

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 6 - Episode 2

An Unlikely Avalanche

Torah Kachur:

The mountainsides of Tahoe Palisades Resort are covered in fresh snow and Loren Ennis is on his first run of the day.

Loren Ennis:

I felt an immediate thud that almost knocked me forward. And I thought a person hit me. And then I realized I kept scooting forward. And then I looked further to the left and I realized, Oh my God, it's a wall of snow.

Torah:

Loren tries to surf it. He's doing everything he can to stay on his board. Above him he sees the chair lift.

Loren:

And I remember hollering at the lift that, know, "Avalanche!" You know.

Torah:

Loren has a full array of avalanche survival gear: a locator beacon, a personal air bag. But he doesn't have any of it with him. He uses that stuff when he's in the backcountry, outside the lines. Today he's at a public resort, so he's left it all in the trunk of his car.

Loren:

You could see the freaking parking lot from this run. And I remember during certain parts of the avalanche literally looking down at my car and just being like, you know, I would have lived if I had that freaking beacon on right now.

Torah:

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar.

As always, we start with the premise that every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. This show is here as a reminder that any of us could be either one of those people every day.

Loren Ennis grew up in Dallas, Texas.

Loren:

The really cool thing that my parents gave me is they would take us skiing once or twice a year. Just great times with my mom and my dad, my brother and my sister playing around in the snow. It's just kind of magical, you know?

Torah:

That love for the mountains took him to Reno, Nevada.

Loren:

We live 30 minutes from Lake Tahoe and just tons of mountains stuff that you can do around here basically.

Torah:

In his 20's, Loren switched from skiing to snowboarding.

Loren:

It's surfing 3000-foot frozen waves is the way I think of it. It's like, what's cooler than that, right?

Torah:

So now his life revolves around his wife, his career as a physical therapist, and spending as much time on those "frozen waves" as he can. Today, he's snowboarding at Palisades Tahoe Resort.

Loren:

If I had to guess, I've probably ridden there over 150 days. Maybe more.

Torah:

So, he knows it very well, including how to avoid the crowds. That's why he's here on a Wednesday morning.

Loren:

I was with my buddy Ben. Ben and I for years had had Wednesdays off together. And so we would always be either going snowboarding, rock climbing, or back country snowboarding.

Torah:

"Back-country" means outside the limits of a ski resort. The trails aren't groomed. You just make your way through the snowy wilderness.

Loren:

We had originally planned to go do some back country snowboarding that day, but we had noticed that the avalanche risk was really high that day.

Torah:

So instead, they decide to stay “in bounds” and spend the day at Palisades Resort.

Loren:

So, we were like, we’ll go to Palisades and, you know, not have to worry about avalanches.

Torah:

They make their way to the lifts.

Loren:

We were just shocked to see that KT22, which is you know, world famous lift, lots of amazing steep terrain. We saw it spinning.

Torah:

KT-22 is an iconic chair lift at Palisades Tahoe Resort. It’s nicknamed “The Mothership,” and it takes skiers up to a summit that gives them access to 2,000 vertical feet of black diamond runs.

They hadn’t planned it, but by chance they’ve arrived on the first day of the season for that part of the mountain.

Loren:

Excited would be an understatement. We were giddy the entire way up.

Torah:

The lift starts running at 9. Loren and Ben are in a chair at 9:03.

Loren:

It’s one of the biggest vertical lifts at the resort. And you get just a fantastic view of the entire Olympic Valley.

Torah:

The two buddies start winding their way down the mountain: Loren a little in front. As he slows down to make a turn, he feels someone slam into the back of him.

Loren:

I was like, oh, man, somebody probably got really injured hitting me in the back or whatever.

Torah:

Then he realizes it’s not a person — it’s a wall of snow.

Loren:

And it was just like my whole body was being scooted at once forward.

Torah:

Snow in an avalanche behaves much like water in a fast-flowing river. It pushes you forward, but since you're denser than the water around you, you also sink.

Then something weird happens. As he's sinking in the snow, the bottom of his snowboard hits something. A bump or a lump of ice, something solid, and that shoves him upwards. He's still mostly buried, but his head and shoulders are above the snow as he's carried along.

