

The Tragedy

As experienced by Link Neal
and told by Rhett McLaughlin



The Background

The events that unfolded the weekend of January the 8th in the year of our Lord, 1999, were, to say the least, eventful. As last minute plans for a quick hit of a snowboarding trip were being laid, not a soul knew what was to come. We, that's Link Neal, Gregg Hartsfield, and I, mounted the Dynasty and proceeded to Hawksnest, a bountiful resort in the heart of Appalachia. There we anticipated a rendezvous with Will and Ben Thomas of Buies Creek, Dan Schleising, also from the Creek, and Andy (I don't know Andy's last name or where's he's from). We arrived at the scene around 5:30 in the PM, and after Link, Gregg and I assembled our boards and met up with the other half of our party, we hit the slopes.

The Jump

As I rode up the lift with Link, he explained his passion for the sport, his utter amazement at the conditions, and his eagerness to return to the snowy playing field he loved to call home. We made about 3 or 4 runs, each time venturing through the "park", which consisted of two jumps, a tabletop followed by a sharper jump. Link, Will, and some of the more experienced boarders were frolicking on and around these jumps, while I avoided them most of the time due to my lack of experience and 6th sense of clear and present danger.

Apparently Link didn't possess this keen sense of the precarious, because after hitting the two jumps successfully on one of his runs, his confidence levels mushroomed. On our fifth and final run, Will and I cleared the table top jump and stopped short of the second one and waited for Link to come. Well, Link came all right, and he came with style. He, like a pro, bounced off the tabletop jump in full composure, and landed it. It was at this point, when Link neither stopped nor slowed down, that I thought, "Man, Link's going for it." Link had told Gregg earlier in the evening that he should go "balls to the wall". He's a man true to his word.

Charles (Link is known as Charles in formal circles) carved back and forth skillfully as he progressed to the steep jump. It was then that Will yelled out, "Link!! You're going to bust!" Bust, it turned out, would be too gentle of a word. Link nailed the face of the beastly incline, was hurled 8-10 feet in the air, obviously lost control while in the air, and disappeared over the horizon. I don't recall what I thought at that point, but I remember Will following Link over the jump (much slower), and me doing the same. That's when I saw Link, laid out about 40 feet from the jump, being consoled by Will. Will asked, "Link, are you hurt?" Link responded, "My hip is hurt." Will suggested, "Take your board off and walk it off." I believe that no matter how badly one male is injured, if the first person on the scene is another male, the instructions for therapy will be, "Walk it off."

There would be no walking this off. Link, coherent at this point, moved up and out of the way of the base of the jump, and I closed it off with a sign that said, "caution." I returned down to the location of Link's landing to find him at a loss for words. He wouldn't respond to many questions; he was apparently gathering himself. Then it

happened. The process that continued for many hours to come, and maybe the funniest thing that I've ever witnessed.

Signs of the Concussion

Link said to me, "I think I'm going to faint." He placed his head between his legs, then raised it, and I noticed a completely blank look on his face. He said, "Hold on...I'm just coming to." I was confused, for it appeared as if Link had "been to" for about 5 minutes. He followed this phrase with, "Hold on...I'm just coming to." I looked at Will, we both laughed. He was joking, right? Then he says, "Hold on...I'm just coming to. Evidently I've hurt my left hip." After a few seconds, in which Will and I questioned Link repeatedly to no avail, he said, "Hold on...I'm just coming to. Evidently I've hurt my left hip." This broken record conversation continued for about 20 minutes. I asked Link who he was, he said Link. I asked him who I was, he said Rhett. He then became angry at our remedial interrogation. He was fully aware of his surroundings, but fully aware over and over again. He was continually forgetting anything and everything he or anyone else said. He was "coming to" repeatedly, and I was getting the biggest kick out of it.

At this point a snowboarding instructor arrived, and to shorten this soon-to-be-way-too-long story up, he carried on the same conversation with poor Link. I kept telling myself he was only joking, but I figured that he wouldn't trouble others, like this instructor, with a practical joke. Ski patrol came on the scene and gave Link some oxygen, and put him on a stretcher-sled. As Link was being strapped into the stretcher, he said, "You guys are fulfilling a dream of mine, I've always wanted to ride in one of these." He turned to me and said, "I don't know what's going on, but I assume it's funny, so don't forget any of it." As he slid down the hill, he threw his fists in the air in celebration, and exclaimed, "I'll feel so stupid!!" There is no telling how many times Link "woke up", only to realize he was strapped in a sled going down a hill wearing a oxygen mask. But one thing is for sure. Every time he woke up he celebrated.

In the Lodge

Some of the more amusing comments of the evening were heard as Link lay outstretched on a bed in the lodge. We all entered the room to find Link talking with some ski patrol guys. He saw us and said, "Hold on...I'm just coming to. Evidently I've hurt my left hip." He had no idea he had filled us in on his condition some 80 times on the hill. A girl who worked at the lodge asked him what year it was, and he said "1998." It accomplished nothing to tell him it was 1999, because he was bound to wake up in 1998 right after you told him. He thought he as at Snowshoe, a resort we had visited a couple of weeks before in West Virginia. It seemed as though he had lost about a month.

