

## **Outdoorsman Survives Frozen Nights and Amputation to Ski Again**

By Joan D. Bennett

Before Michael Lynn set off on a 14-mile trek on snowshoes and cross-country skis through Crawford Notch in New Hampshire's White Mountains last February 12, he stopped by Top Notch Rentals in Glen where he works. At the inn's front desk, he left a note detailing his itinerary, with a message that if he didn't return by dark, something had probably gone wrong.

The fit 55-year-old outdoorsman has lived in the White Mountains region for over 40 years and is a former PSI-certified ski instructor and ski patrol member. A builder, he also worked part-time doing building maintenance and front desk work at Top Notch so he could enjoy his free time in the woods, hiking and snowshoeing, as well as alpine and cross-country skiing.

On Sunday, February 9, Lynn had snowshoed up Mt. Willard after a snowstorm that left eight inches of powder. The following two days he cross-country skied to Mountain Pond and back, a 13-mile trip. With the winter's plentiful snow, the conditions were perfect for outdoor activities.

### **Hitting the trail**

After stopping at work that Wednesday morning to leave his itinerary, Lynn drove to the trailhead of the Nancy Pond Trail off Route 302, a trail he had not hiked before. As he and his dog, Kayla, a combination Husky and Rottweiler, entered the trail at 7:30 a.m., forecasted intermittent snow began, with temperatures in the low 20s.

The first part of the trail had been packed by others and was easy traveling. The pair then made their way through the Cascades, a very steep section before Nancy Pond, passed the pond and nearby Norcross Pond, before following the trail down into the Pemigewasset Wilderness.

At one section of Norcross Brook, Kayla refused to cross a pond trail, so Lynn shadowed the trail, bushwacking for a time before returning to the Nancy Pond Trail. The sun broke through about 1:00 and warmed the temperature slightly.

The snow was deep and Lynn could see that, except for moose, no one had been through the area in a long time. With every step, the 6'1" Lynn broke through the snow two-and-a-half to three feet in his snowshoes.

About two miles up the Carrigain Notch Trail he missed a turn and went about 200 yards off trail. Realizing his mistake, he and Kayla retraced their steps. About the same time, he developed severe difficulty breathing. He took a few steps and bent to his knees to catch his breath, continuing this pattern over and over. Slowly, he made his way back to the trail, continued another quarter mile and stopped.

It was 4:30 p.m., about the time he should have been finishing his journey. But he was nine miles into the woods, with the temperature dropping and the wind picking up.

### **Frigid night in the woods**

"I recognized that if I continued, I would fall down and not get up, or I could prepare for the night," remembers Lynn. "I didn't panic but I was completely without energy."

He knew he was on the trail as a trail blaze was cut on the edge of a tree. Using his snowshoes, he dug into the snow about 18 inches to make a comfortable spot to sit against a tree. He had

matches with him and debated about collecting wood to start a fire, but he knew he didn't have the energy to keep it going.

Lynn stripped down, put on the dry clothes in his pack and then put his wet clothes back on. Both pair of mittens were wet or frozen and his hands were dead white. As he hunkered down in his snow hole, he placed his hands in his pants between his legs to keep them warm, and later wrapped his extra vest around his head. He also exercised his feet in his cross-country ski boots to keep the blood flowing.

"I made choices," he says. "I was most afraid of losing my hands. Once I thawed them, I decided I didn't want to lose my nose or ears, so that's what I protected."

Soon after Lynn settled in, he entered the first stage of hypothermia. His heart beat wildly and his body shivered so fiercely, Kayla moved out of his snow hole and dug her own beside him.

Through the tall trees in the thick woods, Lynn watched the moon move slowly across the starlit sky. The wind howled incessantly and whipped the trees' branches together, creating a cacophony he found unsettling.

"I still wasn't in fear of my life," he remarks. "Because I had left an itinerary, I knew it would be figured out."

### **Lynn's absence is discovered**

On Thursday morning, Lynn and Kayla finished the last of their food. Lynn knew his feet were in trouble as he could barely wiggle his toes or move his ankles. With frozen feet, his only choice was to wait for help.

At 8 a.m. that day, Donna Poyant, Lynn's boss and the manager at Top Notch Rentals, stopped by the front desk and spotted the note with Lynn's itinerary. She asked if anyone had seen him. No one had, so she called Lynn's house.

The line was busy. She called again five minutes later and got no answer. Suspicious that something might be wrong, she asked Mark Dryjas, the inn's owner, to drive to Crawford Notch to see if Lynn's car was at the trailhead.

Dryjas found Lynn's car but thought the tire tracks looked fresh. After he returned and told Poyant what he had found, they called the sheriff's office. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department was alerted and search and rescue teams were dispatched.

### **The search begins**

Just after noon, Fish and Game conservation officers Brian Abrams and Samuel Sprague set out from Lynn's car at the Nancy Pond Trail. Another team of rescuers started in a short while later from Sawyer River Road, where Lynn had planned to finish his trek.

