



## HEAD GAME



### HEAD GAME LIZ DENGLER

# LEARNING FROM OUR FEAR

**T**hough our tolerances may differ, at some point in our flying careers we all experience fear. Whether it's prepping on launch, getting dumped out of a ratty thermal, or cascading out of the sky, ultimately, it doesn't matter what gets your heart pumping, as long as you put in the effort to learn from those moments. Developing a long-term approach to analysing moments of fear makes it easier to handle when they happen again out in the wild.

Teague Holmes is an accomplished ski mountaineer and a free-flight pilot. He crushes big lines in the backcountry that most of us wouldn't even dream of touching. So what does big mountain skiing have to do with fear in free flight? More than you might think.

"Paragliding and backcountry skiing have a lot in common because you're looking at snow or air – both are natural mediums that are, generally speaking, invisible," says Teague. Like in free flight, you use the information available to make the best predictions possible, but as Teague says, "We never really have all the information necessary to make 100% informed decisions. We're always making partially informed decisions."

We can't always see what is waiting for us: a rock just under the snow to clip your skis; the downdraught of a ripping thermal; the lurking avalanche. With skiing, just like free flight, once you launch, you're in it. As Teague says, "We pay our money – we ride the ride." We can't simply stop performing when we get scared.

It's clear that when it comes to navigating fear, the greatest successes come from learning to assess those feelings at the end of the day. A good place to start is learning about rational and irrational fear. Teague says when he starts to feel scared, he always checks in with himself. "I ask myself if this feeling is in line with reality. Is this rational fear – is it warranted? Or am I just getting in my head?"

Some of this assessment comes from your preparation. Did you do your homework and analyse the forecast? Knowing what to expect can reduce the fear because it removes some of the surprise elements.

Teague was also quick to say that ego and expectations are big monsters we must face. "On a recent trip, I had a moment of fear while standing at the top of a couloir. I was opening it up for the team, and I felt pressure on my shoulders as the significantly more experienced skier to do well," he says. "But that's not where my head was at." Taking a moment to process it gave him clarity on those feelings. "I assessed the situation and my mental and physical condition, and decided that, given the circumstances, this was a pretty reasonably valid fear."

That said, he didn't turn back. "I knew I could get down the whole thing safely. I just wasn't going to start off turning the way I wanted," he says. "I side-stepped until I got to a place that looked good and then checked back in with myself."

Teague credits years of experience taking the time to process fears after the day is out. Doing so has allowed him to move the mountains and process that fear quicker while in the moment.

Of course, pilots don't always have the time to side-step – often, they just have to react. That's why taking the time after a stressful flight to dig into the experience is essential. It gives you the space to address what happened, understand why you got scared, and assess how you can move forward. Learn from the experience so that next time you

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can discern if it is something to listen to or push away.

After a scary flight, Teague faced a bit of an internal battle. Though the group knew they were launching the lee (common in Colorado), once in flight, the air was more violent than they anticipated. "I could have done more preparation," Teague says. "I had to acknowledge that I made a poor decision to fly that day, and that really bugged me." He continues, "If I were going to process that situation, I would have to set my ego aside and recognise that I messed up. I made a bad decision. And I am capable of making a bad decision again."

Though it can be difficult to face our egos, it helps us learn so we can process future situations better. "If you have one of these negative experiences, you have to sit with it. You have to let it guide how you're going to move forward. Those are the experiences where you survive, and they help you refine your limits," says Teague. That's not to say that you can't progress and push yourself. But, if you have a moment like this, "If you survive that experience, you damn well better let that guide your career."

There is a degree of danger in this sport that many folks put blinders on to. But Holmes thinks the healthier and more responsible option is to face and incorporate it into our fear assessments. "There is a degree of accepting the risk we're taking," he says. "We all have to accept when we're going to push it and when we're not." Our fear is there to tell us something. "Sometimes, you have to listen." **KB**

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