

Miracle in Moab: The stunning rescue of Danelle Ballengee

Her body shattered by a 60-foot fall, stranded in a remote redrock canyon with virtually no hope for help, one of the world's premier athletes stared at death for 52 hours, and defied it.

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**Friday, Dec. 15, 1:30 p.m. Five miles
outside Moab, Utah.**

Everything about the afternoon signals gloom. A low, gray sky hangs overhead, and the mid-December temperatures already have begun their plummet toward nightfall. Within a few hours the light will be gone, the mercury will fall into the 20s and the barren backcountry that surrounds this Western outdoors mecca will become about as inhabitable as hell.

John Marshall, the officer in charge of the 12 Grand County Search and Rescue members milling about the Amasa Back trailhead, assesses the situation with a sobering calmness. He and his team are here to figure out how and why Danelle Ballengee, one of the world's premier adventure sports athletes and a part-time Moab resident (her primary home is in Dillon), vanished two days prior. Detective Craig Shumway of the Moab Police Department located Ballengee's truck nearby while casing the area about an hour earlier, but all signs have indicated that if Ballengee is indeed somewhere out in canyon country, she would have been there for more than two days now. As much as they are taught to treat this like a rescue mission, the rescuers know enough about their territory to understand they have likely come to recover a body, not to bring someone home alive.

Marshall is putting the finishing touches on his team's assignments when a fellow rescue team member approaches him near the trailhead, where the search party has convened. "I'm going to be leaving soon, John — do you have a body bag with you? If not, I have one in the truck."

Marshall, who in situations like these prepares for the worst but hopes for the best, has

Danelle Ballengee, pictured after finishing Primal Quest Utah last summer, spent 52 hours unsheltered and immobile with a shattered pelvis in the Moab backcountry last week after falling 60 feet while trail running.
Summit Daily file
photo/Kristin Skvorc



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not brought a body bag. His face stern but solemn, he relents. “You should probably leave it with me.”

This situation is particularly unnerving for him. A few months earlier, he had served as a local backcountry expert and medical representative at the world-renowned Primal Quest Utah expedition adventure race. He treated Ballengee a number of times during the 10-day competition, seeing up close the toughness and will that has defined her career as a professional athlete. He watched her stumble in from a horribly underestimated 46-mile torture march through 105-degree desert heat, a dehydrated mess because she went the last four hours without water. He saw her press on through the competition despite her feet being rubbed entirely raw by the piranha-like Utah sand. For him to admit now that she is probably dead, well, it doesn't sit well.

As the men and women ready themselves to trudge out into the cold, vast emptiness, a dog wanders out from the trail. They stop. It matches the description of Ballengee's dog: long, reddish-brown coat, medium build. Marshall calls the dog but it doesn't come.

Animal Control officers, knowing it has probably not eaten for two days, try in vain to lure it with food. For whatever reason, it does not want to be caught. The simple fact that the dog is here alone, however, says enough to Marshall. “Most dogs won't leave their master as long as their master has a pulse,” he said. “To see that dog was a truly saddening sight.”

On the morning of Wednesday, Dec. 13 — the day she disappeared — Danelle Ballengee made a few phone calls, sent a few e-mails, then, after a quick stop at Burger King for a chicken sandwich, french fries and coffee — she is famous on the adventure racing circuit for her love of junk food — she drove out of town for a run. It had been a year since she'd done the popular Amasa Back route, one of her favorites.

If all went well, she'd be back at her truck in an hour and 45 minutes. She locked her cell phone inside, along with her wallet, and tucked a water bottle in the fanny pack around her waist. Dressed in baggy running pants, a fleece hat and three upper layers — a silk base, a polypropylene shirt and a thin fleece jacket — Ballengee set off down the trail with her dog, an athletic 3-year-old mutt named Taz.

She began on the Amasa Back, a technical track through the desert that in the warmer months is well-used by runners and mountain bikers. But Ballengee, 35, who spends about a third of her year in Moab, has developed her own loop over the years, and only part of it utilizes the actual Amasa Back Trail. The rest of her roughly 8-mile circuit consists of obscure Jeep roads known only to locals, and a few stretches that are not on any map because they are not really trails, but rather ways to connect the rest of the loop.

About an hour into her run, she arrived at one such unmapped section and began scrambling up the side of a perilous slope. Toward the top, however, Ballengee put her

foot down and it did not grip. She believes it was a patch of black ice that she never saw. One of the rescue team members who retraced her steps five days later says it was probably wet, frozen lichen ironed on the rock like a camouflaged leech.

All in one motion she slipped and began tumbling down the hill like a rag doll, unable to stop the fall. She smashed into one rock ledge, bounced off, then hit another. After the second ledge — about 40 feet into the fall — the slope steepened into a near-vertical wall. Ballengee's momentum carried her over the edge, and she freefell the equivalent of a two-story building.

Remarkably, she landed square on her feet, but the drop was too much for her slight frame to absorb. Her pelvis shattered, breaking in four places, cracking in others and, in one spot, splintering into too many pieces to count. She crumpled to the ground in excruciating pain.

Right away she knew her injuries were severe, but the adrenaline was pumping. *You have to get out of here — NOW*, her brain said. She rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself up to her knees. She began to crawl. One leg moved fine but the other might as well have been a piece of wood, so she picked it up with her hands and placed it six painstaking inches ahead. For five hours she dragged herself like a wounded dog through the canyon, its walls towering hundreds of feet above her. A quarter mile was all she gained. Finally, upon reaching a puddle of snowmelt, the adrenaline long ago used up, her body beginning to swell from massive internal bleeding, the air now dark and well below freezing, she collapsed onto her back. Taz snuggled up to his owner, and they lay there together that first night, in pain and in fear.

