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Extreme Sports: Are They Worth The Risk?

Angela Walin
awalin_no@sjfc.edu

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Extreme Sports: Are They Worth The Risk?

Abstract

Overview: Broken bones, head trauma, shark attacks, and casualties all while playing the sport you love. Is it worth it? With extreme sports come extreme risks. There are many controversies over these sports as to whether they are ethical or not and why anybody with the right mindset would consider participating in such events. These sports often involve high speed, great heights, a high level of physical exertion, and highly specialized gear or spectacular stunts. Some popular and quickly growing extreme sports in today's society are snowboarding, speed and freestyle skiing, surfing, sky diving, mountain climbing, and wake boarding. Many researchers, psychologists, and sociologists look for the reasons athletes choose to participate in these high risk sports rather than more traditional sports such as baseball and football. A few researchers argue that there are specific demographics that are more likely to engage in these activities. Also, they believe that people with certain personality traits are more likely to participate in high risk activities. My goal is to better understand why people choose to participate in such high risk sports even though they carry extreme risks with them. After recognizing the dangers, people are able to decrease the likelihood of those risks by educating the public, using proper safety equipment, and implementing emergency plans in case dangerous situations outbreak.

The athletes who participate in extreme sports often times value their specific and individual ways of practicing them. In his memoir, Bode, Bode Miller emphasizes his passion to speed ski because he uses his own methods of performing to be the fastest skier in each competition—plain and simple. Knowing which group of people is more likely to participate in high risk sports not only benefits the public's curiosities, but it also benefits the business side of the respective sports. By determining who is most interested in these types of sports, companies can make campaigns and advertisements that are compelling to that specific demographic and ultimately increase their economic revenues. Due to the reputation of extreme sports, they are often times viewed as daredevil activities with unnecessary risks. That being said, a lot of negative speculation revolving around the sport is common in today's society. Various news stories, movies, and other sources in the media help spread the impression of the risks and dangers of the sports. Although the public hears mostly about all the negative effects of extreme sports, there are a variety of ways to decrease one's risk of injuries through proper precautions and practice. In saying that, there are also many benefits to extreme sports as seen in Bode Miller's memoir, as well as interviews with other extreme sport athletes.

Keywords

Writing

Angela Walin

Extreme Sports: Are They Worth The Risk?

Broken bones, head trauma, shark attacks, and casualties all while playing the sport you love. Is it worth it? With extreme sports come extreme risks. There are many controversies over these sports as to whether they are ethical or not and why anybody with the right mindset would consider participating in such events. These sports often involve high speed, great heights, a high level of physical exertion, and highly specialized gear or spectacular stunts. Some popular and quickly growing extreme sports in today's society are snowboarding, speed and freestyle skiing, surfing, sky diving, mountain climbing, and wake boarding. Many researchers, psychologists, and sociologists look for the reasons athletes choose to participate in these high risk sports rather than more traditional sports such as baseball and football. A few researchers argue that there are specific demographics that are more likely to engage in these activities. Also, they believe that people with certain personality traits are more likely to participate in high risk activities. My goal is to better understand why people choose to participate in such high risk sports even though they carry extreme risks with them. After recognizing the dangers, people are able to decrease the likelihood of those risks by educating the public, using proper safety equipment, and implementing emergency plans in case dangerous situations outbreak.

The athletes who participate in extreme sports often times value their specific and individual ways of practicing them. In his memoir, *Bode*, Bode Miller emphasizes his passion to speed ski because he uses his own methods of performing to be the fastest skier in each competition—plain and simple. Knowing which group of people is more likely to participate in high risk sports not only benefits the public's curiosities, but it also benefits the business side of the respective sports. By determining who is most interested in these types of sports, companies can make campaigns and advertisements that are compelling to that specific demographic and ultimately increase their economic revenues. Due to the reputation of extreme sports, they are often times viewed as daredevil activities with unnecessary risks. That being said, a lot of negative speculation revolving around the sport is common in today's society. Various news stories, movies, and other sources in the media help spread the impression of the risks and dangers of the sports. Although the public hears mostly about all the negative effects of extreme sports, there are a variety of ways to decrease one's risk of injuries through proper precautions and practice.

