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Dueling the Devil

Thomas Moore loses a fight with a river but gets a rematch in rehab.

By Brittney Saline

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Thomas Moore

Thomas Moore couldn't move. More importantly, he couldn't breathe.

The rapids he had so deftly navigated just seconds before engulfed him with no warning, wedging his kayak between two boulders and trapping him nearly 4 feet beneath the surface of the San Joaquin River, deep within California's Eastern Sierra.

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Moore was the first of a five-man crew to tackle the rapid, and it would take minutes for his friends to notice his absence and locate him under the churning whitewater.

"I could feel immediately that I was pinned," said Moore, 35. "I knew that a rescue was possible only by me."

The speeding currents pummeled his back like a jackhammer, folding him at the waist toward the bow of his boat. After he shook his hips in a vain attempt to free his boat from the boulders' vice, he knew he had to abandon his kayak.

In a "wet exit," a kayaker will pull a cord near the cockpit to release the spray skirt, a flexible cover worn around the waist and attached over the cockpit to create a watertight seal. Pushing down with the feet while raising the hips, the kayaker pulls free from the boat.

But pinned facing down a 45-degree angle, Moore suspected that once the spray skirt was removed, the force of the water filling the cockpit would wedge him even further into the kayak.

"Part of me thought, 'This is a horrible idea,'" he recalled. "But there were no other options. ... It's a bad scenario to know that my only choice is a horrible idea."

Hearing only the dampened scream of the currents enveloping him, he thought he was going to drown.

He gripped the side of the boat, thrust his feet down and popped his hips, pushing himself out partway. But the raging current immobilized him just below the knee. His legs were forced against the cockpit rim, crushing his knees and causing agonizing pain.

"I've never felt pain like this," he said. "I felt like I had shackles around my knees and ankles. I've never felt so helpless."



Moore's love of kayaking led him to seek out challenges, including Cherry Creek in California.

Submerged for more than a minute already, Moore was lightheaded from lack of oxygen. Hearing only the dampened scream of the currents enveloping him, he thought he was going to drown.

"I tried like hell to get free, but it felt hopeless," he wrote in a [blog post](#) after the accident. "It was at this moment that I thought it was over."

Call of the Wild

Moore's affinity for adventure began in childhood.

A minister's son, he had little opportunity for lavish family vacations as a boy, and for Moore and his older sister, Melanie, holidays meant camping trips in the Redwoods or the foothills of the Sierra Nevada near their home in the small town of Plymouth, California.



Thomas Moore

The Devil's Postpile Run is one of North America's toughest, and it almost claimed Moore's life.

"I've always enjoyed being out under the stars, just getting away from everything," he said.

At 16, Moore took up snowboarding. Self-taught, he was not content to drift down the manicured runs of commercial slopes. Instead, he ventured into the backcountry to freestyle over cliffs and chutes, the narrow trenches between mountainside boulders.

The allure was more than the adrenaline rush, Moore said. He relished solving the puzzle of the landscape.

"Being faced with something that is both physically and mentally challenging has been my true passion," he said.

In 2003, he traded the slopes for the rapids. While lounging one summer day on the banks of Sacramento's American River with his wife, Stacey, the sight of kayakers paddling by piqued their interest.

"We said, 'That looks like fun. We should try that,'" Moore recalled.

The couple began with a two-day whitewater-kayaking fundamentals class, learning basic skills such as how to stay upright in the boat, read current lines and maneuver down Class I and II rapids. Ranked from I to VI by the American Whitewater Association, a rapid's class determines its difficulty.

"Class I means it's moving water," Moore explained. "(Class II) adds more riffles and actual whitewater."

Every weekend they practiced. According to Thomas, Stacey was the better kayaker, often remaining upright in rapids that would buck Thomas overboard. But while Stacey wearied of the sport after a few months, Thomas' passion grew, as he found in whitewater what he had loved in snowboarding.

Though he had been studying to become an engineer, he dropped out at 26 to help run his father's new business and devote more time to kayaking.

"(Kayaking) really changed the focus of what I wanted to do with my life," he said. "It's a tough thing for a guy who has a nine-to-five job to chase the whitewater."

