

Mountain School Tech Tips: How Not To Win When Rolling the Dice

I have a friend who subscribes to the “slot machine theory” of accidents in the mountains. Pull the handle and get one lemon, nothing happens, two lemons, nothing happens, but get three lemons in a row and you're a winner. The lemons in this case are bad decisions. Make one bad decision, and you'll likely get away with it, compound the first mistake with a second, and still you'll walk away, but pull three bad decisions in a row, and you could just be a winner.

Most mountain accidents result not from one wild quirk of fate, as we'd like to believe, but a series of bad decisions or judgments that build one upon another until something finally goes terribly wrong. Often, the initial errors are small and easily brushed aside, like starting an alpine climb at 9 am instead of 5 am, taking a wrong turn on the trail on the way in, or simply failing to discuss ahead of time how you'll handle a situation with your group when one member of the party gets separated from the rest.

Pretty much every mountain traveler has heard the oft repeated quote: *“Good judgment comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment¹”* But, gaining experience and good judgment in the mountains should not necessarily entail epic escapes, near death accidents, and an increasing spiral of bodily injuries. Gradually increasing the technical and physical difficulty of your mountain trips, choosing experienced partners with good mountain sense and judgment skills, and practicing basic skills until they are second nature are all ways that climbers, hikers and scramblers can gain experience without losing limbs. Most important of all, however, is an honest appraisal of our own judgment and decisions, and the ability to admit we have made a mistake. We can then move ahead and use what mountain guides call “error correction” to move our trip back into a situation where we are operating within acceptable margins of safety².

1 Evan Hardin

2 Technical Handbook for Professional Mountain Guides