Loren:

It felt like a million-pound weighted blanket. It was nuts.

Torah:

He tries to use his arms to swim, but he's still strapped to his board and that's what the snow is pushing. So, he sticks his legs out in front of him and gets pulled feet first.

Loren:

That way it's not flipping me forward because that's what I was afraid of the entire time is that there would be some force that would force my head forward and I would go head first down the mountain face down.

Torah:

He's swimming, floating, surfing, doing everything he can to stay on top of the snow. And for a brief moment he thinks "Hey, I'm going to make it."

Loren:

Like almost laughing, like it looks like I'm going to stay on top of this. And then as soon as that happened, the run turns and there's this area called the G.S. Cliffs and I could see the cliff coming up and I was like, Oh, never mind.

Torah:

If he was boarding under normal conditions, he would make the turn and continue down the run. But he has no way to steer.

Loren:

I stopped like 15 feet above this G.S. Cliffs area. I was about nipple-level deep. But I was able to keep my arms above it. The entire time I'm just thinking like, I've got to get out of here quick. Cause if there's a second slide that's, you know, so much as another foot deeper of snow, I'm under snow again.

Torah:

He's also thinking about his buddy Ben. He was a little further up the slope. Did the avalanche catch him too? Is he dead?

Loren:

We actually landed about 20, 30 feet apart from each other. So I was able to shout out to him.

Torah:

Loren and Ben dig themselves out.

Loren:

We're just kind of looking around. And that's whenever I remember seeing like this black speck, probably like probably like a hundred yards away or so and it was moving. I just was like, holy shit. I think that's a person over there.

Torah:

Loren rushes over. All he sees is a hand with a black glove sticking out of the snow.

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're running from a wildfire, lost under the desert sun, or buried under an avalanche.

Skiing has always been part of Janet He's life.

Janet He:

Skiing is one of the big family sports together. We really like, really had a great time.

Torah:

And a lot of that was done on the mountains around Lake Tahoe.

Janet:

So the Lake Tahoe is I always go to because I am living in San Francisco Bay area.

Torah:

Today, she's here with her husband Joe.

Janet:

My husband and I always like to be the first one on the lift.

Torah:

So, as soon as the hill opens, they line up to get on KT-22.

Janet:

By the time we get to KT22, I think it's about 10 minutes past nine, or maybe 12 minute past nine, something like that.

Torah:

It's the middle of the week so it's not particularly busy.

Janet:

Just some people like getting ready to ski down. It's super normal. This is like a very typical ski day.

Torah:

For their first run of the day, they opt to go down what's called the G.S. Bowl. At that point it looks very easy.

Janet:

I just like go slow. Yeah, so at the time, like Joe was probably about maybe 60 feet ahead of me. So, I told him like, go slow, slow down, slow down.

Torah:

Her husband stops to one side and pulls his phone out of his pocket.

Janet:

And I think he also probably stopped and took some pictures for me or maybe make some video recording.

Torah:

But then she notices that he isn't looking at her. He's taking a video of something higher up the slope. Suddenly, the ground beneath her lifts up and throws her forward.

Janet:

And then before I knew it, before I know what I should do, right? I already kind of swept me away to the cliff.

Torah:

An avalanche is rolling down the mountain, picking up everything in its path, including Janet.

Janet:

Just imagine you are in a giant washing machine. It's just like keep rolling down the mountain, bounce kind of bounce here, there, but keep rolling, rolling.

Torah:

She is carried along, tumbling, no sense of up or down. The rolling thunder drowns out all other sounds.

Janet:

I'm sure nobody can hear my screaming.

Torah:

As suddenly as it starts, everything stops. She's buried faced down, unable to move.

Janet:

I refused to think the word of like die, but I, at some point I say, uh, my word come to mind. It's like, this is it.

Torah:

A little aside here: Janet loves skiing, but she doesn't like the cold. So rather than

just regular goggles, she wears a full-face ski mask. And that creates a little pocket of air around her nose and mouth for her to breathe. Right now, that pocket is keeping her alive, but it's not big and it won't last long.

