

"Me and Clare Barnes in the U.S., 2002. Her death hit me hard."

# DEATH IN THE SPORT OF LIFE

BY CHRIS "DOUGGS" MCDOUGALL

**H**ow lucky are we? We found the ultimate sports of skydiving and BASE jumping that have completely changed our lives and created amazing lifestyles, passions, and families of unconditional love. And for each and every one of us, our first skydives—and even our first BASE jumps—changed our lives for the better for evermore. Sure we know it can be dangerous but that's part of why we signed up in the first place, isn't it? The adrenaline, the freedom, the feeling of self-achievement by conquering our fears and achieving human flight, turning a normal, mundane life into a three-dimensional paradise of enlightenment, bliss, and smiles. Sure there is a chance I or my friends could die but I am all over this shit. It can't happen to me, and it can't happen to my mates. I feel invincible.

That's how I felt when I started jumping at the age of 20. I just wanted to do one skydive with my mates for an adrenaline buzz to show myself, and the world, that I am hard core! I heard of people dying but it was just by word-of-mouth or in skydiving magazines so it never really bothered me because I am fine—I am safe and I would never make mistakes, nor would my mates.

And then bit by bit, the deaths and downsides of our beautiful sports came crashing down around me and they haven't stopped since. One minute my friends are there and the next they are dead, gone forever. The most beautiful, amazing, full-of-life people that I have ever met and they are gone forever, just like that. What the fuck! No No NO! This can't be happening. Not to me and definitely not to all my best friends in the whole damn world. How do I deal with this? What do I do now? I can't believe it!

Well believe it! The unfortunate truth about our amazing sports is that there is a very dark side that can be difficult to deal with and that will change your life forever.

While the rest of the world goes on living life with blinkers, working until they retire and dying the slow, miserable death of life, they haven't realized that life can be gone in a split second, taken away forever. We are lucky, really, because by committing to skydiving and BASE jumping we accept that life is finite. That yes, we can die doing what we love, so let's make the most of every single day and enjoy life while we can.

That's great and all but when something does go wrong, whom do we turn to for help, for guidance, for understanding?

We are not like most people and it is very difficult for the normal person to understand our pain, let alone help us because the truth is, we are selfish and we have made these choices in our lives. So at the end of the day we are mostly left alone to deal with the loss of a loved one, a partner, a friend and it is rough—really rough sometimes.

Unfortunately for me, I have been through almost every scenario over the last 15 years in these sports that I love and adore and that have become a major part of my life. I have learned the hard way how to deal with death and I hope this article may help other people deal with death if they are ever faced with it.

I must state that from here on these are purely my experiences and my perceptions. They may be the same as yours or they may be completely different and you may completely disagree with everything I say, which is fine. There are no rules or even guidelines to any of this so it all comes down to personal experiences and opinions. These are mine.

I have put skydiving and BASE jumping deaths into six categories:

1. Someone I don't know dies that I didn't witness.
2. Someone I don't know dies that I did witness.
3. A friend dies that I didn't witness.
4. A friend dies that I did witness.
5. A partner dies that I didn't witness.
6. A partner dies that I did witness.

## 1. Someone I don't know that dies that I didn't witness

It is a lot less traumatic for me if I don't watch someone die. Mostly it doesn't hit home too much if it is a stranger because there is just no emotional tie there. I either hear it by word-of-mouth, by reading it in a paper or on the Internet, or by watching it on TV. Bad things happen every day on TV and it is normal to watch it without emotion.