In saying that, there are also many benefits to extreme sports as seen in Bode Miller's memoir, as well as interviews with other extreme sport athletes.

It is important for people to be aware of the dangers that exist in extreme sports in order for them to take the proper precautions to avoid serious injuries. Often times, the truth is bent or exaggerated about the activities and that they are either extremely dangerous in a way that you are basically asking to get severely injured or killed, or that they are so laidback and carefree that you need no training or prior experience. In reality, I believe that extreme sports lie somewhere in between the two extremes. By no means are they completely safe for everyone to do, but then again they aren't automatically going to kill or really injure a person every time. I believe that with the proper precautions and an understanding of the risks that come along with them, extreme sports can be enjoyed both competitively and leisurely to a certain extent.

Many researchers examine not only why people engage in extreme sports but also who participates in them. Many times, stereotypes form about those who choose to participate in extreme sports. Robert Fletcher takes a closer look into the idea of people being more prone to participate in these sports according to their specific social structure. Fletcher states, "I suggest that risk sports appeal particularly to members of the professional middle class because of such sports' capacity to simultaneously satisfy and provide a temporary escape from a class habitus demanding continual progress through disciplined labor and deferred gratification." In other words, he believes that there is a significant relationship between sport and social class because it relieves people of their stress and worries that they deal with on a daily basis (Fletcher 310). However, this theory was later proven false and that, in fact, peoples' willingness to participate in risk sport depended on their own personal traits and characteristics rather than their surroundings (Fletcher 323). Personally, I feel that this idea is somewhat accurate or maybe just a coincidence due to the fact that with my experiences at ski resorts I happened to notice more white middle class participants above all else.

Although there is not a specific gender or sex that makes one more prone to find risk sport appealing, there is still a typical target audience. For instance, it is a common observation that participants tend to be young, more specifically in their late teens through their mid-thirties, and during this specific age period people tend to be in a period of their life suitable for "adventure, experimentation, and the avoidance of strong commitment" (Fletcher 315). According to data collected in the 2005 LG World Championships of Freestyle Motocross, people engage in these

activities strictly for fun and enjoyment, the thrill, aesthetics, and affiliation with the sport itself. The survey was limited to those who have participated in action sport competitions before. This questionnaire was given to 500 athletes, with a 50% return rate, in order to create a variety of results which would result in better suited answers. In order to understand consumer behavior, one must recognize the motivation behind the affiliation with extreme sports.

In contrast, an article out of the Edmonton Journal ,titled “Living the X-treme Dream: More and More Kids Are Turned on to the Thrills and Spills of Snowboarding, Rock Climbing and a Host of other Alternative Sports”, argues that the age in which people find extreme sports appealing is even lower than previously thought. Kids as young as 12 or 13 are beginning to choose dangerous sports such as snowboarding and BMX racing over traditional sports like baseball and football because of the thrill and culture that revolve around them. According to the National Sporting Goods Association, extreme sports are the fastest growing youth sports in the past decade. Edmonton Psychologist Paul Sussman states, “One of the things that attract people to extreme sports is the absence of rules...The rules are the rules of physics. And that’s it.” Author of that article, Curtis Stock, further elaborates this point by discussing how the sports give you individual freedom unlike other traditional team sports.

In one interview, after being asked why they choose to participate in extreme sports, 7th grade snowboarder Kristin Embree states, “Everybody likes the new and popular stuff. The latest and the greatest. I like the danger, the speed and all the wipeouts...all I worry about is wiping out into the trees. Like cracking my head open or something like that”(Stock). This quote illustrates the new attitude that today’s youth has on taking risks and trying new and exciting sports. Stock adds:

For sure, extreme sports are all about attitude, all about making a statement. Like the ones listed on extreme sports Web pages that shout: “Are you afraid to die? Or just afraid to live? We take these risks not to escape life, but to prevent life from escaping us. Beaten paths are for beaten men. (Stock)

In other words, he concludes that perhaps children engage in this relatively new category of sports in order to become a part of the all-around carefree culture of extreme sports. By experimenting with these types of sports, it allows the athlete to fully engage in a thrilling and exiting type of individual competition which, with enough practice, will lead to self-success (Stock).

