

In less than a month, I would be the best in the country. I was coming off of a gold medal in a regional snowboarding slopestyle event, with my ticket punched to the national championship in just a few weeks.

I wanted to win, and in my age group, the only way to succeed was completing big spins as part of a run packed with other tricks and rail slides. I was progressing extremely quickly, and I decided it was time to learn a trick that could get me to the podium: a corked backside 720. Taking off blind, a cork 720 consists of spinning two full 360s off-axis while spotting the landing and holding a grab. If all went to plan, I would open up at the perfect time and ride out the landing.

It was March, but you wouldn't know it from the weather. It snowed at a pace you would find in a Christmas commercial, coating the mountain in a slow layer of soft snow. The cold was ever-present: a dagger against any exposed skin. I shook off the chill and turned my attention toward the looming skyscraper of a jump in front of me.

I took a breath of icy air to steady myself, pulled my facemask over my nose, and dropped in. As I snapped off the runway of the jump, I knew something was wrong. I flailed through my rotation like a fish out of water, unable to orient myself in the air. After seemingly an eternity in the sky, I was slammed into the ground far from the intended landing. My head struck the concrete-like snow and I blacked out.

“Severe concussion. Out for weeks- if not months.”

Threads of conversation replayed themselves in my head as I came to consciousness lying at the edge of my bed. The events of the previous day were fuzzy, covered with a sheet and hidden from view. I wandered downstairs, and the memories trickled back into my head. Rushed to the hospital, a cushioned chair, a CT scan. White walls, a conversation, sentencing, a diagnosis.

The trickle of memory turned into a flood of emotion as I understood the reality of my situation. There would be no snowboarding. No nationals. No chance to differentiate myself, to establish myself, to compete and defeat others. It would be weeks of dry ground, weeks of boredom in place of flying through the air and standing on a podium. Over my prescribed rest period, the motivation leaked out of me like a faulty faucet.

As the weather gradually warmed, I returned to school. I passed the days on autopilot, all of my classes merging into each other. Outside of school my hobbies felt as though they were filling a void that snowboarding had left.

Weeks later, a group of my classmates invited me to the mountain for the upcoming weekend. I didn't want to be anywhere near the snow which took my chances at nationals, but these feelings were overshadowed by my desire to spend time with my friends, so I grudgingly accepted. What I found was enthralling. It was as though I rediscovered snowboarding. I felt light and euphoric, appreciating the beauty of nature and the company of my friends. The pressure of competition and nationals had been weighing on me in a way I didn't realize. It was as though the sport had become a toxic outlet for my competitiveness and my lust to win.

A certain pandemic made it such that I never got the chance to compete at nationals, but the world did not end. Snowboarding remains one of my favorite sports, and I finally mastered the cork 720. I look back upon this event ardently as the moment when I finally recognized my overwhelming desire to win and my tendency for over-competitiveness. I had a habit of turning everything into a contest, whether it was being the first to finish a test, or endlessly comparing my scores and grades to my classmates. My toxic competitive nature finally manifested in consequence as I overworked myself and received a ringing skull as a reward. A divot on the back of my head stays with me from my concussion, serving as a reminder that winning isn't everything.