Janet:

So that's why I have to force myself to calm down. Otherwise, I think if I did keep heavy breathing, probably it's gone pretty soon.

Torah:

She tries to wiggle her fingers. That's when she realizes her left hand is still holding her ski pole.

Janet:

I was able to kind of like use the pole and then pull on myself a little bit so I can release my right hand. I was able to wave my hand. I don't know who can see me, I just wave my hand.

Torah:

Incredibly, someone does see her tiny hand sticking up through the snow. And that person, is Loren Ennis.

Loren:

And I was just shouting the entire time, like, "I got you."

Torah:

He has no idea where Janet's head is. So he starts digging in circles around her hand. He finds her elbow then follows that to her shoulder.

Loren:

She was face down, head first down the mountain. She was in a really crappy orientation.

Torah:

He clears her face so she can breathe, then gets to work moving the rest of the snow.

Janet:

After he pulled me out, I say "Thank you." And he said, "Are you skiing with somebody?" Then I realized I need to look for Joe.

Torah:

Janet has no idea where her husband is. It turns out that they were right on the edge of the avalanche. Joe was only 60 feet away, but he was left untouched.

Janet:

My husband is more traumatized from the experience than I was because like when he turned around, I was disappeared.

Torah:

For Janet and Loren, their parting was odd, almost jovial considering the situation.

Janet:

So after I say thank you to him, of course, I didn't realize the gravity, right?

Loren:

And then she grabs me and is like, "Take a picture with me."

Janet:

We took a selfie together.

Loren:

So, I felt weird about the picture because I was like, man, this does not seem like a time to be taking pictures or anything like that.

Torah:

Janet is euphoric about being alive. Loren, meanwhile, is wondering how many other people were caught up in the avalanche. In his head, they could be standing on top of other trapped skiers.

Loren:

She was super stoked. I was super stoked. You know, something happy happened out of this terrible situation, right?

Torah:

All around them on the hill people are calling out for their skiing partners trying to make sure everyone is accounted for. Complete strangers join together and form a line. They walk in unison jabbing into the snow with fence poles searching for buried skiers. The ski patrol arrives on the scene within minutes, bringing word that one person has been found dead.

Janet:

So then we realize how bad the situation is. I have the most terrible experience personally, but I also saw how people are helping each other, right? And I think I saw the best side of the human being.

Torah:

And that includes Loren.

Janet:

It's just like saved my life. He's the person to pull me out. And you know, I'm so grateful.

Torah:

Loren's story, however, quickly took a dark turn. He went to work the next day. Then on Friday, he went back to the mountain to snowboard. The first couple of runs were great. He saw the spot where he had been swept up and the spot where he had dug

out Janet.

But after a couple hours his arm started to feel heavy, then numb, and by the evening his whole torso was in pain.

At the emergency room he was diagnosed with severe damage to the vertebrae in his neck that was impacting his nerves. He consulted a handful of neurosurgeons and was referred for cervical disc replacement surgery.

Loren:

What they did in the end is I have three artificial disks in my neck. They're made out of titanium alloy and ceramic alloy. Honestly, the whole process of like leading up to that surgery was, that was way more scary than the avalanche was to me.

Torah:

It's been two years since the avalanche, and Loren has spent much of that time doing physiotherapy and rehab. But I'm glad to say, he's now fully healed and yes, he's back to doing what he loves, surfing those frozen waves.

And he says everything that happened, has changed his perspective on all the time he spent goofing around in the snow.

Loren:

I feel like it gave meaning to all of that because it helped me keep me safe and it helped me keep somebody else safe. So I think that's pretty dope.

Torah:

Loren's injuries turned out to be quite severe. But I mean he was caught in an avalanche, so I guess that shouldn't be surprising. But what about regular skiing or snowboarding — is that dangerous? And how can we make it less so?

To answer that I sat down with Leslie Desrosiers, a doctor of physical therapy who is also an avid skier. What are the most common ski injuries, snowboard injuries? What do you often see?

Leslie Desrosiers:

Yeah, with skiing, it's primarily knee injuries. So that's the that's the number one most common injury for skiers. And typically involving ligaments. So the ACL, I don't know if you're familiar with the ACL, anterior cruciate ligament, ACL injuries are really common just because of the nature of twisting and turning that we have in skiing.