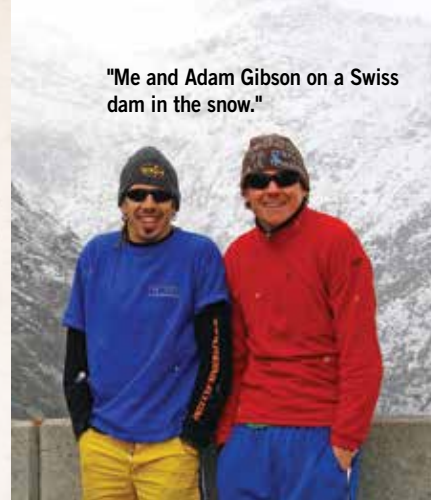
I am able to distance myself from it a little bit because I was not part of their final situation. For me then, the trauma comes from interacting with the people who were there and with their families and friends. I feel their pain, not my own, because I am disassociated from it. Unfortunately, I also built up a tolerance for it over the years, which is a bit sad but it's sort of like a hardened soldier. I am not too sure why but sometimes it is a blessing while other times it is a curse. This is really just a heads-up that this may or may not happen to you. I guess I have just become battle hardened over the years now.

## 2. Someone I don't know dies that I did witness.

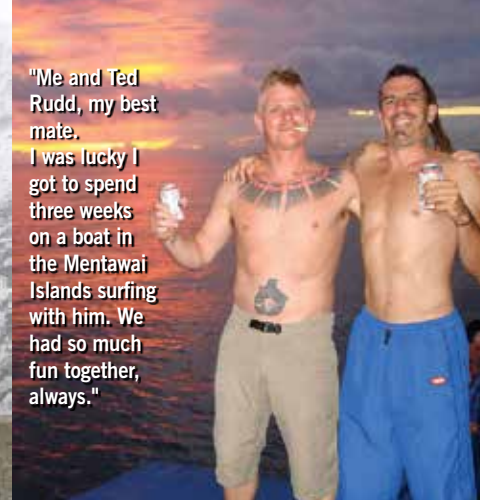
Now for the tricky part—watching someone die. In a word it is fucked! Whether I don't know the person or it is a friend or partner, watching someone die is a horrible experience but it is how you learn to deal with these things over time that makes you a better person. This will sound horrible but I was lucky enough that the first person I watched die wasn't someone I knew. I was on the jump with him but I didn't know him.

It was horrible and I will never ever forget the sound of him hitting the water with only a pilot chute out. It was like a cannon firing. That will stay with me forever. I was lucky enough to have friends around who had dealt with it before and so I was looked after. But watching something like this scared me forever still. The whole experience was surreal and it was a lot for me to take in.

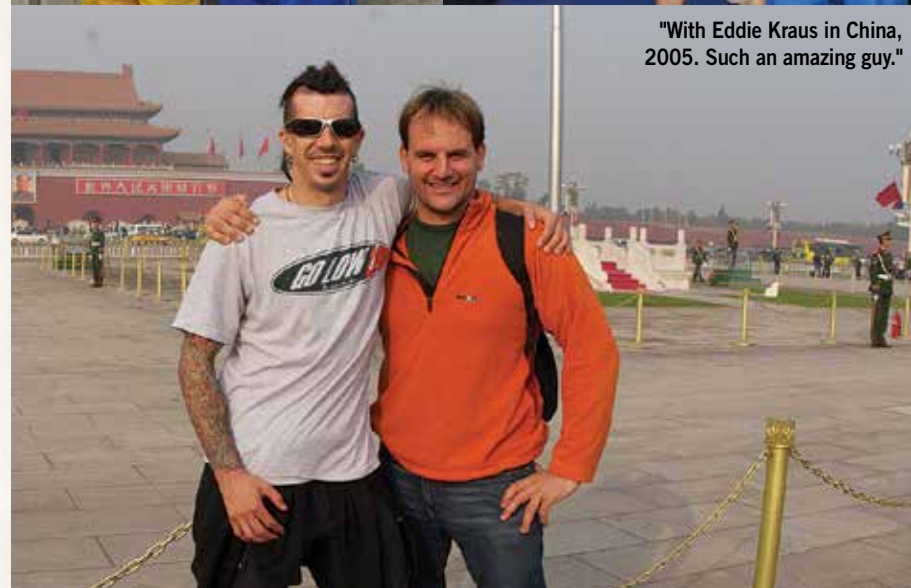
"Me and Adam Gibson on a Swiss dam in the snow."