Researchers also looked at specific personality traits of athletes to see if there was a difference between those who participate in high-risk sports and those who participate in non-risk sports. The term personality trait refers to “a consistent pattern of thinking, feeling, and acting, that differs between people themselves” (Kajtna 25). Researchers use the characteristics of personality traits to compare different people because they contain a basic descriptive component and help explain consistent behavior patterns. The two types of traits are external traits, which can be directly observed such as behavioral traits, and internal traits which are emotional and cognitive traits in a human. The research method included a series of subjects including 38 male athletes involved in high-risk sports, 38 male non-risk sport athletes, and 76 non-athletes. The instrument used in the study was the Big Five Observer Scale which is a model that though it is not generally recognized, it “adequately complements the biologically oriented genetical approach that is the second dominant orientation in modern personality research” (Kajtna 25). The scale of this instrument measures five dimensions: energy, acceptability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness (Kajtna).

The results showed that the highest scores in the five dimensions were always obtained by high-risk sport athletes, followed by non-risk sport athletes, and the lowest scores were obtained by non-athletes. The differences varied depending on which personality trait dimension and which type of athlete, or non-athlete, was being observed. Generally speaking, the differences between high-risk sports athletes and non-risk sports athletes were much smaller than the differences between either of those groups and the non-athletes. In other words, both groups of athletes had higher results in energy, acceptability, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness compared to the results of non-athletes.

From the test results, we are able to see that those who participate in high-risk sports are more emotionally stable compared to non-risk sports athletes (who are more emotionally stable to non-athletes all together). Being emotionally stable is essential for high-risk athletes because they need to be able to remain calm and collected when faced with a dangerous situation. On the other hand, non-athletes have lower emotional control and can be seen as unstable, impatient, and often experience nervousness and anxiety (Kajtna 29). High-risk athletes also uphold key elements of conscientiousness. This means that the athletes can handle and maintain good relationships with other members of the group in which they are a part of because they are all responsible and trustworthy. Athletes who participate in high-risk sports are also found to be

more extraverted than non-risk athletes and non-athletes due to the scoring in the energy portion of the tests. Because of their high ranking in the energy category, high-risk athletes are often times forceful, dominant, brave, sociable, and communicative (Kajtna 30). Overall, through the tests given, you are able to see that there are specific personality traits that are more extreme in high-risk athletes in relation to both non-risk athletes and non-athletes.

There are also a lot of outside factors who take into consideration who is more likely to participate in extreme sports and why they do so in order to promote a company, event, or product. According to Yong Jae Ko's article, Action Sport Participation: Consumer Motivation, motivation is "a conscious experience or subconscious condition, which serves as a factor in determining an individual's behavior or social conduct in a given situation" (Ko 121). It is important to find out which people are most interested in these sports and why in order for the industry to grow and allow other businesses to make a profit.

Many companies choose to affiliate themselves with certain extreme sporting events or teams in order to gain a profit off of the increasing demand and growing market of the sports. For example, Red Bull sponsors over-advertise at a variety of high risk sport events in order to associate their brand with the thrill as well as the overall cutting edge spirit of the games. The real fact of the matter is that the Red Bull company markets their product closely with extreme sports making average people that the product "gives you wings" and allows them to perform the same as the professionals. This is hazardous because it gives average people the thought that they could perform risky activities without the proper training or knowledge of the activity. From Franz Lidz's article, "The Fuel of Extremists (Or, Taurine in Your Tank)", you can see that companies such as Red Bull are one of the reasons extreme sports have become more popular in the last decade. No longer are extreme athletes the only ones interested in such sports, because of companies like Red Bull, many more people are fans and aware of the sports and view as it more of a leisurely, purely adrenaline seeking activity (Lidz).