On the river, Moore found mentors in the kayaking community who taught him advanced moves and rescued him when he failed. By 2005, he was running Class IV and V rapids, turbulent waters fraught with steep drops, obstructions, sieves and hydraulics, or “holes” in the river where the current flows backward.

The price for such thrills is a constant dance with death.

“The water will suck you down and spit you out 10 feet downstream,” he said. “I’ve gone underwater and traveled like a submarine. . . . It’s an amazing feeling.”

The price for such thrills is a constant dance with death. In addition to visible hazards, rapids can conceal hidden hydraulics, some with undercurrents leading through tunnels underground.

“Some rapids you look at and say, ‘If I swam there, I could drown,’” Moore said.

In a March 2002 [study](#) on whitewater safety and usage across 30 major U.S. rivers, American Whitewater, a nonprofit organization protecting whitewater rivers throughout the country, reported only 64 fatalities among 7,420,563 whitewater boaters between 1994 and 1998.

Still, the threat of serious injury remains constant.

In 2001, the British Journal of Sports Medicine [reported](#) that of nearly 400 whitewater kayakers surveyed globally, 56 percent had sustained injuries within a five-year period ending in 1997. According to the study, one-third of the injured boaters were forced to take a month or more off the sport to recover.

“There is little to no room for error,” Moore said. “With this (sport) comes great rewards like nothing you can put into words, but with anything that comes with such reward, there is an equal or even greater risk.”

Crack of the Earth

Stretching more than 300 miles, the San Joaquin River is California’s second longest, after the Sacramento River. Comprising the North, Middle and South forks, it weaves its way from among the peaks of the Sierra Nevada through the San Joaquin Valley, eventually merging with the Sacramento River to flow into the San Francisco Bay and the Pacific Ocean.

Fed by the melting snow of the High Sierra, the Middle Fork begins at Thousand Island Lake in the Eastern Sierra. More than 32 miles long, it rushes by Devil’s Postpile National Monument near Mammoth Mountain in eastern California. Just south of the monument, 30 miles from the nearest road, is a stretch known to whitewater kayakers as the Devil’s Postpile Run, revered for its formidable rapids and striking beauty.



Thomas Moore

A truly extreme sport in certain rivers, kayaking places paddlers in a battle with nature, and mistakes can be very costly.



Thomas Moore

Its remote location makes for amazing scenery but puts Devil's Postpile Run far from medical assistance if something goes wrong.

Like a freeway entwined in a metropolis of rock, the river writhes between canyon walls 50-100 feet apart and 1,500 feet tall. The granite skyscrapers block the sun's warmth until well into the afternoon.

"You're really in this crack of the Earth," Moore said.

It's a sight beheld only by the most expert paddlers. Requiring multiple days to traverse, the Devil's Postpile Run features rapids rated as Class V-plus and "is considered one of the hardest runs in North America," Moore said.

Many sections are accessible only via difficult portages on land, requiring kayakers to clamber with their boats and gear—often weighing up to 90 lb.—over perilous stretches of the craggy mountainside.

"Even finding our way around the rapids is difficult," Moore said. "If you don't want to run the rapids, you have to do some serious rock climbing."

But Moore was no novice paddler. The trip that almost took his life was his fifth consecutive year making the Devil's Postpile Run, and he knew every drop, slot and hole.

"I was feeling really confident the whole trip down," he recalled.

The journey began on Tuesday, June 3, 2014, with a six-hour drive from Sacramento to Devil's Postpile National Park, where Moore and his friend, Chris Madden, camped near Mammoth Mountain. The pair put out at dawn the next morning, meeting Darin Mcquoid, Moore's kayaking partner of eight years, and brothers Jim and Tom Janney on the river around noon. Four out of the five had paddled the run before, and all were expert kayakers.

The water was fine, and for two days, the men played.

Charging through slides and boulder gardens and "boofing" over drops and waterfalls, the crew traversed nearly 20 miles, paddling for up to five hours each day and camping early each afternoon to enjoy the scenery. (In a boof, a kayaker leans back to raise the bow, preventing a nosedive upon landing.)