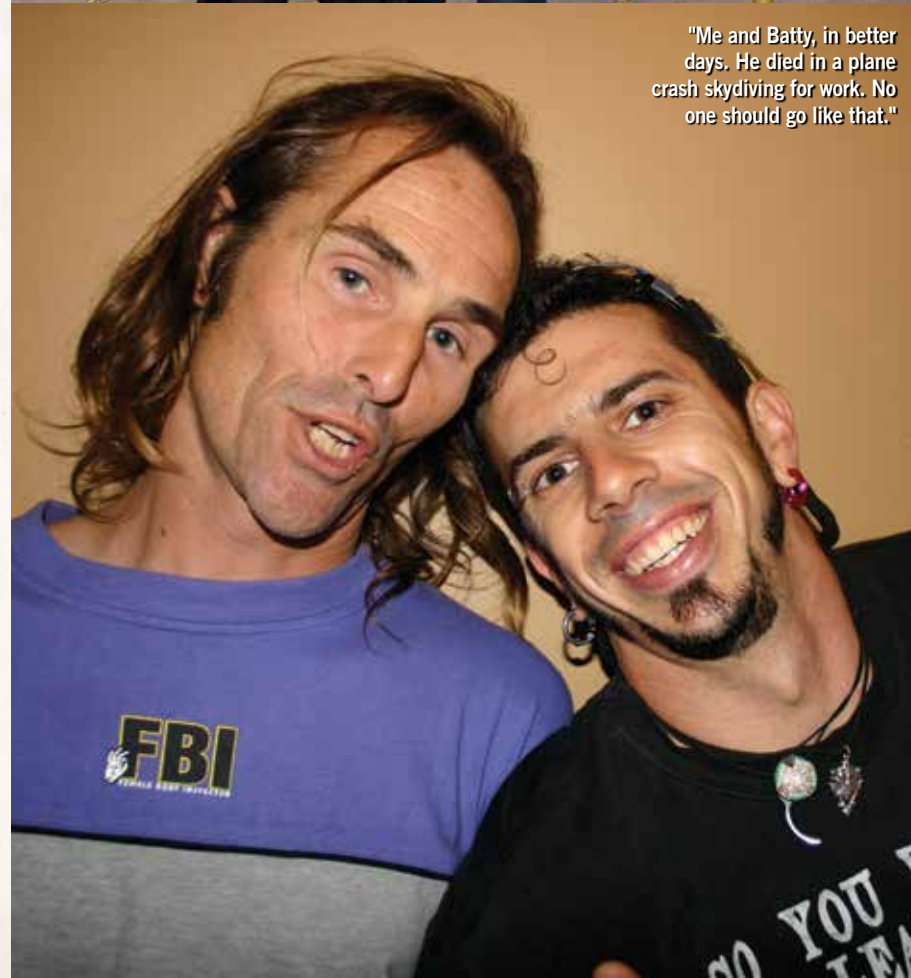
"Me and Ted Rudd, my best mate. I was lucky I got to spend three weeks on a boat in the Mentawai Islands surfing with him. We had so much fun together, always."



"With Eddie Kraus in China, 2005. Such an amazing guy."



"Me and Batty, in better days. He died in a plane crash skydiving for work. No one should go like that."



"Having fun with Coombesy in Oslo before a display jump. So much fun all the time with Coombesy!"



"Rob Kelly, legend BASE jumper and legend guy. He died last year in France wingsuiting, leaving a beautiful wife behind."



"Coombesy, Robert 'Slim' Pecnic, me. Both Slim and Coombesy were my heroes and friends. Slim would die the next morning in China."







"A girl in China, "Big Gay" Steve, me, Coombes, and Mark Spicer. I'm still alive and Mark got out of the sport with his life."

The crazy part for me was how quick someone goes from being alive to being dead. It still spins me out every time it happens. To see a body go from a warm living creature to a cold, pale shell is a horrible experience. Even though you might not know the person, seeing it happen has a major effect, and especially if their friends and family are present, it can get very emotional.

### 3. A friend dies that I didn't witness.

I have lost nearly every one of my best friends. It just sucks. The coolest people in your life and in an instant they are gone forever. But again, not being present to watch them die seems to make it easier to deal with. It is still horrible of course but not being there or watching it on a camera is just so different to actually being present.