Companies such as Red Bull also use a lot of endorsers and sponsor events revolving around extreme sports. Red Bull is a huge sponsor of the X Games which is an annual sporting event broadcasted by ESPN which focuses on action sports. American motorsports competitor and stunt performer Travis Pastrana is one of the athletes who is sponsored by Red Bull and endorses them as well. For example, he performed a stunt where he jumped out of an airplane while chugging a Red Bull and screamed "I hope this stuff works!" Of course this was a professional

stunt that Pastrana is a specialized in performing, but it still promotes life endangering situations. Red Bull uses this type of advertising in order to catch people's attention and make viewers curious about their product. Altogether, their advertising techniques must work because Red Bull is currently the most popular energy drink in the world.

Various companies also use the thrill and risk of extreme sports as an advertising technique. Companies tend to target average people, often times tourists, to engage in their action-based activities or sports even though they have little to no experience. Travel companies also embrace people's desire to go on "adventure of a lifetime" excursions by promoting thrilling and often nature filled trips in exotic, unpredictable places. This phenomenon is known as "adventure tourism." The risks advertised are often times underestimated which often leads to careless accidents and tragedies especially because the participants are amateurs and not properly trained. (Palmer). Companies in today's society seem to make risk sports and activities more commercialized and purely as a leisure activities in order to appeal to a larger variety of people. They sell the danger and thrill of the activity to those who crave the excitement as a distraction from their everyday life. This ultimately increases the risks and accidents in the extreme sport because people perform them more carelessly and with little experience which leads to more negative outlooks on the sport.

An example of when risk and danger was sold in adventure package for tourists is the Interlaken canoeing disaster in August of 1999. The Swiss village of Interlaken was a regular stop for Adventure World's Contiki travel circuit where 45 young backpackers were continuing their "cannoning adventure of a lifetime" experience. According to a various reports, there were no proper instructions given by the operating company about the skills needed, knowledge about the environment, and ability one would need in order to survive in the event of a tragedy. Due to the canyon's steep and narrow trails, the tour had a limited view of the weather conditions that were setting in. On that day, a flash flood occurred which killed eighteen tourists and three of the eight tour guides. Although this incident could have happened to any tour on any given day, some day that the victims lives could have been saved if they had been aware of exactly what they were getting themselves into. Although it was purely the weather which caused this horrific incident, some of the backpackers may have reconsidered their participation if they were aware of the risks of this adventure. Overall, I believe the advertisements given by the operating company are

to blame for simply selling the thrill and adventure of the trip and ignoring the risks involved (Palmer).

Because extreme sports are so risky and dangerous when not played cautiously, they are often viewed with an undesirable perspective. Various parties are willing to argue whether or not the involvement in these activities is moral or not. Head of the School of Social and Health Services, Steve Olivier states, “They are dangerous not just because of the environments that they take place neither in, nor because of the intense physiological and physical demands that they require of the participants, but because of elements of unpredictability inherent in the activities” (Olivier 98). In other words, the unpredictability of the sports is what makes them both thrilling and dangerous. Not only does the participation in extreme sport affect the athlete, but also bystanders in the events, families, rescue workers, and society all together. Due to the fact that one’s action has a great potential of affecting another’s life greatly, it is viewed by some to be immortal. On the other hand, some believe that taking away one’s free will and own choices would be unjust and immortal. When it comes down to it, it all depends on each individual to decide whether the benefits of participation in extreme sports outweigh the potential negative costs (106).

When trying to decipher whether or not it is ethical to allow your child or loved one participate in such high risk sports, it might be helpful to look at interviews from families who currently face this dilemma. An article in People magazine contains an interview with Dr. Anne Boyd, a Pittsburgh-based sports medicine expert, who states, “It’s like the difference between a football hit and a car accident...one happens at a much higher velocity, which ups the risk for a more severe injury” about the difference of risk between extreme sport and traditional sports (People). However, author of the article, Alex Tresniowski, assures that wearing protective gear and knowing your limits aren’t precaution enough to protect one from becoming a victim of an extreme sport accident. Tresniowski interviews a family’s 13 year old son, Austin Ekberg, whose passion was to compete in BMX racing even though he knew of the consequences that came along with it. While taking the proper precautions he still managed to suffer minor injuries such as a dislocated shoulder and broken collar bones but still wished to continue competing. A few weeks after those injuries, Austin was practicing with his best friend and hit a bump resulting in him flipping over his handle bars. His bike landed on top of him splintering his back which punctured his heart causing him to die instantly. After the incident, though his family was distraught over the loss of their son, they choose not to blame racing but rather focus on the joy

and excitement their son got from it. His mother states, "If your kid wants to do something and they're dedicated to it, you need to support them" (People). This particular family, along with many others across the country, agrees to the fact that extreme sports are worth the risk because it is allowing their loved ones to participate in the sports they love.