On Thursday, they negotiated a daunting five-rapid section known as The Crucible before camping near a pool below the breathtaking 200-foot Shangri-La waterfall.

"There's only one way out, and that's down the river."

—Thomas Moore

At 7 a.m. on Friday, Moore woke with a sense of disquiet.

Thursday's 90 F weather had brought runoff from the melting snowpack of Mammoth Mountain, raising the water level a considerable 6 inches.

"There was an unspoken edge and nerves because the river rose quite a bit," Moore recalled. "But there's only one way out, and that's down the river."



Thomas Moore

This shot, from Cherry Creek, shows the significant drops kayakers must navigate at times.

The men breakfasted on oatmeal and tea before loading the boats with their gear, putting out around 9 a.m. for the journey's final leg. The sky was clear, and Moore looked forward to attending his niece's high-school graduation ceremony later that night.

After paddling down some easy Class II rapids and making a short portage, the crew approached a Class V rapid. Moore scouted for the group, returning with instructions.

The rapid would take them down a 10-foot drop into a hydraulic before shooting them through a slot—a narrow space between two boulders—on the right. The plan was to pause at an eddy, a pocket of calm water, on the left before running through the slot.

Moore was the first to go, Mcquoid following 10 feet behind.

They boofed down the drop, sticking the landing. Mcquoid went for the eddy, but the rapids pushed Moore straight into the second half of the run. Charging toward the slot, he was a few feet too far to the right, and a second, smaller hydraulic pushed back against him.

Going for the slot, Mcquoid appeared at Moore's left side. They laughed as their boats knocked together like bumper cars before Mcquoid darted through the slot.

"That's the last time I remember being upright in my boat," Moore said.

In one swift motion, Moore was pulled under, as though the river had opened a gaping mouth and swallowed him whole.

Approximately 60 feet downstream, Mcquoid looked over his shoulder.

"Thomas was gone," he said. "I was confused."

Madden and Jim Janney were the next to pass through the slot, Jim catching a glimpse of blue beneath the surface as he paddled. He assumed Moore had abandoned his kayak.

"I thought he had swum, and that it was just so submerged because it was full of water," he said.



Courtesy of Thomas Moore

Trapped underwater, Moore (left) thought of his wife, Stacey, and wrenched himself free of the kayak.

The pair met Mcquoid at the bottom of the rapid. The boulders upstream obstructing their view, they presumed Moore was stuck behind a rock. He would appear any second, they thought.

"As more time went by, we started getting really worried," Mcquoid said. "His paddle came out first, and that's a bad sign."

Meanwhile, Moore fought.

"I was in so much pain, and I was losing oxygen," he said. "It's amazing how much energy you lose when you're holding your breath and you try to fight."

As his stamina waned, he thought of his wife of more than 13 years. He and Stacey had met at church when he was 18 and she was 16. Three years later, they were married.

"I proposed to her on the beach along the northern coast in California, and we got (an) extremely bad sunburn sitting in the sun, drinking champagne and being in love," he said.

His first kayaking partner, she was the first to pluck him from the froth when he spilled overboard.

"I would be swimming down the river, and she'd help me get to the side, and it was just the two of us," he said. "She's always been so open and supportive of me and what I want to do and what I love."

As he struggled beneath the water, he knew he might never see her again. The sorrow renewed his fight.

"Just the thought of her, that she'd be alone, that she wouldn't have me—she's my everything," he said, his voice breaking with emotion. "I thought, 'I just can't go out like this.'"

With all his remaining strength, he violently shook his hips. He felt his knees buckle as they dislocated sideways. His right leg came free, but his left foot caught on the cockpit rim.

With one final shake, he kicked off his shoe and his left foot popped free. The current took him immediately, slamming him into some rocks and pulling him deeper underwater before spitting him to the surface.

Legs lifeless beneath him, he drifted downstream sucking wind, a drowning man's first breaths above water.

Mcquoid and Tom pulled Moore from the water onto a flat boulder about 150 feet downstream from where he had surfaced.

"I remember looking down at my legs, and my knees were hinged to the right like a puppet," Moore said.