Don't get me wrong, when I heard that my best friends Coombes and Ted Rudd had been killed from proximity tracking, it devastated me and I still miss these guys every day. But I wasn't there when it happened. I was talking with people who were there and it is a horrible thing they have to experience.

When you get the news over the phone your heart sinks and you feel so alone. You know that these amazing people are gone forever and nothing will bring them back. You give support to their friends and family and in turn you receive support from them. But the pain of losing a good friend never completely goes away. So you have to learn to live with it and deal with it and support your friends and the family of the deceased through this rough time—and it can take years.

### 4. A friend dies that I did witness.

When you watch a friend die it is totally fucked, and the aftermath is even worse. I had to deal with this last year when they brought my mate down from a cliff in a chopper, hog-tied to the bottom of it without even a body bag. Then I and another friend had to identify the mangled body after a terminal wingsuit impact on a ledge. This was not cool and I would hate to have had to deal

with this as my first death. It was very hard.

Even harder is watching a friend die when there are other friends there or a family member or partner. They do not deal with this very well at all and things can get crazy with emotion, from tears to anger and everything in between. It is a very touchy situation to be in and must be dealt with delicately. It takes a lot of time to get over this type of situation and I never really do. I not only deal with my demons but also their family and friends, and generally have involvement in the funeral arrangements too.

### 5. A partner dies that I didn't witness.

This is one of the hardest things to deal with I am sure. Losing a partner in any situation is a horrible thing—the person you love, gone forever. It can be very difficult to deal with the families of a partner as well, especially if they didn't condone the sports in the first place. There can

be a lot of anger directed at you, which can be hard to manage while you are dealing with your own emotions. But again, not being there makes it just that bit easier for me to dissociate from it all. If your last communication with your partner was not a good one, this can play very hard on you forever until you are able to let it go and move on, which can take years, if ever.

### 6. A partner dies that I did witness.

The hardest one for me was watching my girlfriend die years ago; it still stirs emotions up even as I write this. When my mum died after an 8-year battle with cancer, I had time to get closure with her, talk to her about it all, and say my goodbyes. It actually wasn't that hard when she died and I just moved on over time.

But when my girlfriend died it was in an instant and all the times I had been an asshole and all the things I should've said but will never get the chance to say started haunting me and still does. She had a main/reserve entanglement that I witnessed, and was first to her body. It was a gruesome find, as she hit feet, pelvis, face. I had nightmares for months and needed to keep a photo next to me to remember what she actually looked like alive.

It was the hardest death I have had to deal with so far. I went on a 6-month downward spiral and stopped caring about myself, something that no one should ever do. I was drinking a lot and doing some recreational drugs (which I still enjoy doing) but not in a good way, in a self-destructive way.

It was not going to end well for me if I kept this up. My dad and a couple of friends got me out of it though. Dad was very simple. "Which road do you want to take, son? The upward positive road or the downward spiraling negative road? It is your choice!"

And that is the thing with grief; it comes down to your choice of how you deal with it. You can get on with things and make each day a better day and see the good things and the positive things—or, you can stay in a rut forever and focus on the negative things. I have a family member like that and you can just feel the negativity creeping into you from them; it just doesn't need to be like that.

So how do we deal with all this?



"Darcy, such a great guy gone too soon."

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## AT THE SCENE

Everyone reacts differently, most of the time not in a good way. It is horrible for everyone involved but there is no need to go crazy or panic because it will not change the situation for the better.

When there is a major accident (in any form— BASE, car, etc.) everything slows down for me and I can act very calmly and deal with whatever needs to be dealt with. I have trained my brain over the years (with the help of skydiving and BASE jumping) to process my surroundings at a very fast rate, sort of like a primal animal or early human that was still hunted by predators. This enables me to deal with a lot of bad things easier than most as I can shut down my emotions (for the most part), deal with the situation at hand now, and set aside my emotions to deal with later. It can be a blessing and a curse.

