

Travis Kauffman vs. the Mountain Lion: How an Instinctual Response to Danger Saved a Man's Life*

by

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Travis Kauffman, a 31-year-old man, was a relatively new resident of Fort Collins Arizona, and had been living in the area for just over five years. In addition to feeling discontent with the bleak atmosphere in his home state, Kauffman's desire to achieve a more active outdoor lifestyle heavily influenced his choice to relocate. As an environmental engineer, his occupation demanded more intellectual exertion rather than physical labor, but Travis maintained his athleticism through recreational activity. He wasted no time in acclimating to his new topography by participating in events such as mountain biking and marathon-style trail runs. It was while training for one of these runs that Travis found himself in the grueling battle that would soon make headlines.

On the fourth of February, 2019, Travis Kauffman started his day like any other; he had no reason to think this day's events would deviate from his usual routine. With the "Dirty 30 Trail Race" slowly approaching, Travis put extra effort into making his runs worth while, choosing trails that would be conducive to his endurance training and hill running. He left late that morning wearing only a lightly insulated jacket and shorts as the weather was unseasonably warm. Travis had been trail running for a year now, so he was familiar with the paths he frequented in Horsetooth Mountain Park. He began his 12- to 15-mile run on one of his usual trails. Residual snow on the ground of this particular path made conditions increasingly slippery for Travis, so he chose another nearby trail on which to complete his run. A quarter mile in to this detour, Travis stopped to rest and admire the scenery, but this tranquility was quickly disrupted when he heard the rustling of pine needles behind him.

On most other days, Travis would have had headphones on, playing energetic music to keep him motivated. However, on this day he had made the fateful decision to go without them so as to fully appreciate his natural surroundings. He turned around to acknowledge the movement he had heard, assuming it would only be a small rodent scurrying about. What he saw instead terrified him. There, standing just 10 feet away was a mountain lion, also known as a cougar. Fortunately, Travis could see the lion was small, which led him to assume it was a juvenile. Travis acted quickly, recalling that he had read somewhere that when encountering one of these animals, a possible deterrent to being attacked was to scream loudly and flail your body to increase the size of your overall appearance. He did just that. At only 5 feet 10 inches, 155 pounds, his efforts to intimidate the beast were not effective; the cougar proceeded to come closer and eventually lunged at Kauffman. The mountain lion latched on to Travis's right wrist as he tried to shield his face from the claws (each claw measuring about one inch long). After sustaining lacerations to the face, chest, and legs, Travis felt his epinephrine coursing through his body, and he made the conscious decision to stay and fight for his survival.

He continued to yell, distract and attempt to intimidate the cougar as he managed to push it off of his body with his right wrist still in the cougar's mouth; but this resulted in both he and the cougar tumbling 20 feet into a gully. The mountain lion landed on its back, and thrashed to get itself out of this vulnerable position. At this moment, Travis knew he had to pin down the mountain lion's hind quarters, as he was aware of the power in a feline's back legs from

* Narrative details from *Travis Kauffman Interview Only (1080P for Media)* [Video], produced by Jerry Neal, Colorado Parks Wildlife, 2019. Running time: 10:42 min. <<https://vimeo.com/317311809>>.

owning a cat of his own. He did this with his left knee, protecting himself from being eviscerated by his opponent. Now, only having to focus on the cougar's upper extremities, he deflected the swipes to his face as best he could with his left hand. Surveying his surroundings for possible weapons, he tried stabbing the lion in the neck with a stick with his left hand; unfortunately, it was too brittle to do any damage. Though it was heavy and cumbersome, Travis was able to lift a nearby rock with his left hand and stun the cat with blows to the head. With the lion now disoriented, Travis moved his right knee close to his right wrist in the cougar's jaws and pushed his right foot toward the mountain lion's neck. For a duration of two minutes, Travis held constant pressure on its airway. The lion flailed in desperation as its trachea collapsed, ultimately becoming asphyxiated. Even when the cougar was unconscious, Travis continued to apply pressure until the cat's jaws released his wrist and he knew it was dead.

Although Travis Kauffman had just survived a wrestling match with a mountain lion for ten minutes, he didn't internalize what he had just lived through. Still feeling the effects of his epinephrine rush, he immediately began to run to safety. With his senses now heightened, he was more aware of his surroundings. He now noticed the multiple rocky overhangs in which mountain lions often lurk, and the presence of large paw prints in the snow. Kauffman ran for about two miles before crossing the path of another runner who helped him to the parking lot and drove him to the nearest hospital.

Travis, not showing signs of visible panic, calmly explained the situation to the hospital staff, who were in disbelief that he had survived such an event. The nurses examined him and determined that he suffered from the following injuries: puncture wounds to the upper extremities, lower extremities, and lateral nuchal region; and lacerations to the posterior trunk and left zygomatic region of the face. Prior to his release, Travis Kauffman received a total of 28 stitches and antibiotics to combat any possible bacterial infection in his wounds.

Since his recovery, Travis has resumed his training and trail runs, although he now never runs with headphones on, nor without a buddy when traversing secluded terrain. He advises other runners to do the same.

Questions

1. What were some of the signs that Travis noticed later that should have warned him of a mountain lion being nearby?
2. What are Travis Kauffman's physical attributes that were advantageous or disadvantageous in this case?
3. Would you have predicted that Travis would survive this? Why or why not?
4. Keeping in mind the structures, vasculature and nerve pathways in the body, consider the wounds Travis sustained and describe any deficits he could have suffered. Explain why such injuries could have been life threatening.
5. Would the outcome have been better or worse if the lion had released Travis's right wrist earlier in the struggle?
6. Considering the effects of epinephrine, describe how Travis' overall condition, with regard to his current physiological state, would change as his body returned to normal parasympathetic nervous functions.
7. What do you believe are the specific characteristics of this attack that allowed Travis to survive?
8. What do you think would have changed if Travis had worn headphones that day?
9. Would Travis still have had a chance of surviving if the lion were full grown?
10. All variables considered, do you think fighting was the best choice for Travis? Predict what would have happened if Travis had chosen to flee.