In extreme sports, tragic events are not a rare occurrence; however, this does not seem to affect the athlete's continued participation in the sports. Alex Tresniowski from People magazine interviewed families on this topic and found that people choose to continue after injuries due to their passion for the sport and all their hard work they previously put into it. As discussed in the paragraph above, the main reason people continue participating in the high risk events after accidents and injuries is because the positive benefits outweigh the negative aspects. In other words, the individual participating feels that they gain much more from their involvement in each sport than they are risking in injuries and fatalities.

According to an experiment in the Journal of Humanistic Psychology, various high risk activity participants feel that their experiences left them with a new perspective on life. The study consisted of 15 participants from Europe, Australia, and the United States, 10 male and 5 female, between the ages of 30 and 70 (Brymer 116). Those being tested were participants of leisure activities where the most likely outcome of a mismanaged mistake is death. Many people who participate in high risk sports also claim that after being faced with a life threatening task or situation their perception on life was completely altered in a positive way. Participants report that their changes were permanent, instant, and unexpected (117). They believed that being a part of a life threatening situation actually opened their eyes to a completely different positive transformation of self. One man, Michael Bane claims that he was transformed after a windsurfing session in a storm conditions in 1996. This gave him the mission to re-explore the experience through other extreme sports, and that this journey would "change everything it touches, take me places I've only imagined. It will allow me to reach out and touch...something. Something desirable, something mythical. But as is true of all fairy tales, it will extract a price" (119). In other words, Bane believes that he gained a sense of fulfillment after one specific excursion. He is confident that partaking in extreme sports doesn't necessarily give you a feeling of immortality but it "offers something far less tangible- and far more rewarding" (Brymer 119). Altogether, Bane is an example of someone whose perspective on life has changed for the better after participating in extreme sports.

Participants of extreme sports also agree that they feel a great sensation of humility and courage while they partake in each event. Those who choose to participate in these activities are not only aware of the dangers that come with extreme sports but they are also conscious of the benefits they convey as well. Being a part of mentally and physically demanding activities often times lead the participant to have a better appreciation of life altogether. Laird Hamilton, a worldwide famous pioneer of extreme surfing, claims that he “developed an appreciation of life and living through his experiences of the natural world as something greater than humanity, a realization that changing him emotionally, physically, cognitively, and spiritually” (121). In saying that, one gains a better understanding of how modestly participating in something daring can give them a new perspective of their relationship with themselves as well as with others. Participants also feel a great deal of euphoria after engaging in an activity where they feel real fear because they are aware that if something were to go astray death might very well be a possibility. However, the participants are willing to take the risk because of the powerful positive psychological experiences that are probable after succeeding (Brymer 124).

Bethany Hamilton, in her memoir, *Soul Surfer*, survives a shark attack while competing in her favorite high risk sport, surfing. She elaborates on her death defying experience in her autobiography. On October 31, 2003, at the age of thirteen, Bethany along with two of her friends were out early in the morning casually surfing. She was lying on her back simply floating the water when she was attacked by a 14-15 foot shark. The shark ultimately tore off her left arm just below her shoulder. By the time she arrived at the hospital she already lost 60% of her blood. There she spent the next seven days recuperating from this tragic accident. Although she lost her left arm in the accident, less than a month after the accident, she was in the water again training to be able to compete again. Bethany Hamilton had to retrain herself to surf by using only her right arm, and kick harder while positioning herself differently on the board than she had prior to the accident. Since she started competing again, she has appeared on a number of talk shows such as *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and many others to discuss her inspiring story of not only surviving, but continuing her dream to be the best surfer in the world. A year after the shark attack, MTV Books published her memoir, *Soul Surfer: A True Story of Faith, Family, and Fighting to Get Back on the Board*, about her accident which later became a movie in 2011. Her story is not only inspiring, but makes people wonder what affect these sports have on people that make them go back to participating in them even after such traumatic events.