Some people just don't have control over themselves during these dark times, for whatever reason. So if you can train yourself to be calm, reactive, and not freak out and get aggravated during this time then you can be of assistance to the people who are not mentally prepared for such events. A great example is ambulance officers. They arrive at the scene of an accident, assertive but not aggressive, and they stay calm and neutral and just deal with the situation at hand. If you can be something similar to this during the bad times then you will be helping other people a lot and help to not make the situation worse than it already is.

"Mirko, Dan, Wildman, Adam Gibson, me. Mirko was my first student who died from BASE jumping, years after this picture. Adam would be dead within two months."



## Drinking and Partying

When I lose someone I have no hesitation in getting all fucked up with my mates for a day or two. Long-term alcohol and drug abuse to hide your pain is a negative thing, but short term it can be very helpful for me. Once I'm a bit wasted it is a lot easier to bring to the surface and release my raw emotions—get them out there and lay them on the table for me and my friends to see. That way I can start to deal with them because I know what they are.

But for now, just get smashed and celebrate the deceased person's life because most likely they were an amazing person who was high on life and wouldn't want you to be sad forever! So get wasted for a bit, release the pain and start planning on how to move on with life because it is finite for all of us.

## Humor

With my skydiving and BASE jumping friends at least, we use extreme humor and very black humor to get through these dark times. From

an outsider's point of view it seems callous, disgusting, and downright disrespectful that we would talk like that. For me and my mates, it is a release to bring back some laughter in a dark time, which is the best emotional tool to bring positivity back into my life when it's at its worst.

Probably one of the harshest things ever said to me (from an outsider's point of view) was when I watched my girlfriend die. I was on a team called "The Shovels" back then and about two

"Wildman, Atle Dahl, Tom Eric, Ted Rudd, me, and Al McCandish. Al and Ted were great mates, but both would die chasing their passions just too hard core."

hours after she went in, I had just finished with the police and was a total mess. My teammate rings me up and first thing he says is, "At least there was a Shovel there to scrape her up!"

Now to anyone else that may be the most horrible thing in the world to say, but for me it was like, "Oh, you sick mother fucker bro!" With a dark giggle and for a moment it lightened the heavy load I had on my shoulders. Of course this is an extreme comment but one I want to get across to people. Humor is a great way to release pain. We will normally only wait a couple of hours before we give our dead mates shit. Again, it sounds harsh but I would expect nothing less from my mates if it were me! Remember it was their choice to start these sports, as it is yours!

## Crying

I never used to cry. I never really cried after my mum's death but after my girlfriend's death I lost my shit and would cry for hours. Crying is awesome and I recommend it. It is such a great release of pain and a great way to get in touch with your emotions, especially if you are one of these Alpha male macho men out there. You won't cry forever and to cry yourself out is a great way to move forward.

When you stop crying you might get all like, "Fuck man, harden up, and get on with it," or something similar but if you didn't cry it out and become vulnerable in the first place then you'll just keep bottling up these emotions for god knows how long and it is just not healthy.

Now I have gone from never crying to crying during most movies which sux when on airplanes. But again, this is a good thing. It means you are keeping your emotions on the outside where they can breathe and grow and not bottled up on the inside, slowly engulfing you.



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### Time Alone

I always make sure I have a lot of time on my own, not only to have a bit of a cry and reflect on someone's passing but also to reflect on my life—past, present, and future. I can't change the past but I can focus on the present and strive to improve the future. It is good to have time alone to question everything. Your motives, your hopes, your dreams, and things you could've done better. You should of course make sure you have friends around you too but make sure you get some alone time. A good long walk on the beach, through the forest, or in the desert, with or without music.

When my girlfriend died I went to Nepal and hiked to Everest base camp and the surrounding areas. It was a very tough time and I found more questions than answers for sure. But this really helped me in the long run, and it is a long run. The pain doesn't go away overnight so be patient, but always try to see a light at the end of the tunnel. You need this to keep moving forward. The pain never completely goes away for me but it subsides enough to get on with things and make a better life.

