

Double Black Diamond Slopes: Risky Business?

by

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“Mom! Mom!” Danny flew through the backdoor and dumped his school backpack on the floor.

“Whoa!” His mom stepped back from the sink where she was cleaning up the pots and pans from the casserole she had prepared for dinner that evening. “What’s up? You’re pretty excited. How was school?”

“Oh, school was boring as usual, but Sean’s parents are taking him to Top-of-the-World ski resort for spring break and they’ve asked me to go along. Can I, *pleeeeeease*, can I?”

Mrs. Mason wiped her hand on a towel and looked at her exuberant 14-year-old son’s face. The first thought that went through her mind was a resounding “No!” But she knew that was partly because she didn’t enjoy winter sports, so she paused and asked the string of questions most parents would ask: “When are they going, how long, who’s supervising and what will it cost?”

At warp speed Danny tried to answer all the questions. “Sean’s older brother is supervising, they’re going for a week and it won’t cost much because they said they’ve paid for the condo and it has an extra bedroom so I just have to buy my lift tickets.”

“Well, we need to talk to your dad about this after dinner,” was her reply. All the while her inner voice was loud and clear: *No! You can’t go, you’re my only son! You’ve only been snowboarding for a few months, and I know nothing about Sean’s older brother.*

Danny’s disappointment showed on his young face because he hadn’t received an immediate “yes,” but at least it wasn’t a “no.” It would be so cool to go back to school after spring break and brag about the “big air” he got and talk about the double black diamond slopes he expected to fly down.

“Now, pick up your backpack so someone doesn’t trip on it, hang up your coat and go clean up. Your sister is going to join us for dinner tonight. She finished her midterm at the university early so we’ll all be together for dinner tonight. Oh, and I have a volunteer meeting later tonight. I have a report that I have to present.”

Later, as they were finishing dinner, Mary Mason said to her husband, Dr. Ron Mason, “Danny has something to ask you.”

Danny cringed; he knew he was about to get a lecture from his orthopedic doctor father that typically sounded to him like, “You know, Son, living is going to kill you.” His father, in his opinion, was an alarmist whose gory stories about people’s injuries were too dramatic.

After explaining how little the trip would really cost and providing what meager details he could remember, he looked expectantly at his father. He knew both his mom and dad would have to agree and he hoped he had sounded mature enough to get them to let him go. But before either parent could say anything his sister Tracie interrupted.

“Whoa, Sean’s brother just got arrested for a DUI. He’s so irresponsible! I wouldn’t do anything with him, much less get in a car with him. He thinks he’s indestructible. Don’t you remember last year when he broke his wrist, shattered his elbow and dislocated his shoulder trying one of those stupid stunts he saw in a YouTube video? Dad, weren’t you the one that patched him up in the hospital?”

Dr. Ron thought for a moment and said, “I see so many young people who break limbs trying silly stunts that I don’t usually remember them by name, just by their X-rays. Titanium pins show up so well on those.” Shaking his head, he continued, “Some of these kids pay such a terrible price for not thinking about the possible consequences of their actions. The one I remember most vividly is that young man who severed ...”

“Stop, Dad!” yelled Danny. “I hate those stories. You’re trying to scare me!”

“No son, I’m not trying to scare you, I’m just trying to get you to think through things and plan appropriately.”

Tracie spoke up again. “We’ve been learning about avalanches in my general science class recently and Top-of-the-World has been our case study. They patrol the area and do all different kinds of mitigation, but they had a dry slide there that ranked a 3 on a scale of 5 two years ago and killed four out-of-bounds skiers.”

Danny scowled at his sister, certain that she was trying to sabotage any chance he had of going on this trip. “Tracie, they aren’t going to let anyone get hurt by an avalanche because they know how to fix those things now. You even said they did mitee..., mita..., what word did you use?”

“Mitigation,” she replied, rolling her eyes.

“Well, Danny,” said the father looking thoughtfully at his son. “I need to know a great deal more about this possible trip before your mother and I make any decisions about your participation.”

“Like what, Dad?” At least he hadn’t gotten a “No, you cannot go” for an answer. “What more do you need to know?”

“To start with, I want you to make a list of what you think is important for us to know. Let’s start there. Then your mother and I will discuss it.” Dr. Ron figured that this approach might help his son realize that snowboard trips didn’t just happen out of the blue and that there was thought, planning and costs associated with such a trip. There were definitely safety considerations too. He was inclined to say no, but he was willing to listen if his son did some more investigating on his own. And of course, he wouldn’t let his son anywhere near a car whose driver had a DUI recently. Ron and Mary needed to know a good deal more before making any decision.

Questions

1. List the main characters and describe their attitudes about the perceived risks that Danny might encounter. How did the life experiences of these characters influence their attitudes?
2. Make a list of the appropriate information (qualitative and quantitative) that Danny should have before he talks to his parents about the trip again.
3. List the “risks” that occurred to you as you read the story.
4. Who do you most identify with in this story? Why?
5. Why are the parents hesitant to give Danny a “Yes, go on the trip,” answer right away?
6. What risks can be “managed”? Mitigated? What risks cannot be controlled?
7. What are the possible consequences that Danny could experience if he goes on the trip? If he stays home? Identify positive and negative consequences for each alternative.
8. Formulate a brief definition for personal acceptable risk and for risk assessment (risk analysis).