

CHAPTER 1

Going Up!

Considering my chosen profession, it really didn't come as much of a surprise to learn that I was born in a hospital elevator on my way up to the maternity ward. It seems that I've been 'going up' ever since.

It may have been nothing more than a bizarre coincidence, but I've always found that detail to be ironically amusing. My mother used to tell me that I have always been in a hurry. So being an impatient type of guy is a trait that I was apparently born with and most who know me will attest to the fact.

Every career has a beginning, but because of my age and some rather unusual circumstances, how I got started is regarded by most as unique and somewhat extraordinary. I can still recall my mother's

inspirational words, which were of course intended to instill practical common sense and rational values in her somewhat wayward twelve-year old son. "Just because one of your friends tells you to jump off of a bridge, you aren't going to jump...are ya?"

Well...since I had already been there and done that, those old clichés don't always apply to every situation and each individual. What was I supposed to say... 'No'? I certainly didn't want to lie to my loving mother. I was thinking honesty, more along the lines of George Washington and the cherry tree.

"Well Ma, it's like this; Mike Czech, Randy Dickenson and I have been diving off the old bridge for the past few weeks."

"You did what? ...jumped off of a bridge? What the hell is the matter with you boy and what were you thinking? My son thinks he's Superman and leaps from tall buildings with a single bound. Where did I go wrong?"

I wasn't quite sure if she was going to pass out from the shock or slap me silly. I'm sure she must have thought that I had completely lost my marbles and maybe to some degree I had, but I proceeded to reassure her. "It's really not that big of a deal mom.

And we don't jump, we dive...you know, like Acapulco."

"Oh my God! Dana, don't you realize that you could kill yourself doing silly stunts like that?"

"No way ma! We checked out the water first. It's plenty deep and we're real careful. Matter of fact, we had a contest the other day and everybody said I won. So I must be pretty good at it." Her hands clasped her head and she glared up at the ceiling as if in silent prayer. "We're gonna have another contest on Saturday. You and dad should come out and watch" I stated with an air of cocky pride. Oddly enough, arrogance would later prove to be one of my most revered trademarks and a bit of a virtue.

Although my parents never actually said so, at least not to my face, it's probably safe to assume that their freewheeling son was considered a major disappointment, particularly after the high diver revelation. But my confidence in my capabilities as a high diver was relatively high even then. It came naturally and I felt fortunate to have discovered my talent at such an early age.

Unfortunately, even though I wasn't looking for it, trouble (with a capital "T") just had its own way of finding me. In 1970, my

eight-grade year in school, bussing had become the latest political 'craze'. It was an ingenious means that some profound elected official had dreamt up to resolve racial desegregation issues and I got caught right smack dab in the middle of it.

While others from predominately Indian-based neighborhoods were scheduled to be bused to our local school district, I was docketed to be shipped out to theirs. Prior to the start of our school season my family was invited to an orientation night, which part of their elaborate introductory program. It was designed to demonstrate the program benefits and enable us to get an idea of what we could expect at the new school. I suppose that everything has a purpose because it was there that I was introduced to my first high diving mentor, Coach John Tobler.

John just happened to be conducting a trampoline clinic in the gymnasium that evening. John was a fairly young guy coaching local gymnastics, but he also dived in shows and competed professionally during the summer months. He was inviting kids up to bounce around on the trampoline. Although I had never been on a tramp in my life, I was tremendously intrigued by it and was anxious to give it a try. Quite honestly, just staying on the damn thing turned out to be quite a challenge in itself. I spent more time picking myself up

from the floor than anything else, but I absolutely loved it. Every time I fell off, I got right back up.

Though I'm sure he wasn't the least bit impressed with my performance, John apparently saw enough tenacity or 'something' in me that prompted him to invite me to join his training camp. It was there that I began to learn a wide variety of tricks that I would eventually transform into high dives.

Had I known where John's guidance would ultimately lead, perhaps I would have pursued things much differently. But it was from that chance meeting that my professional high diving career actually got its start. The first pieces of a very strange puzzle had begun to fall in place.

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The Death of my friend Mike Czech

As I look back and recall the bizarre incident, I still have a hard time believing it today. I was nothing more than a confused twelve-year-old kid at the time and my best friend Randy Dickenson was just a year older.