### Acceptance

Long ago I accepted my own death and mortality and that is why I have so much fun now—I really know that my time here on earth is finite. Whether I die jumping tomorrow or of cancer in 40 years, my time is still finite—so all of the sudden, most of life's petty problems don't matter anymore and I can get on with things that truly matter (to me) and not worry about what others think and all the man-made bullshit problems out there.

Accepting death gives you the true chance to live and if you work this out while you're young then you are on the yellow brick road to Oz, ticking off all your hopes and dreams along the way. Most people work it out after they have retired, only to realize they worked 40 years to give the bank interest payments for material possessions they don't really need.

So, accept that you will die—and so will every

single person around you, at some point. It is the harsh reality of not only our sports but of life itself. Then at least, if something does go wrong one day with you or someone you love, you will at least be a little bit mentally prepared.

### Choice

If you are reading this then you have probably chosen to be a skydiver or BASE jumper and that is one of the most important things to remember through all the bad times. IT IS YOUR CHOICE!

Obviously none of us chooses to die but if you are going to put yourself in a position where you or your friends can get killed then you have to accept that. No one is making you jump out of an airplane. No one is making you jump off a building. I mean really, what we do is pretty silly. It is amazing as well but we are making a conscious choice to put ourselves right in front of the reaper and tell him, "Catch me if you can!"

I like to put it like this: Every time I go on a BASE jumping trip with my mates, I treat it like we are a battalion going into battle. The battle of freedom and fun! Like in a war, there are sometimes casualties. Unlike in the world wars where they were forced to be there, we have a choice and every time I go on a jumping trip I am fully aware that not everyone will always come back. Again, it comes back to acceptance.

### Hugs and Love

I always try to hug my friends when I see them and hug them again when they leave. If nothing else it is just a cool act of affection to show your friends and family that you care. Most importantly, if something does happen you can at least get some closure from the fact that you gave them a hug and left things in a happy, positive way. This will save a lot of the haunting negativity if you left things on bad terms.

Don't freak out boys, but you can tell your mates you love them too! You don't have to love them in

a family way, a partner way, or a sexual way. But they are your mates! I love my mates just like I love everything good—I love the mountains, I love being happy. Love is a strong emotion and we all have access to it. It has an endless supply so use it as much as you can!

### Time Heals All Wounds

I hate to say it but it is true. Time heals all wounds. The pain might not ever fully go away but it will subside over time. At worst, it will allow you to keep on keeping on and at best, it will help you move onward and upward in your life with passion and enjoyment. It doesn't mean you have to forget your friends who have passed but you can honor them by getting on with things and not dwelling too much—and I bet they wouldn't want you to dwell either!

And lastly...

### At least you got to know them

One of my good friends helped me out a lot after my girlfriend died. She has been BASE jumping for over 30 years and seen a lot of bad and she really hit the nail on the head for me. She said, "These are the people I think about a few times a day," and she rolled off about 20 names. "These are the people I think about once a day," and she rolled off about another 20 names. "And these are the people I think about every now and then," and mentioned another 20 or so names. She said, "The most important thing is that you actually got time with these people, no matter how short it was. At least you had the pleasure of meeting them, knowing them and loving them—what an honor! So many people on the planet never got to meet these amazing people and yet you did, so be thankful for that."

This was a huge one for me and I live by that now. I honor my dead mates rather than grieve for them and I remember how much fun we all had together, how much we laughed together and stoke out on all the crazy adventures we had together.

So remember folks...your time on this planet is finite and so is your friend's time on this planet so enjoy this fact and make the most of it. Always hug your mates and tell them how amazing they are! Try not to get caught up in petty bullshit, as it is a waste of time. If you have a dream, go and live it now, not tomorrow. And be safe out there, nothing is worth dying for. ☺

Hugs and love to all,  
Douggs



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Chris "Douggs" McDougall is one of the most experienced, hard-core BASE jumpers on the planet, and the author of the book "Confessions of an Idiot: A Colourful Tale of a Life in Freefall." Douggs' BASE jumping, speedflying, paragliding, climbing and surfing missions have taken him around the world 100 times over...and it's all been captured on camera. See it all at [www.basedreams.com](http://www.basedreams.com).



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