Madden set emergency beacons on the surrounding rocks to summon a rescue team while Tom, an ER nurse, stabilized Moore's legs with a SAM Splint and a second, makeshift splint made of a disassembled spare paddle and duct tape. He laid Moore on a sleeping pad, covered him with a sleeping bag and administered painkillers from his first-aid kit.

The pills took more than an hour to dull the pain, which was excruciating. Moore squeezed Mcquoid's hand and counted each breath, fighting to keep a panic attack at bay. Moore's friends murmured encouraging words while the hours ticked by, the rushing wind between canyon walls an aural mirage of rescue.

Four hours later, a sound like a choir of horns and steam engines thundered through the canyon. Overhead, a helicopter emerged from above the canyon rim, passing over twice before lowering a paramedic to the rock below.

"I was smiling so hard to hear that chopper appear," Moore said.

Tom and Jim helped the paramedic cinch Moore into a transport bag while Moore and Mcquoid met each other's gaze.

"We both had tears in our eyes," Moore said. "It was really intense to leave my group."

The cable retreated, pulling Moore out of the Earth and into the sky.

Shattered

Moore's first night in the hospital was hell.

After he arrived at Community Regional Medical Center in Fresno, California, nurses set his legs, holding him at the ankles and jerking his knees into place. Then, he endured hours of X-rays and MRIs, each transfer causing agonizing pain.

"I was screaming at the top of my lungs," he recalled.

Meanwhile, Stacey endured the torture of waiting. The trauma ward was overwhelmed, and no visitors were permitted inside.

"I left work in an emotional panic and drove two-and-a-half hours to the hospital," she said. "All I wanted to do was be with him. ... I had to sit and wait, and it was horrible."

At 9 p.m., she was allowed to see her husband.

"I heard Thomas say 'Hi, babe!' and I turned to my left and saw him laying there with a huge smile on his face," she



Courtesy of Thomas Moore

During his violent fight for life, Moore tore three ligaments in each knee.

Courtesy of Thomas Moore



Like any CrossFit athlete, Moore couldn't resist an opportunity for pull-ups, even while his legs were immobilized.

recalled. "I was so happy to finally be with him."

"It was such a huge relief. It felt so good (to see Stacey)," Thomas said. "It was beyond words."

While fighting for his life, Moore tore the ACL, LCL and PCL in each knee, dislocating both and tearing the patellar tendon in his right knee, causing a tibia fracture. Over the next three months, he would undergo three surgeries, spending more than a month bedridden with metal rods drilled into the femur and tibia on each leg to immobilize his knees. For five weeks, he sat with his legs outstretched in front of him like a child, feet perched on a footrest made of carpeted wood and jerry-rigged onto the front of his wheelchair.

The slightest sideways motion would cause the rods to tug flesh from bone.

"It was like a worst nightmare, like something you see in a horror movie," Moore said. "I was losing my mind with pain

and anxiety. . . . I wanted to die I was in so much pain."

Nine days after his accident, Moore was transferred to UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento, where he spent another week learning basic rehabilitative skills such as transferring between his bed and his wheelchair and

Moore, a CrossFit athlete of two years, used a trapeze rigged over his bed to do pull-ups.

dressing himself. Stacey spent nights curled on a pile of blankets on the floor by his side.

"It's hard to watch my husband have so much pain, to have



Courtesy of Thomas Moore

Moore tore the patellar tendon in his right knee, fracturing the tibia in the process.

his life changed so drastically," she said. "I have tried to be strong for him."

Over time, pressure sores developed on Moore's buttocks and heels. So Moore, a CrossFit athlete of two years, used a trapeze rigged over his bed to do pull-ups.

"I just wanted my butt not to be sitting down," he said. "I could only do it for about 10 seconds, but just the joy of feeling my butt off the ground, it felt great."

After Moore's release from the hospital, the couple moved in with his sister, Melanie, who took leave from work to help care for Moore. Though he had loved ones at his side, the abrupt transition from a successful, fast-paced life to a bedridden, housebound existence threw him into a depression.

