

No Bull—

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Boots like this mechanical bull-rider is wearing might have prevented the victim's injury.

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While attending the Aerospace Basic Course (ABC) in Alabama, I became aware of a gap in the safety program: the hazards of riding a mechanical bull.

One of my classmates who was addicted to line dancing but didn't have a car asked me to take her some place where she could get

a "fix." We found a nice bar off-base—called True Country, or something similarly unoriginal—one Wednesday night. I knew the night would be short because I usually prefer sleeping to dancing and drinking. Noticing an inactive mechanical bull in the corner, I said, "I bet some of the guys would bring you here this weekend if you tell them there's a mechanical bull." She agreed this was a good plan, and we returned to base shortly thereafter.

In case you don't know, Air Force training bases require temporary-duty students who engage in high-risk activities to undergo a briefing. (This briefing is geared to guarantee they'll do nothing when later engaged in the activity to render it enjoyable.) There is a list of specific high-risk activities, such as skydiving, downhill skiing, and motocross racing, and anything not on the list, by default, isn't

I'm Hurt

considered high-risk. Riding mechanical bulls wasn't on that list when we attended ABC, which seems surprising, since most Air Education and Training Command (AETC) bases are in the South.

The Monday morning after our trip to the bar, I was greeted with the question, "Did you hear about James?" This 32-year-old, prior-service butterbar had ridden the mechanical bull.

Everyone else had been thrown off. James was doing well, though, and, as he got better, the operator turned up the skill level—just to make sure James didn't get bored or fall asleep. At one point, the bull went up and right, and James, being skilled, counterbalanced by throwing his weight up and left. Unfortunately, his right foot became trapped momentarily between the bull and its pedestal. He heard two distinct snaps and realized these weren't good sounds. After uttering a choice word or two, he released the rope and slithered as gently as possible to the padded floor.

James said he didn't immediately feel anything, but he knew something wasn't right. Meanwhile, the gang rushed over laughing; they assumed the bull just had bucked him off until he said, "I think I hurt my foot."

One of the students—a future pilot, if that instills any confidence—said, "Oh, you just twisted your ankle." He immediately grabbed James' shoelace and started tightening it to prevent swelling.

James quickly stopped him. He saw something jutting out oddly on the inside of his leg and calmly said, "I think I need to go to the emergency room."

The students picked up James, put him in a car, and drove him (moaning) to the nearest hospital, where a nurse showed him an X-ray

of his leg. She explained the tibia wasn't supposed to be sticking out against his skin like a tent. She also said the fibula wasn't supposed to be lined up with the butt-end of the tibia like it was, nor was part of his heel supposed to be free-floating. This information, coupled with the fact the shock was wearing off, nauseated James, so the nurse gave him a continuous morphine drip, and he was very "happy"—when he was conscious.

James underwent emergency-reconstruction surgery about 0700 Sunday morning and emerged with a 6-inch metal plate and seven screws in his ankle. Extra bags of morphine kept him in a painkiller stupor for five days, and he missed the final week of class. He also spent several weeks on convalescent leave when he returned to his duty station.

What could have been done to prevent this mishap, other than not getting on that bull in the first place? More appropriate clothing—boots, instead of the tennis shoes he was wearing—may have helped, but no one knows for sure. He also could have remembered and had more respect for his advancing years and physical condition. There are many things you can't do that you did 10 years ago.

Some might wonder if alcohol was involved, since this incident happened in a bar. James, however, was drinking responsibly. He had consumed only one-and-a-half beers on a full stomach.

Mechanical bulls may look harmless, but, as James learned, they're a rough way to have fun (and to think I'd have been on that thing with the rest of them if I had been there). It wouldn't surprise me if the AETC commander adds mechanical bull-riding to the list of high-risk activities. ■