Mike Czech was one of our best friends, a guy who dived and bummed with us on a daily basis. We were constantly challenging each other competitively in everything we did, particularly high diving, which served to mold us into talented high divers. Those skills were expected to one day propel us into the flamboyant world of professional diving. Matter of fact, in the winter of 1973, the three of us had already received an offer from Maxwell Associates to dive in their water shows the following summer. Needless to say, we were as shocked as everyone else to learn that Mike had been killed.

Losing a close friend at such a young age is a traumatic experience...enough to stun two kids into complete and utter disarray, but it was the brutal dissension following Mike's demise that nearly destroyed our lives. Because we were presumed to be the last to see him alive, Randy and I...for whatever reason, stood accused of having something to do with Mike's death.

Since we were completely innocent of any wrongdoing, we expected the truth to come out and the horrible experience to simply fade away. Much to our amazement and alarming dismay, it never did. Matter of fact, things got a whole lot worse.

That dreadful Saturday started out pretty-much like any other. Randy, Mike and I had spent the day learning some new dives from the bridge and in general goofing off as typical kids do. The three of us were on our way home that evening. Though I honestly don't recall Mike mentioning any details, he indicated that he was meeting his girlfriend and had somewhere else to go. That didn't seem important at the time and, since that was nothing out of the ordinary, Randy and I simply continued on our merry way. Unfortunately, that casual farewell actually turned out to be the last time we'd see Mike Czech alive.

Mike didn't show up for school the following Monday, but we certainly didn't think much of it. We figured he was sick or just playing hooky, something we all did from time to time. That night though, as any parent would, Mike's mom and dad were placing calls and roaming the neighborhood trying to piece together his whereabouts. They were justifiably concerned and, though he was missing, the thought that he might be dead never once crossed our minds.

By Tuesday, the police had gotten involved in the search and were questioning pretty-much everyone. Again, because we were thought to have been with him last, they seemed to focus their

investigation on me and Randy. If I remember right, it was on the following Wednesday that Mike's mutilated body had been found several miles down River.

Our best friend was dead and we wanted to know what happened as much as everyone else, but for us it rapidly culminated into another entirely different mission altogether. We did everything we were asked to do and cooperated fully with the authorities. Oddly enough and in spite of our compliance, Randy and I spent the next several weeks being rather harshly interrogated. I would even go as far as to say that we were harassed by a team of investigators who were for whatever reasons overwhelmingly convinced that we had something to do with this.

At twelve, I didn't even know what the word 'motive' meant, but I certainly had no reason to harm our best friend. Though that fact was made abundantly clear and there was virtually no evidence indicating otherwise, we were targeted and publically labeled as the so-called 'guilty party'. Since it was never implied that we murdered him or anything of that nature, I'm to this day still confused as to just what anyone may have presumed we were guilty of. It even got to a point where Randy and I even agreed to take lie detector tests. We had nothing to hide and passed with flying

colors, but that wasn't enough either.

Many of our so-called friends became convinced that we were somehow involved. Some later implied that out of jealousy over the fact that Mike had received a high dive contract, we had perhaps enticed Mike to do a dive into dangerous or shallow water and that was how Mike must have died. That of course was a ludicrous notion derived from meaningless assumptions. Since all three of us had received the same offer and were expecting to be working in the dive show business together, how anyone could possibly have reached that conclusion is beyond me. That was an absurd misconception.

Unfortunately, we never found out what actually happened to Mike, but his death was eventually and officially ruled accidental. In spite of our exoneration, the brand we had been tagged with never wore off. In the eyes of most, particularly Mike's other friends; Randy and Dana were guilty of 'something'. For the record though, I'd like to state emphatically that there was absolutely no wrongdoing...at least not on our part.

2801 1st Avenue in the downtown area of Minneapolis is where my family lived. It was a tough enough neighborhood to grow up in without being socially branded and that was back in the seemingly

less-violent years of the early seventies. My dad would actually go outside on a Friday night and fire gunshots into the air just to let any potential troublemakers know; don't come fucking around our house.

In the midst of all this Mike Czech turmoil, I'm being bused to a school where everyone pretty much hates my guts for doing whatever I surely must have done to Mike. My side of the story and anything I had to say was irrelevant. Nobody wanted to hear it. It was suddenly as if I had a target painted on my back and I'm not exaggerating in the least. Seriously, a week rarely went by that I didn't get my ass kicked by the 'boys' that ruled the roost.