"There have been moments where I've felt shattered, like a piece of glass that can't be fixed," he said. "I can't even pick up the pieces. There (are) too many of them."

"The physical pain is one thing to deal with, but it wears on your mind," he added. "The physical pain leads to mental anguish and worrying. ... It forced me to think about things and decisions I've made in my life that I wish went another way. You have nothing to do but think."

As he lay in bed, he dwelled on time spent chasing the whitewater instead of nurturing relationships with family, including Melanie, from whom he had grown distant following his parents' divorce years ago.

"I've kind of pushed certain people in my family away," he said. "I filled so much of my time with kayaking and outdoor activity that I've kind of neglected those relationships."

In mid-July, the rods were removed and Moore began the arduous process of rehabilitation. Seeing a physical therapist once a week, he began with knee bends, at first reaching only 20 degrees. After surgeries in August and September, he was cleared to bear weight on both legs in October, standing for up to 30 seconds at a time.

It was a far cry from the PRs he was used to setting, like jumping atop the 42-inch box at CrossFit East Sacramento.

"I look at a 6-inch curb and I can't even imagine jumping on it now," he said. "I want to feel alive, to feel my heart beating, the sweat pouring down my head—I want to do CrossFit again. It seems almost impossible at the stage I'm at now, but yet something in my brain says I have to have hope. You have to be chasing something."

So Moore chased.

Fight for Today

Two to three times a week, Moore trained his upper body at CrossFit East Sacramento while doing up to three hours of rehab exercises for his knee each day. Taped to the floor next to where he worked was a sheet of paper reading, "Never give in."

"There have been times where I thought, 'I want to give up. I don't want to fight anymore,'" he said. "But if you give up hope, what are you? Hopeless. And being hopeless is a sad, miserable place where you lose your mind."

Moore said the discipline he learned through CrossFit has helped him persevere in his recovery.

"The habits I developed with exercise and the ability to keep on pushing is something I keep looking back to," he said. "CrossFit has allowed me to go to that dark, difficult place where your mind and body want to stop, yet you somehow continue on."

In November, Moore drove for the first time since before his accident. Transferring himself from wheelchair to walker and tossing both in the back of his truck, he drove to his wife's office to bring her a bouquet of fresh flowers.

The couple moved back to their own home in December, and in January, Thomas PR'd his post-surgery stair climb by 24 flights, hiking the stairs of the parking garage where Stacey works.

"I parked in the bottom story, walked to the top, got in the elevator and rode it down," he said. "It felt good to have something to fight toward."

One month later, Moore did 20 air squats and a few reps with an empty 45-lb. barbell. And for the first time since his accident, he danced on the water again, running a Class IV rapid in mid-February with braces on his legs. He crawled to the water's edge while friends carried his boat and paddle.

"For the first time I felt equal and normal again," he said. "I am so slow when it comes to walking or getting around, so to be able to go fast and run rapids was just great. . . . it's hard for me to truly express what this moment meant, but it brought tears to my eyes."

Nearly a year after the accident that ripped Moore from his fast-paced, venturesome life, he's had time to reflect. Like an immersion school for open communication, he said spending months in his sister's home has helped them rebuild their relationship.

"It's really brought a peace to that and made our relationship grow," he said. "We've been able to talk about things that we've never talked about, things that happened when our parents divorced. It's a really bittersweet way to change your life, . . . but in a lot of ways I'm grateful. I have a chance to redefine myself and how I connect with people."



Thomas Moore

Cherry Creek (pictured) might not be in Moore's immediate future, but he was back in Class IV rapids in February, braces on his legs.

And for the man who once thought he had no fight left, life is beginning to look like an adventure again.

"We look at things and we think, 'I can never do that. I can't ever do a pull-up,'" he said. "And there (are) certain things that maybe you won't, but if you don't continue to fight, you'll never find out where you can be."

He added: "Enjoy the journey, enjoy the fight. I don't know where I'm going, but I know what I'm doing today, and today, I'm going to fight."



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brittney Saline contributes to the CrossFit Journal and CrossFit Games website. She trains at [CrossFit St. Paul](#) in St. Paul, Minnesota.