

Paralyzing snowboard accident can't keep Keene native's spirits down, by Steve Gilbert

Posted: Friday, December 12, 2014 12:00 pm

Trevor Kennison knew mid-air he was in serious trouble, life-or-death trouble. A snowboard strapped to his feet, he had launched himself off a 40-foot jump near the top of the 10,662-foot-high Vail Pass in Colorado.

Kennison, an expert snowboarder and avid outdoorsman, was last in the group of three friends to jump. The Keene native had navigated tougher terrain than this — jumps and cliffs with 60-foot drops — so he says he wasn't intimidated yet was respectful of the danger.

But sometimes things go wrong.

Snow was falling on the backcountry mountain (not the Vail resort) Nov. 15, as the three friends hiked straight up the final 1,000 feet. Kennison, 22, decided to ride down with his bindings in the goofy stance, meaning his right foot was forward rather than his left. He wasn't as experienced in that position, but was still comfortable and confident in his abilities.

"I literally went off-access immediately," Kennison said Wednesday by phone from Craig Hospital in Denver. "I was basically parallel to the ground ... and the ground was coming up fast."

Had he maintained his face-first position and simply dropped, he figured his odds of surviving were slim. So he tucked his head into his board as hard as he could, forcing his body to rotate forward into a somersault. His back hit the ground first.

"I could have killed myself if I landed on my face," said Kennison, a 2011 Keene High graduate. "I heard a loud pop and my legs went numb. I didn't cry. I didn't freak out. I was very calm about the whole situation. I knew exactly what had happened."

He tried to call his girlfriend, but couldn't get through and then dialed 911. The poor weather conditions meant rescuers couldn't airlift him out, so he was on the ground for three hours as 1 to 2 feet of snow piled up from the storm. Temperatures were in the single digits. "I don't think I've ever been this cold my entire life," he said.

Eventually, eight rescuers carried him off the mountain by toboggan. He was then transferred by snowmobile to an ambulance, then to the local hospital, then to Craig Hospital in Denver.

He broke a bone in his back and fractured his T11 and T12 vertebrae in his spinal cord, leaving him with no feeling in his legs below his knees. Surgeons stabilized his back with two 12-inch titanium rods, 12 screws and two braces in six hours of surgery.

"I was in a lot of pain at first," Kennison said. "Monday came (Nov. 17), I got in my wheelchair and

today I can do everything by myself — eat, get in and out of bed, dress myself, take a shower.”

He says this sternly, matter-of-factly, from his hospital room in Denver, where he is in rehab. His doctors don't know yet how much movement he'll get back in his legs. He says he will accept — no, embrace — whatever the future holds, be it walking with a cane, with a walker or not at all.

“Once you can grasp you're going to be in a wheelchair, you can accept it,” he said. “Even if I can't walk again ... it could have been worse.”

He was on the cusp of earning his plumber's license, having worked in the trade for three years. He says he was never the college type — his grades were just OK and he didn't want to incur college debt — so he found his niche working at Highland Plumbing and Heating in Eagle, Colo.

He had lived in Rhode Island for a couple of years after high school, moved back to New Hampshire for five months, then moved to Colorado, a nirvana for outdoor enthusiasts. He had already bought his Epic Pass for this year, a ski pass that covers many of the top ski mountains in the Rockies.

“I love it out here,” he said. “I got my work truck, loved my boss, loved to learn about plumbing.”

A stellar athlete at Keene High, Kennison is the son of Olga Pardo and Ernie Kennison, two outstanding former athletes in Keene. Ernie Kennison was one of the region's best runners and Pardo played Division II soccer at Keene State College, won three Clarence DeMar Marathons and coached both the varsity boys and girls soccer teams while teaching Spanish at Keene High.

Pardo today is single, lives in Scituate, R.I., and teaches Spanish in a middle school in Pawtucket. She flew to Denver after the accident. “He kept saying to me, ‘I'm so blessed that I can still think, I can still talk, I'm still Trevor,’ ” Pardo said. “The doctors told me, because of his attitude, he's going to thrive.”

A decorated competitive swimmer as a kid, Kennison had his share of injuries in high school. He was state champion in the breaststroke as a 13-year-old, but tore the labrum in his right arm and couldn't swim competitively for five years. He injured his left shoulder playing baseball, resulting in three surgeries in three years on two shoulders.

That didn't stop him from playing other sports. He was all-state in soccer and all-state in volleyball his senior year. He says that was his proudest accomplishment, because it was his first time playing volleyball.

He is close to his girlfriend and sees a bright future for himself in Colorado — career and sports. His body may prevent him from working as a plumber, but he's already thinking about a career in computer programming.

Sports-wise, thoughts of participating in the Paralympics and competing in triathlons has him eager to begin training. What he's not willing to do is feel sorry for himself. He says he knows setbacks are inevitable, but he just as easily could have been killed on that mountain, so the future is still bright.

Fundraisers have been set up to help offset his medical costs, including online accounts at giveforward.com/fundraiser/fxk6/trevor-kennison and gofundme.com/he2lqg.

He says his goal is to work as hard as possible to get back as much movement as he can in his legs. He will be at the hospital's spinal rehabilitation center for at least several weeks.

"I feel good about how much I've accomplished in just two weeks," Kennison said. "I cannot wait to see what I can do in six months."