Although so many negative effects of extreme sports are more often commercialized, many current athletes, such as Shaun White and Bode Miller, give their own person positive reasons for partaking in extreme sports. In Shaun White's interview posted on YouTube with Scott Lancaster, radio host of ABC's of Sport, he discusses why he chooses to participate in risk action sports rather than team sports such as football, baseball, or soccer. White underlines the fact that in those sports you have to rely greatly on those on your team and that sometimes all your individual hard work might not result in the outcome you want or deserve. He emphasizes the importance and time it takes to successfully complete each trick so that the risk of injury is decreased. He also says that he snowboards because he likes the fact that he doesn't have to depend on anyone but himself in order to accomplish his goals. However in skateboarding or snowboarding, White describes the fact that he likes to go out on his own time and work on his own fundamentals that he feels he needs to work on. Shaun White also says that it's crucial to "emphasize the fun element" and loves that he has such a passion for what he does that he sees it as an escape rather than his job.

In his memoir, Bode, Miller describes a different aspect of why he loves participating in extreme sports so much. From when he was little to the age he is now, he always did things his way with his straightforward attitude to be the best. He neglected the instructions and fundamental teaching from his coaches and instead did things his way. He taught himself how to alpine ski simply by following his instincts. Bode states, "I don't master the mountain, I master speed." This signifies how simple and laid back this individual athlete is. Unlike Shaun White who focuses mainly on the fundamentals of the sport, Miller focuses on just finishing fast because ultimately that is what wins the medals. Each athlete show their own technique and overall way of training and competing in extreme sport which is one of the main reasons the athletes prefer them over other team sports. Due to Bode Millers unusual way of training and competing, the media craves his attitude and stories creating his own rules that appall competition officials and coaches (Bode). Using both of these athletes as examples, it is easy to see the reasons why they choose to participate professionally in their specific extreme sport rather than a traditional sport. In both cases, the athletes enjoy the freedom and fun they have competing in what they have a passion in hoping for successful results in exchange for all their hard work. Even though they may seem laidback and only focused on a few aspects of training, they still acknowledge the fact of the risks that may happen while partaking in these sports.

This topic is a main concern for those currently participating in extreme sports because of the negative views and discrimination against the athletes for participating in high risk events. Not only those who are participating in the events getting a bad reputation from the public but also those who support, sponsor, or have any kind of affiliation with the sports. Companies are constantly being hassled for promoting and supporting “death- defying” stunts to the public. Where I stand on this topic is that yes, extreme sports do come with the risk of injuries or death but so does everything else in the world. By all means I don’t support everyone and anyone to go out and snowboard down expert level slopes but if one has that drive to engage in some type of thrilling, high risk event, with the proper training and safety equipment, they should be able to work their way there. As we learned from professionals in these specific sport categories, Shaun White and Bode Miller, there are definitely benefits to participating. They give the individual the freedom to learn from their mistakes and train themselves what they think they need to work on in order to improve. Also, for these athletes, partaking in extreme sports gives them a feeling of euphoria that they can’t get anywhere else. Altogether, although there are risks involved in extreme sports, with enough practice and caution, one can decrease their likelihood of being involved in life threatening accidents.

In order for people to understand the truth about extreme sports, I believe that they need to be educated on the matter in an unbiased way. Instead of teaching the ideas that extreme sports are a “death wish” if you perform then or that they should be done in a completely carefree leisurely way, one should teach both sides of the argument. Make people aware of the dangers but also how to minimize the risks of injury or death as well. There is no denying the fact that with extreme sports comes extreme risk. However, there are many ways to decrease those risks including educating the public, proper safety equipment, and emergency plans in case a dangerous situation comes about. Overall, in order to understand why people choose to participate in extreme sports given the risks and dangers involved, it is crucial to understand all aspects of the sports themselves. By having a better understanding of the fundamentals, risks, safety procedures, and reasoning behind the athletes’ participation, one might find the idea of high-risk sports not so absurd.

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