It may have been the perpetual beatings that made me such a tough nut to crack. It damn sure didn't soften me up any. Randy and I were forced to fight as a means of survival. The majority of the time, those 'fights' amounted to a five-on-one bout and us taking another severe pounding. The important lessons I was learning at school took on an entirely different meaning. The only education I was getting was the pitfalls of a being trapped in seditious society.

I had two choices; give up or get tough. I had to get tough

just to survive. To dive from 100' you pretty much have to have your own brand of brass balls, but I knew all-too-well what I was up against and brass balls just wasn't enough to survive in this harsh environment. I had to get out!

It was clear that the typical routes weren't in the stars for Dana Kunze. I fought more than my fair share of fistfight battles, but I certainly was destined to be a boxer. As much as I loved the sport, I was just too small to be an outstanding football player. I was way too short to excel at basketball. And, since I wasn't exactly an intellectual genius, there weren't too many options.

I wasn't afraid of too many things and that included heights. The one thing I knew for certain was that I could dive, but who ever heard of anyone making a living as a diver? But that was the only direction I could see heading in.

Although I wasn't scheduled to begin diving professionally until the end of the school season, I simply couldn't take the abuse any longer. That would of course mean dropping out of school, but I didn't feel that I had a choice. Of all things, it turned out to be my high diving skills that would save me.

John Tobler was aware of our situation and understood the pressure we were under. He made some calls and the necessary arrangements. Within a matter of days, Randy and I were on our way to Wildwood, New Jersey...wherever the hell that was.

It's not my intent to dwell on the deprivation. Every successful athlete and businessman has a story to tell. I'm sure that many of them came from backgrounds with much worse conditions than mine. Every successful person has to make their fair share of sacrifices and difficult choices. In my case the choice was to either stay where I was and adapt to the social climate or make a drastic uncertain change and hope that it leads to a better life. For me, it wasn't a very tough decision and becoming a high diver is something that I have never once regretted.

Don't get me wrong. I have my fair share and a relatively long list of regrets. I wish now that I had done a lot of things in my life differently. I wish that I had finished high school and perhaps followed that with a college education, but my decision to pursue a professional high diving career literally saved my life!

When I started high diving I was just like any other ordinary mixed-up kid looking for a way out. Fortunately, as it turned out, I

was an ordinary kid with an extraordinary talent. I had no grandiose visions or reticent aspirations of becoming the biggest name in the sport, but I was willing to work hard and for me it paid off.

I certainly wasn't the most graceful pecker in the pool, but my enhanced trampoline skills enabled me to put an acrobatic twist on the concept of springboard and tower diving. There was a time when I could do more tricks on a diving board **without getting wet** than most divers could do from the board into the water. Very few if any were willing or brave enough to even attempt some of the tricks I did from a high dive tower. In the late seventies, I could perform more acrobatic dives at a height of 100' than most divers could do from a three-meter springboard.

John Tobler's elite group of high diving talent in Minneapolis consisted of me, Randy Dickenson, Mike Foley and Jim Rasmussen. There weren't many that were even the least bit interested in high diving. That fact taught me a very important lesson early in my career. People from all walks of life seemed to acknowledge the capabilities of a high diver.

Since very few people would even consider doing what we did, respect was an indirect byproduct of that unique talent. I wasn't

the sharpest tack in the barn or the most educated kid on the block, but I knew enough to know that respect was something that people don't give freely. If you want respect, you have to earn it.

Maxwell Associates who was the producer of the high dive show near Amoroso Pier in Wildwood. For me it was a new world, a new life and an introduction to another dimension.

When I walked into that theater for the first time, I was in absolute awe. There they were; some of the biggest names in the sport, the same guys I had seen on Wide World of Sports. They were performing some excellent dives in exciting live shows and for huge crowds in a packed stadium. I had been invited to become a part of show business. For me and in more ways than one, this was truly a brand new world.

I went from struggling to survive on some of the toughest streets in Minneapolis right into the enhanced limelight of show business. In hindsight, had I known that I was actually being cast into a den of lions, perhaps I might have taken steps to better prepare myself. I had to grow up fast and learn to live in the real world according to professional divers, which was a world entirely different from anything I ever knew.