At one point, I was talking with the girl about Link's condition. He would be quiet for a minute, pick his head up, and say, "Hey, do you want me to talk? Should I shut up?" This happened several times in several minutes. In Link's mind, he had just awakened to two people talking about him, and he wanted them to know that he was NOW conscious. The problem was that he was ALWAYS conscious. I'll admit that I

didn't cease laughing at him during the whole episode, even when it was explained to us that they were going to have to call an ambulance. They told us that Link wasn't at the "normal level of consciousness". You didn't have to be a neurosurgeon to gather that. There was one problem, however. We had planned on staying at Mark Valentine's place in Boone that night, and Link had the directions. Not good. Will and I went into the room, and asked Link if he had the directions to Mark's house. This was WAY over Link's head. So I said, "Link, Mark Valentine got married, and he's living in Boone. You have the directions to his house. Check your pockets." Link looked at me as though I had said, "Link, I'm Clint Eastwood." So, they called an ambulance, and we followed it to Watauga Medical Center.

The Hospital

As we arrived at the hospital, we were directed to the ER. We were told there that we would have to wait to see Link. I stepped out for a minute to get something to drink, and that's when the doctor came in and said we could see him one at a time. So, I missed the golden opportunity to see my lifelong friend first, but Will Thomas was a fine representative. Will has clued me in on his conversation with Link, and I will retell it as close to the facts as possible.

Apparently Link discovered that the nurses had removed his clothes, all but his whitey-tighties, and placed him in a very drafty gown. He did not discover this only once, however. As Will stood over the invalid, Sir Charles would realize he was in his undies, and say, "Will, look what you made them do! Will got 'em to take off my pants! Wiiiiiiiii, I can't believe you!" Will has told me that Link discovered this fact and made the same accusation over and over again. He topped that, however, with a comment to the nurse. One time, Will claims, as she came over, Link said to her, "You took my pants off, didn't ya? I'm surprised you didn't take my underwear off. I know you wanted to." Now, coming to Link's defense, I can say that he shouldn't be held accountable for this. He was delirious, after all.

I felt Will had spent well enough time with Link, and I went back to see him. It was during this visit that Link saw that the nurses had put an IV in his left arm. Link didn't like that too much, and he realized just how much he didn't like it about 5 times. He would look down and say, "Oh man, they put an IV in my arm." The conversation would progress a little, and then he'd say, "Oh man, they put an IV in my arm." I had a little fun at his expense. Before they wheeled him off for a CAT scan, I asked, "Hey, Link. Did they put an IV in your arm?" Link said, "I hope not!" He then looked down and said, "Oh man, they put an IV in my arm."

He would ask me, "Why aren't you hurt?" I told him that he wrecked snowboarding, and that he was the only one in the accident. He would wait a little bit and say, "Why aren't you hurt?" I told him once that he'd been in a car accident, and that he was the only one hurt. It didn't matter, because he forgot in about 15 seconds and said, "Why aren't you hurt?"

During the CAT scan, Gregg and I left to get Mark (we later found the directions) from his house in Boone. He returned to the hospital with us. They told us Link had broken his pelvis, and then Mark went to see Link. He was holding a wet rag on

his head and moaning and groaning about a severe headache and his broken pelvis. He would look up and ask, "What happened? Evidently I fell on my head. It hurts like the devil. And my hip is hurt. What happened? Evidently I fell on my head. It hurts like the devil. And my hip is hurt." During Mark's visit with Link, he asked Mark, "Didn't you get married?" Mark had gotten married about a month before, and Link was at the wedding. Link said, "Why wasn't I there?" Mark also asked about Christmas Conference, where Mark had seen Link many times. Mark told Link he was at Christmas Conference and that he saw him there. Link said, "Well, I didn't see you!"

Later, Gregg, Mark, Will, and I all went back to see Link. He was laying in the same bed, except this time he had in his hand a big yellow sign that read the following:

Charles Neal

January 8, 1999

You fell snowboarding. You are at Watauga Medical Center. You have a concussion and a broken pelvis.

As you can see, the key words that the doctor wanted to emphasize were fell, concussion, and pelvis. Makes sense. However, Link didn't take this note too seriously. When I arrived in the ER for the second time, Link held up the sign and said, "Hey Rhett, I've got a broken penis!" He told Will and Mark about his apparently malfunctioning penis a number of times. He was really amusing himself, and every time he would laugh he would follow it with a moan because of his broken PELVIS, not penis. He read the sign to me a couple of times, then he got that I've-just-come-into-reality look on his face. I asked, "How many times have you read that Link?" He said, "once."

The nurse finally told us that they were going to keep him overnight, and that was definitely all right with us. Having the same conversations with Link was getting frustrating. The nurse told us that he wouldn't remember anything from that night. We said that we'd call in the morning and see how he was. I called Link at 8:30, and he knew it was me. I asked him where he was, and he said, "Boone, I think." I asked him what he was doing, and he said, "Well, there's a woman taking blood from my arm, and I don't want to talk to anybody while she's doing it." Our conversation ended shortly after that. We returned to the hospital to find Link considerably more coherent. He was still forgetting things, but the whole waking up repeatedly episode was over.

After a day of relaxation and pain relief, Link was released like a restless coyote into the wild. His mind came back and he began to laugh with us about all that had happened. We took him home in the Dynasty just as we had taken him there. To this day Link doesn't remember snowboarding that night at all. He probably never will. The important thing is that a few lucky individuals will never forget it, and I'm one of them.