

HIGH ACHIEVER

When a BASE-jumping accident left Florida-born thrill-seeker **JAY RAWE** with life-changing injuries, he used his mental strength and positive outlook to find a new, adrenaline-fuelled calling

WORDS CHARLIE ALLENBY

When leaping off the Perrine Bridge on the outskirts of Twin Falls, Idaho, BASE jumpers have just six seconds of airtime from launch to impact in the Snake River, 148m below. A 24-year-old Jay Rawe knew the timings like the back of his hand: Perrine Bridge is where he'd cut his teeth. But, in March 2014, it would also be where his life came crashing down.

While attempting a daring jump that involved standing on the shoulders of fellow BASE jumper Austin Carey, Rawe became unbalanced. He tried to abort and jump back onto the bridge but didn't make it. As the pair plummeted, they were able to open their parachute canopies partially at the last second, slightly softening their fall and cheating death. Rawe suffered a burst fracture of his L1 vertebra and tore a ligament off the bone on his ankle. He also sustained peripheral L5 nerve damage affecting his glutes, hamstrings and calves.

But rather than end his participation in action sports, Rawe's life-changing injuries led him to try a new pursuit: sit-skiing, a discipline where the athlete sits in a bucket seat attached to a single ski. Now, almost 10 years later, the 34-year-old is at the forefront of the freestyle sit-skiing scene. This April, he became the first sit-skier to attend the Swatch Nines – an invite-only camp featuring some of the world's best skiers and snowboarders – and was voted MVP (Most Valuable Player) by his fellow riders. Feeling fitter than ever, he hopes to keep pushing the envelope while showing others what's possible with a disability.

THE RED BULLETIN: What inspired you to take up BASE jumping?

JAY RAWE: When I was a kid in Bradenton, Florida, my grandpa had a pilot's licence

and he'd take me flying from municipal airport to airport. I always wanted to be able to fly without a plane. How could I get close? BASE jumping. You need skydiving experience, so at 21 I did my AFF [Accelerated Free Fall licence], where I met friends with the same interest. In 2013, one of them saw Red Bull Air Force's Miles Daisher post online that he needed a roof built on his house in exchange for a first jump course. Me and two buddies packed up a car, drove from Florida to Idaho, and roofed his house that summer.

How did life change after you broke your back just eight months later?

After surgery, I was in ICU for eight days before transferring to Florida for in-patient rehab. A doctor said I might never get any [movement] back. In my mind, I thought, "I'm going to get back to 100 per cent. I'll be BASE jumping in six months." I'm not back to 100 per cent yet – I walk with a cane and have a brace to stop the toes of my left foot tripping me, because I've got drop foot [an inability to move the front of the foot]. But I've got much more [movement] than I had. And I did BASE jump seven months later. When I got to the bridge, I had all this fear, but it went as soon as I was up there with my friends.

How did you discover sit-skiing?

I was in a bad place. I moved home from Idaho, didn't have a job, was drinking a lot, and was working hard in the gym but not seeing progress. I met my now-girlfriend and we decided to do a road trip. On the trip, we went to Utah, and my mom and girlfriend convinced me to try sit-skiing. All the videos I'd seen showed people being steered down the hill, which didn't look like anything I wanted to be involved in. But then I saw a video of [Canadian Paralympian] Josh Dueck doing a backflip and that changed my whole mindset.

How has it helped you?

It gave me something to get up for and look forward to, and it gave me a creativity mindset [rather than] a victim mindset. Also, being the first person to do a 360 and the second to do a backflip has given me this purpose to show there's a way out for anyone in a similar position to me.

Are you not scared of injuring yourself again?

I could sit on the couch, watch people who are doing this and wish I was there. Or I could find a way to do this safely and understand that I might get injured – it wouldn't be worse than wishing I'd been doing it. Living a fulfilled life is doing the things I enjoy. Those things happen to involve a lot of risk, but I do everything I can to not step too far across that line.

You were voted male MVP by the other riders at Swatch Nines 2023. What did that mean to you?

I had put weight on my shoulders – I was the first sit-ski athlete to be invited, so I was speaking for the craft and needed to show that sit-skiers weren't any more of a liability than any other skier or snowboarder. When I got voted the riders' choice for MVP, it felt like acceptance.

What's next?

I've got different trick progressions on my list, including the cork 1080. I've also been interested in doing a sit-ski-BASE jump. Before I got hurt, I wanted to learn how to ski, for the sole purpose of doing a ski-BASE jump. I've found a way to do it safely, so I'm going to go for it next March for the 10-year anniversary of my accident.

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**“Living a fulfilled
life is doing the
things I enjoy”**

Sit-skiing has allowed Jay Rawe to pursue his passion for action sports after his 2014 accident