Torah:

Is it catching an edge? Like what causes that?

Leslie:

Yeah, I mean you can catch an edge as you're rotating and sliding and turning. If your ski catches an edge, then you have that long lever arm of the ski and that

force with your body going one direction and then your ski or your lower leg all of a sudden changing directions or turning or stopping and that momentum can just lead to a twist at the knee that can go right through the stabilizing ligaments. So, the ligaments are what hold the knee together.

Torah:

What about snowboarding?

Leslie:

Yeah, snowboarding, you know, we do see ACL injuries in snowboarding, not as many, but we get a lot of upper extremity injuries with snowboarding — falling on the wrist, falling with the arm outstretched, shoulder dislocations, that kind of thing.

Torah:

So, if you're planning a day on the mountain this winter, you want to reduce the risk of getting injured, how do you prepare?

Leslie:

Start a strength and conditioning training program to prepare your body for the demands that are on the snow. There's really nothing else exactly like that. And so even if you're active throughout the year, your body isn't necessarily prepared for the demands on the mountain. So if you can prepare with just the right types of exercises that strengthen through the legs, the quads, the hamstrings, the glutes, but then especially targeting the hips and the core. Those are really key to improving your body awareness and your alignment and then giving you the resilience to withstand the forces on the mountain.

But beyond just strength, mean, that's gonna include things like balance exercises and some agility work and moving different directions. So a lot of people forget to work side to side because a lot of what we do with running and biking, everything is in a forward direction that we forget to strengthen laterally or side to side or in rotation. And then when you get on the mountain and you're on skis or a snowboard, you're in these rotational movement patterns. And if you haven't developed the strength to control that, then you're at a higher risk for injury.

Torah:

So it's more than just a wall sit.

Leslie:

It's more than just a wall sit. Yeah, more than just squats. Exactly. That's so funny you mentioned that because that is the thing people fall into. They think just strengthen your quads. Just do wall sits or do a squat challenge. But there's so much more to it to really, really protect yourself from injury.

Torah:

But that's the muscle you feel when you're skiing, right? It's your quads are burning. So you think the next time I'm gonna be stronger just in my quads.

Leslie:

You do, you do feel those quads burn, yes. Right. And interestingly, when you do strengthen your core and your hips, you actually take a little pressure off your quads so your quads don't have to do all the work.

Torah:

What are your top tips to prevent injuries in winter sports?

Leslie:

Yeah, the first tip is to prepare as best you can physically, physically and mentally. That day, there's things you can do that day, like warm up. Just taking five to 10 minutes of moving your body and warming up the right muscles before you hit the slopes, that's gonna make an impact as well.

Staying hydrated, staying fueled, minimizing stress, minimizing fatigue. A good tip is to carry snacks with you so that you can, you're able to have a bite and get some snacks in so you don't hit that fatigue wall. When you do, you can get distracted more easily. And when you get distracted and you don't make decisions quickly, enough or you slow your decision making processes slow down that can leave you more vulnerable to injury.

Torah:

And maybe don't go for that spread eagle that you could do when you were 20.

Leslie:

You know, what's interesting though is with a lot of injuries, like major injuries like ACL injuries, they're not always with those big air jumps and big moves. And so often, because it's such a devastating injury that has such a long recovery time, people want to be able to have a big story of something magnificent that they did, but in reality, I see it time and time again that it's just a slow moving, even a standing still, twisting fall, and that can end up in a torn ACL. So it doesn't have to be that big impressive jump. It can be just something small, slow, maybe being distracted, maybe just getting knocked off balance.

Torah:

Should the threat of injury prevent us from skiing or snowboarding?

Leslie:

No, absolutely not. You know, the body's amazing in that we can improve our capacity to handle demand. So if you are staying in control, if you are staying aware of your body and following the rules, then chances are you're going to finish the day in one piece, feeling good, feeling strong and having had a great day.

Torah:

Leslie, thank you so much.

Leslie:

You're welcome.

Torah:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people.

We share a new story every other week, but if you are in the mood for another one right now. Scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes.

On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

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