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June 1, 2005

Climber dies in fall on Bells

Son escapes with minor injuries

 By **Tim Mutrie**

June 1, 2005

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A Lakewood man was killed Monday in a 400-foot fall down a couloir on the Maroon Bells, and Tuesday his dinged-up son/climbing partner walked out of the backcountry to report the accident.

The victim, Kip Ryan White, 49, and his son, Jordan Cole White, 19, were roped together descending a steep and narrow east-facing chute between North and South Maroon Peaks known as the Bell Cord Couloir, aka Grand Couloir. It was some time after noon.

"Father was belaying son, and one of them fell," said Pitkin County Sheriff's Office Patrol Director Ann Stephenson.

Both Whites were sucked down the couloir, which has an average pitch of 45 to 50 degrees.

Experienced climbers, according to authorities, the duo had apparently reached the 13,800-foot saddle that marks the top of the Bell Cord and separates the Bells' two distinct 14,000-foot-plus summits. But the weather was deteriorating and they opted to turn around before making the summit of 14,156-foot South Maroon, their most likely itinerary.



A Mountain Rescue Aspen team carries the body of Kip Ryan White after recovering it Tuesday from the Bell Cord Couloir on the Maroon Bells. Aspen Times photo/Paul Conrad.

Two Mountain Rescue Aspen climbers lead the body of Kip Ryan White during the recovery from the Maroon Bells on Tuesday afternoon. Aspen Times photo/Paul Conrad.


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Based on reports from Jordan White and Mountain Rescue Aspen members who retrieved Kip White's body later Tuesday, authorities said the Whites fell from a point about one and a half rope pitches (about 225 feet) below the saddle.

Jordan was knocked unconscious for some time; authorities said his helmet was cracked open. When he regained consciousness, he located his father about 30 to 40 feet downhill, at about 13,360 feet, and determined his dad was dead.

Jordan had to down-climb another 600 feet of "no-fall" terrain on his descent to Crater Lake, at about 10,000 feet, then hump another two miles to Maroon Lake. But darkness forced him to spend Monday night under some trees, according to authorities.

The Pitkin County Sheriff's Office got the call at 6 a.m. Tuesday, after Jordan had apparently driven his dad's truck down Maroon Creek Road to Aspen Valley Hospital, Stephenson said.

But first Jordan called Luann White, his mom, in Lakewood, Stephenson said.

According to authorities, Jordan suffered a broken bone in his leg during the fall, but he was otherwise OK. Jordan was released from AVH early Tuesday afternoon.

"The two deputies who spoke with him said he was very shaken, as you might imagine," Stephenson said.

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At least two other parties of mountaineers set out to climb the Bells early Monday. But the two other groups - one headed up the North Face of North Maroon, the other attempted South Maroon by an east-facing couloir similar in aspect to the Bell Cord - turned back after encountering unsavory conditions and weather.

Kent Harvey, a cinematographer from Carbondale, was with his wife, Amy, high in one of the couloirs leading up South Maroon when he spotted the Whites early Monday.

"We saw them starting out on the lower snowfield after sunrise," Harvey said. "We were at about 12,500 feet and the snowpack was variable, pretty crummy, hadn't froze overnight and you had like a three-inch breakable crust with slurpy snow underneath."

"And that coupled with the weather - graupel snow, windy, kind of your classic spring storm, a big moisture salad with the peaks socked in - we decided to split, head down."

Harvey, a former mountain guide, thought he saw the Whites descending, as well, as he and his wife changed out of their snow-climbing gear at the bottom edge of the lower snowfield about 8 or 8:30 a.m. Monday. But then he didn't see them again so he figured, with the weather going in and out, they were continuing up.

"When the weather turned bad and my call was to turn around, I just thought, 'Wow, they're hard core and they're going for it.' You know, everybody has their own method to their madness."

The Bell Cord Couloir, steep and gnarly, is one of the familiar tumbling grounds that, over the years, gave rise to the Bells' nickname, the "Deadly Bells." The moniker was coined as part of a public awareness program sponsored by Mountain Rescue Aspen and the U.S. Forest Service, according to mountaineer and author Lou Dawson of Carbondale.

Dawson, author of "Dawson's Guidebook to the Colorado Fourteeners," yesterday recalled numerous pitfalls on the Bells, including several in the Bell Cord Couloir.

As word of the accident spread Tuesday, several local mountaineers noted it was late in the day for the Whites to be on an east face like the Bell Cord.

"If you're snow-climbing any of these east faces," Dawson said, "you want to plan on being on the summit when the sun hits. You want that nice firm snow because that's what gives you control for your axes and crampons."

"The footing this time of year can be excellent, but if it softens, you'll get a layer of mucky snow. And it gets stuck on your crampons and you can't get purchase. Then, if you fall, while it's fairly soft on the surface, once you get going and you try to self-arrest there's only mush to bite into."

"It's happened to a lot of people up there," added Dawson, an accomplished climber and ski mountaineer. "One guy, and I won't say his name, fell on his skis and ended up hanging upside-down where his skis snagged between the rocks. That's a true story."

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Members of Mountain Rescue Aspen reached Kip White about 2 p.m. Tuesday and started the painstaking process of lowering his body down the steep, narrow chute. Other team members were placed at strategic places farther down the slope to help with the grim chore.

At one point a Mountain Rescue member ran down a long snow field to retrieve a body bag, then hoofed back up at least a thousand vertical feet.

After they negotiated the steep section of the chute, the rescue members had to skirt a small cliff face with the body



Mountain Rescue personnel maneuver White's body down the Bell Cord Couloir between North and South Maroon Peaks on Tuesday. Aspen Times photo/Paul Conrad.

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before reaching a more gentle snow field that took them to the West Maroon Creek valley floor.

Wranglers from T-Lazy-7 Ranch and Capitol Creek Outfitters came up the trail from the Maroon Lake parking lot and intercepted the retrieval party south of Crater Lake. On horseback, they took White's body down to Maroon Lake, where a Mountain Rescue vehicle transported it to Aspen Valley Hospital for an autopsy.

Meanwhile, life went on as normal in the heavily visited Maroon Lake area. Most tourists sightseeing around Maroon Lake or hiking to Crater Lake were unaware that someone had been killed in a climbing accident in the area.

Aspen Times Staff Writer Scott Condon contributed to this report. Tim Mutrie's e-mail address is mutrie@aspentimes.com.

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