drawers right next to Kim Csizmazia’s panties and Jeff Lowe’s boxers. And it’s never been washed...That’s right boys and girls; it carries the sweat and the stink of eight Ouray Ice Festival auctions and only God knows what else.”

The tale of the Got Stump? shirt started back in 2002, when Daly was emceeding a live auction at the Ouray Ice Festival. Daly, then a recent amputee, was wearing a shirt that read “Got Stump?” when the particularly rowdy crowd started chanting for him to “Sell the shirt” off his back.

“WTF? What shirt are you talking about?” Daly said. “That shirt,” they said, pointing to his chest.

Bidding quickly escalated to over \$100. Finally, at \$140, a lone hand remained.

“I looked over to confirm and Chris Folsom nodded his head and said, ‘I’ve got to have that shirt,’” Daly recalled. “Turns out that Chris had lopped off a finger while wrenching on a car and earned the nickname ‘Stump.’”

Folsom wore the shirt for a year, then gave it back to be auctioned again at the next Ice Fest, and a tradition was born. In 2008, the Got Stump? Fundraiser became part of the Paradox Ice event. Over the years it has raised \$50,000 to build the Ice Park’s Fallen Climbers Memorial, Kids Wall and Stump Wall. As part of the tradition, the original shirt is passed down to a different adaptive athlete every year.

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Vijay Viswanathan, a paraplegic, had nothing but smiles during his first experience ice climbing at a Paradox Ice event. (www.claudialopezphotography.com)





Last year, Shawn O'Neill passed the shirt on to Tommy Carroll, a veteran and above-the-knee amputee who lost his leg in a motorcycle accident. Today, he designs artificial limbs and adaptive sports prosthetics, and volunteers with adaptive sports programs like Paradox Ice.

"The first time I climbed rock with ropes, safely and smartly, was with Paradox," he said. "What that has blossomed into is allowing me to climb Cotopaxi in Ecuador."

Standing on the rim of the Uncompahgre Gorge last year, on the last day of Paradox Ice, wearing his Got Stump shirt and a gnarly leather fedora, he looked about as disabled as Crocodile Dundee.

But it wasn't always that way.

"When you become disabled, and you spend enough time in the hospital, you become institutionalized. You lose who you were before," he reflected. That can be destructive; you are dealing with your own inner anger, and then you take it out on the people around you.

"We've seen a lot of these guys end up turning that completely around, and now they are part of society, and they are strong in their own head."

But as Jukes points out, Paradox Ice is just as much about changing the perception of those who inhabit the "able-bodied" world.

"That's one of my big things," he said. "People think they need to feel sorry for us, but it's the body that was broken, not the mind."

Perhaps the greatest paradox of all is how many able-bodied people say that Paradox Ice has changed their lives.

"They realize they have had perceived boundaries, limitations of their own, whether psychological, or physical abilities," Jukes said.

Davis agreed. "The lessons are universal. It just takes the gimps to show it. For us, it's just more obvious what is wrong."

The 2015 edition of Paradox Ice is scheduled for Feb. 27-March 1. The weekend typically includes two full days of climbing instruction at the Ouray Ice Park, and plenty of opportunities for participants to get to know each other off the ice (including dinners, slideshows and the Ouray House's biggest party of the year). Disabled climbers pay a bargain \$225 to participate. Paradox Sports offers scholarships for those who can't afford it. For more information or to volunteer, visit paradoxsports.org. @

Tommy Carroll (above left), Jas White (above right) and Pete Davis (below) are all stylin' their own personal journeys of badassdom, thanks to Paradox Ice. (www.claudialopezphotography.com)