The wind howled as Abrams and Sprague crossed Nancy Pond, breaking track in snowshoes. Abrams wished he had packed a face mask. He knew this wind would damage exposed skin quickly.

The pair picked up Lynn and Kayla's tracks after Nancy Pond. Because a fire the week before had damaged the communications building on top of Mt. Washington, they couldn't radio their

supervisor with the news, but were able to radio the other search team within their site line that they had found Lynn's trail.

By a brook, they discovered Lynn's abandoned cross-country skis, another clue they were on the right trail. "We decided we should just keep pushing," says Abrams. "It was so cold we didn't want to stop. We needed to set a pace we could maintain all night long."

### **Lynn awaits help**

Meanwhile, Lynn had hoped someone would find him by noon. By 2 p.m. he was surprised no one was there. By 4 p.m. his confidence waned. He feared no one would know he was gone until he didn't show up for work on Friday at 11 a.m.

"I didn't panic," he says quietly, "but I was pretty certain this was the end." Lynn dreaded watching the moon move slowly across the sky another night. "I would have welcomed a little less consciousness."

With temperatures averaging about 30 degrees below zero and a shrieking wind, Thursday night was even more frigid than the night before. Close to 10 p.m., Kayla barked and Lynn saw a flash of light through the trees. He knew someone had come to rescue him.

Abrams and Sprague had been yelling Lynn's name for a while. This time, someone yelled back. "It was pretty incredible to yell out and get that response," remembers Abrams. "A lot of times we go in and people haven't made it, and we carry them out of the woods."

### **Warming experience**

Lynn was lucid but suffering from severe hypothermia and frostbite when the pair reached him. Sprague assessed Lynn's injuries and knew he couldn't walk out. With the extreme cold affecting their radio and GPS system, they would have to wait until morning to radio for help.

The conservation officers broke off dead spruce trees and started a fire close to Lynn to warm them all and heat Gatorade and Jello. They gave Lynn fleece pants, a jacket and dry mittens from their packs, and the trio spent the night talking about their families.

Friday dawned sunny. At 8 a.m. Abrams and Sprague determined their GPS coordinates and were able to radio one of the search teams that had been looking for them all night. Less than an hour later, a National Guard helicopter hovered above a small clearing a quarter mile away. Balancing on his ski poles, Lynn walked slowly on snowshoes with his two rescuers.

A helicopter crew member was lowered to strap Lynn into a seat and hoist him up. Low on fuel, the helicopter delivered Lynn to the Laconia airport 50 miles away, where an ambulance waited, and then continued on to headquarters in Concord to refuel.

An hour and a half later, the helicopter returned to pick up Abrams, Sprague and Kayla. "I gained a healthy respect for the cold," says Sprague. "It was the toughest rescue I've ever been in." A month later, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department awarded the officers Lifesaving Medals.

### **Road to recovery**

Lynn's severe frostbite took its toll. On March 7, his right leg was amputated about eight inches below the knee. Physicians waited on his left leg. With the front half of Lynn's left foot and a

spot on his heel black with dead bones and tissue, physicians debated about removing half of Lynn's foot or taking it all.

"I didn't necessarily want a partial foot," he says. "In talking with my surgeons, Robert Tilney and Jay Neil at Memorial Hospital in North Conway, and other skiers, including Bob Emerson, a technician at Next Step who is a competitive skier and an above-the-knee amputee, I thought that wasn't the way to go."

By mid-May, he decided to have his left foot and ankle amputated. "I was thinking ahead to the recovery period that would allow me to ski this year," he says.

On June 7, Lynn had a Symes amputation of his left leg above the ankle, using the healthy tissue on his heel to cover the base of the amputation.

Eager to return to his active lifestyle, he turned to Next Step Orthotics and Prosthetics in Manchester, N.H., a firm that specializes in fitting active amputees. Next Step technicians fit Lynn with a different-style Flex Foot for each leg, giving him maximum energy and mobility for his outdoor activities.

"I fool people most of the time," says Lynn with a smile. "They don't know I'm a double amputee."

### **Back to an active life**

By late October, Lynn was not only walking in the woods every day on his prosthetic legs with Kayla, but he was making plans to ski. Lynn asked Next Step to adjust his prosthetics to fit his alpine and cross-country ski boots and the demands of skiing.

"We added a removable superstructure, like a knee brace, to his right leg to give him extra stability while skiing," says Scott Cummings, PT, CPO. "His Symes leg is so long he'll have enough stability on that side when skiing." Technicians also made Lynn a water leg for showering and water sports.

After his ordeal last winter, Lynn decided he needed to get away. He is spending this winter in Winter Park, Colorado, a resort where he taught skiing 12 years ago. The area is the headquarters of the National Sports Center for the Disabled, a good place to learn how to ski again, he thinks.

Lynn knows he would not have made this trip to Colorado if it weren't for the smart thinking and expertise of the many people who played a role in his rescue and recovery. And when thinking about hiking again, he says he learned two very important lessons, always leave an itinerary and never go without assuming the worst can happen.