The age of these guys ranged from some in their early twenties to others in their forties. Their lifestyle was much different than any I had ever been accustomed to. At the age of thirteen I was suddenly living and working with a group of guys that started their day with a cocktail or an eye-opening joint of quality weed. That's just the way it was. If you wanted to fit in, you were expected to adapt and I wanted to be just like Barney Cipriani. So I set my sights on acceptance into their prestigious league. Though it involved a series of hard lessons learned, it wasn't long at all before I was just another one of the 'boys'.

I also took notice that certain divers received most of the attention. The stars of the show were clearly the guys who had earned the title of World Champion. Those were the hotshots everyone came to see. So even then, I had the desire and began setting vague goals to attain my share of that limelight, which was a lot like an addictive drug. Once you managed to get some attention, you wanted more. But in order to gain that level of respect, I'd somehow have to become good enough to beat the best of the best. That's not an easy thing to do in any sport.

With the odds stacked against me, I was secretly harboring a

deep desire to become a World Champion. Virtually everyone has the desire to be a champion, but desire alone just isn't enough to get the job done. If I wanted that title, I had a whole lot of work to do.

My quest to be the best was fueled by relentless motivation. That prompted me to learn more and work harder than everyone else. I wasn't sure exactly what 'it' was, but I had something to prove and mostly to myself. To spite all the conflict I had faced in my life, I needed to become something more than another high school dropout despised by a loathing group of disgruntle classmates. Assuming that an enhanced level of success would somehow serve to change the past, I set out to develop that determination. Somehow and someday I was going to be 'somebody'.

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When I turned forty, my wife threw a surprise birthday party for me at our home in Minneapolis. She invited most of our relatives and a host of friends, many of whom dated back to the era of the Mike Czech incident. Having achieved a somewhat respectable level of success in my career, I was willing to put the spite from my

unfortunate past behind me and let bygones be bygones.

Since that was my objective, I can't even begin to express how disappointing it was to learn that after twenty-five years, nothing in certain former circles had ever really changed. Many of our guests, my so-called friends, were still secretly harboring resentment toward me over Mike's death. At one point in the evening, I overheard a group of people discussing presumptuous 'details' of my direct involvement in Mike's death. After all this time, they still hadn't let go. I was flabbergasted.

Behind my back, never to my face of course, these alleged friends still perceived me as guilty of some sort of wrongdoing. I simply couldn't believe the audacity of these uncouth people who had accepted an invitation, come into my home, drank my booze and eaten my food while laying blame on me and Randy for Mike's death. Randy had passed away and couldn't be there to defend himself and I felt compelled to do just that.

Instead of celebrating my birthday, I found myself making an official announcement that would put the proverbial brakes on the festivities. I informed everyone present that I had overheard the conversation and openly expressed my dismay. I stressed in no

uncertain terms how foolish and utterly ridiculous the whole notion of our involvement was to begin with and followed up with a lecture on how hypocritical it was of them to accept the invitation to my party if they truly felt that way.

I honestly believed that everyone had finally gotten past that childish nonsense. I told them that anyone who truly believes that preposterous notion should be utterly ashamed of themselves. "I feel sorry for you and, if you are expecting some sort of an apology from me, forget it. Randy and I have nothing to apologize for. I don't need your forgiveness and you are no longer worthy of mine."

"The party's over! Get the fuck out of my house! Go away and I don't ever want to hear from any of you ever again."

The people in my life that truly matter most, my family and genuine friends, stayed and, in the true spirit of that celebration, partied well into the wee hours. I was surprised by the number of people that left. So it was a much smaller tight-knit group, but we had a great time together.

I suppose that it provided me with a means of closure. For the first time since 1973, I was finally able to fully confront the

encumbering burden of that humiliating epoch in my life. On my fortieth birthday, I finally put the matter to rest once and for all. At least for me, it was over and done.

I'll forever live with the unfortunate loss of two very dear friends, but I also cling to some very fond memories of Mike and Randy. No longer will I dwell on the erroneous resentment that had been unjustly directed at me for so many years. For the first time in my life, I was granted the gift of genuine peace. Thank God!

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