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Top Outdoors Stories

After the fall, Bell bounces back

By David Watson
Boomerang Outdoors Writer

"I heard the others screaming, and I remember hearing me hitting the rocks. I thought ... I am falling, and this is not good. When I stopped, my friends thought I was dead."



Barbara J. Perenic/Boomerang photographer
Former University of Wyoming All-American cross-country skier Ava Bell is nearly fully recovered from her injuries sustained in an accident while trying to access a climbing route in Grand Teton National Park over the summer.

Ava Bell, 22, is a long-time resident of Laramie and recently graduated from the University of Wyoming, majoring in international studies with minors in Spanish and geography. Her college years were also spent competing on the UW cross-country ski team.

"My roommate (Greta Black) and I joined the team as freshmen because we both liked skiing," Bell said. "Then I really liked it because we had such good coaches (Christi Boggs and Rachel Watson), and because of them, I did really well. We are all such good friends on the team and they made my college career. We all trained year-round together."

In her freshman year, the UW cross-country team won the national championship in March of 2003 at Lake Tahoe, Calif. Bell had an All-American finish, placing 10th. The team then won the championship again in 2004 when she was a sophomore and then finished runner-up when she was a junior and a senior.

Last spring she decided to take up rock climbing so she could still enjoy the outdoors after the ski season was over.

"I like backpacking and hiking, and cross-country skiing was my first love," Bell said. "I just started rock climbing basically because I didn't know what to do on weekends and my friends invited me."

She was introduced to rock climbing by her roommates at the time, Taylor Mendenhall and Tess McGinty.

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National News

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“I didn’t work this past summer because I didn’t want to and was climbing about three days week for something to do outside,” Bell said. “I trained for skiing every summer by running and I wanted to do something different on top of that.”

After a summer day spent backpacking the Wind River Mountains, Bell and McGinty met up with three other friends (John Coomes, Justin Daraie and Carissa Pereda) for a climb in Grand Teton National Park. All four of her friends are experienced rock climbers.

They were planning on climbing a route called Open Book, which is a popular multi-pitch route in Garnet Canyon on the south side of Disappointment Peak with a Yosemite decimal system rating of 5.9.

“We slept in that morning, started out about noon and it was really hot,” Bell said. “It was a really long hike to get to the climbing route, covering about five miles and 3,000 vertical feet. After leaving the trail, the hike went up a cliff and a huge talus that was very steep that when you were hiking up it, you could reach out and touch the ground. Right after the break for lunch, we got to the last part of the hike (at about 9,400 feet) near the base of the climbing route. The boys were looking at another climbing route and the girls were scrambling up to the base when I slipped.”

Since the group had not started their climb, they had not clicked into their gear and ropes or put on their helmets.

“I fell 20-25 feet vertically and landed on my back. What saved my life is that I had a backpack on with our ropes in it and it broke my fall,” Bell said. “But I kept rolling down the talus for another 60-80 feet. It was very rocky and I broke most of my bones during the roll, and then hit a really big rock where I stopped.”

Coomes and Daraie immediately went running down the talus towards Bell. They kept her from trying to get up while waiting for Pereda and McGinty.

“They said I tried to take my backpack off and I don’t remember that. They waited for Tess to get there because she has had several Wilderness First Responder/First Aid courses,” Bell said. “She first made sure I had no major neck or spinal injuries and then they had to move me because I was still sliding down the hill. As soon as Tess finished checking me, John went running down to where he could get a cell phone reception.”

According to the Jackson Hole Daily, Coomes placed the emergency call at 2:47 p.m. and two park rangers immediately set out on foot. They covered about four miles and gained 2,700 feet, arriving at the scene at 4:50 p.m. After initial treatment, the search and rescue personnel decided to evacuate Bell with an interagency helicopter rather than moving her over the rocky terrain because of the nature of the injuries.

“One helicopter was fighting a fire in Utah and another was fighting a fire near Pinedale, so one of the helicopters actually had to come back, refuel and then come get me. It arrived about an hour after the first search and rescue people got there. During the wait, my friends helped me stay calm and Carissa was reading a book to me,” Bell said.

The helicopter couldn’t land when it arrived on the scene. The rescue personnel placed Bell into an evacuation suit and suspended her below the helicopter on a double-rope system for the flight to Garnet Canyon Meadows. The helicopter flew off with Bell hanging below suffering from a broken pelvis



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in three places, six broken ribs, a punctured and collapsed lung, a broken left pinky finger, a black eye and more cuts and bruises than could be counted.

When the helicopter found a flat area to land, they placed Bell into the helicopter for another flight to a waiting ambulance at Lupine Meadows. She was then taken to St. John's Medical Center in Jackson, where she spent the next 28 days.

"The treatment I got at the hospital was wonderful. I actually had the option of coming to Laramie earlier, but decided to stay there," Bell said. "I also was in long-term care for the last three weeks and it was basically a nursing home. I met four old ladies that were so hilarious and I ate dinner every night with them.

"All my friends and family were also wonderful. I only know one person in Jackson and I think there was only three total days without visitors. One weekend, I had 20 people in my room. I also got a care package from the UW ski team that was so big, the nurse could barely lift it."

Bell's parents are Ann and Dave Bell. She has two younger sisters, Christy and Jennifer and a younger brother, Peter.

Bell arrived back in Laramie on Aug. 20 and was still in a wheelchair for two weeks. She then discarded the crutches after only a short time before she started walking again.

"My physical therapist (at Homestead Physical Therapy in Laramie) attributed my recovery to my age, and the fact I was in such good shape."

Today, Bell has mostly recovered from her injuries, except for surgery last Friday, ironically, on her left pinky finger. "The only surgery I had to have was on the smallest bone that I broke that didn't heal right," Bell said. "I had to have a plate, five screws and a bone graft."

Bell said that the accident would not stop her from enjoying the outdoors or even rock climbing again.

"I will rock climb again. When you fall, you have to get right back up again. It was just an accident," Bell said. "I am the only person I know who got hurt by going rock climbing. I think it is more dangerous to drive somewhere than it is to rock climb. I have always been physically active in the outdoors. You are so close to nature and God, and I love people who love the outdoors. It is so much fun to hang out with your friends outside."

Bell currently is the coordinator for the Medicine Bow Nordic Association, works part time at the Grand Newsstand and will be an assistant cross-country ski coach for Laramie High School this winter. Next August she plans to work at a girls' orphanage in Honduras.

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