

# A MASSIVE LACK OF RISK MANAGEMENT

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Invaluable life lessons through fart jokes and body spray.  
Photo: Jay Goodrich

**HIS NAME WAS NICK,** and he was three grades my elder when he double-dog-dared me to bomb “Smokey,” the black diamond on the frontside of my home hill, Nubs Nob in Harbor Springs, MI. I was 10 and he was cute. I gladly accepted.

But stopping at the top of the run, my initial bravado became less keen. Peering down the seeming abyss in front of me, I realized I’d been abandoned by most of my comrades, who’d escaped to the familiar territory of a nearby blue square. Only myself and one other chose to carry on, hell-bent on proving to the eighth grader that we would conquer the scariest run in our small ski world.

So we pushed off, arms airplaning, knees locked, poles not at all fulfilling their intended use, conquering the fears of our childhood by the most hazardous—and, we’d later learn, formative—means possible. It was anything but graceful, far from safe and, although we didn’t know it at the time, a decision we’d be thankful for for years to come.

While our parents used the ski club as a temporary babysitting service on winter Thursdays, to intrepid Midwestern middle schoolers like us—versed only in pizzas and French fries—it was absolute freedom, something with which we had never been fully entrusted (and probably for good reason). At the mercy of our own imaginations, we’d challenge each other to ski ballet PIG or futile attempts at 180s. We’d unintentionally cut people off while exceeding all former personal speed records. Frostbite, broken digits, our mom’s battered 1992 Nordicas—nothing could slow us down.

Twelve years after this recklessness, my 12 and 10-year-old sisters recently begged me to tag along as a chaperone for Thursday-night ski club at Nubs Nob. I agreed, though hesitantly—ski club, as I remembered, was a time for screaming as loudly as possible while careening off jumps, falling, bombing and spinning, all without any regard for others. It was an experience with which I wasn’t wholly interested in interfering—or being held responsible. But I went.

What you find when surrounded by preteens is that weird smells and fart jokes reign supreme, and riding the chairlift without your friends is blasphemous, borderline unforgivable. The few boys that aren’t wearing their dad’s insulated work bibs and flannel jackets are trying to look like Justin Bieber (it was Nick Carter back in my day), accompanied by gratuitous



amounts of Axe body spray. There was even a kid wearing chemistry goggles over an old bike helmet.

It turned out to be the last ski club of the year and my last runs of the season with my sisters. In an accident that surprised no one, an 11-year-old broke his ankle while navigating a wooded trail on a pair of straight, 175-cm Rossignols, which were mostly likely unearthed in the attic, dusted off and unjustifiably deemed safe. Due to the massive lack of risk management it takes to send four-dozen middle schoolers off on their own, the powers that be decided ski club should be suspended for the rest of the year.

Beiber wannabes and malodorous body spray aside, not much has changed at ski club in those 10-plus years. Injuries and near misses remain precursors to hurtling through gates at 40 miles an hour, shoulder dislocations while learning rails, or dozens of hospital visits and concussion-caused sick days. Eventually, it leads to taking up climbing, mountain biking or any number of sports our parents never really liked—a reckless gateway drug to other fear-fueled pursuits. And while I may have loathed it at the time, I’m eternally thankful for that random eighth-grade boy and the dare that forced 10-year-old me, screaming with fearful excitement, down the frontside of Nubs Nob for the first time. ¶