“To be a good adventure racer,” a former pro once said, “you basically have to be hard to kill.” The suffering comes in many forms: pain, natural elements, hunger, thirst and self-imposed sleep deprivation. The best ones learn how to exist on the brink for days, even when their bodies beg for mercy.

Lying on the cold rock in the middle of nowhere, Ballengee did just that, developing a routine that kept her alive. Small things, like wiggling her fingers with her hands inside her pants to preserve the warmth. Like tapping her toes on the ground because it was the only way to delay the inevitable onset of frostbite. She even did little “head situps” — lifting her head toward her knees hour after hour after hour, nonstop, to keep her core warm. About the only thing she had going for her was the lack of precipitation; if it were snowing, she would be at a far greater risk of exposure.



Taz, Ballengee's 3-year-old dog, helped save his owner's life.

Special to the Daily

When she'd finished the half-bottle of water that remained from her run, she turned to the murky snowmelt in the 2-inch-deep puddle. As much as she yearned to quench her ever-growing thirst, however, she knew better. If she drank more than her body absolutely needed, she would pee it out. Still unable to shift her body position, she would pee on herself, and the urine eventually would freeze on her clothes and skin, driving down her core temperature and making it more likely that she freeze to death. So she sipped a little here, a little there, scooping it up with her water bottle cap.

Two more items in her fanny pack helped keep her alive. First, she'd carried a pair of raspberry-flavored energy gels — her only food. She ate one on the first morning and the other on the second, each time planning to gain strength from the gel and attempt to crawl out of the canyon. Each time she failed without moving an inch. She also brought a plastic shower cap, common among adventure racers who do much of their training in the backcountry because the plastic prevents the loss of body heat.

When the sun came up on the second day, Ballengee began to scream for help and didn't stop for 10 hours. A number of times she thought she heard voices or an ATV getting near, but nobody appeared. There was only the silent horror of her impending death.

As Taz became increasingly unnerved by his owner's state — the rescue group's dog handler would later say Taz was the most distressed dog she had ever seen — he stopped cuddling with Ballengee and began leaving for 30 minutes at a time. She just lay there and prayed, eventually becoming overwhelmed by her greatest fear: that she would never get to say goodbye to her family.

Why didn't I tell them how much I love them? Why didn't I tell my friends how special they are and how much I learn from them? Why didn't I?

Dorothy Rossignol is a 76-year-old Moab treasure, a creature of habit who happens to be Danelle Ballengee's neighbor. Ballengee never leaves town before she has said goodbye to her friend next door; nor does she leave without drawing her blinds and shutting down her house. So when Rossignol noticed that Ballengee's lights remained on for a second day and that she could still see her computer on the coffee table through the open window, she grew worried.

She called Ballengee's parents in Evergreen and learned that they, too, had been trying to reach Danelle, and had gotten suspicious. Her parents requested a welfare check from the

Moab police, who arrived late Thursday afternoon and checked the house for signs of foul play, but found nothing. Nevertheless, they put out a multistate bulletin for Ballengee's vehicle that night.

The following morning, with the vehicle still missing and some time on his hands, Detective Shumway decided to check the local trailheads. He started on the north end of town near the airport and worked his way south. After coming up empty at more than a half-dozen parking areas, he arrived at the Amasa Back lot, a little ways down from the trailhead itself. No truck. He drove to the trailhead and found nothing there, either. Then, acting on a hunch — and the innate backcountry knowledge that comes from having spent his entire life in Moab — Shumway drove another few hundred yards to a secret spot around the corner where you can park next to an old campsite. Bingo. Ballengee's truck was there, kayak on top and mountain bike locked in the camper — but no sign of the missing woman.

The page comes through to Grand County Search and Rescue at 1:04 p.m., 49 hours since Ballengee shattered her pelvis. Although they get paged only a couple times a month this time of year, many of the team members heard the chatter on their scanners the night before, so they know a local woman and her truck are missing. Within 10 minutes they have assembled at the rescue shed downtown, eager to know what is going on.

Marshall, a local guide and EMT who was randomly assigned the officer-in-charge (OIC) responsibility for this week, sends some of his team directly to the trailhead with their assignments. He decides the rest when he arrives. Knowing Ballengee's background — she is a three-time Primal Quest winner and four-time Pikes Peak Marathon champ — and feeling confident that she probably would not be out for a simple hike on the main trail, Marshall has Melissa Fletcher take off running up a gnarly stretch of singletrack nearby. She is to be met farther down the trail by a pair of Polaris Ranger ATVs, one of which is driven by Bego Gerhart, 60, an Eagle Scout with a hulking build and bushy beard, who has been rescuing people since he was a teen.

That's when Marshall and the rest of the search party see Taz. In a seemingly conscious effort, the dog eludes their attempts to capture him for just long enough that the humans catch on: *This must be Ballengee's dog. He's our best clue right now. Let him run.*

Initially, Taz leads them away from the trailhead, back toward town. Weird, the rescuers think. But they follow. And Taz sees them. Shortly thereafter he turns around, "like once he knew he had attracted enough attention, it was time to go back into the canyon," rescue group member Rex Tanner says. The dog darts through the assembled search party and out toward the canyons. Marshall radios ahead to his two Rangers: "Whatever you do, don't try to catch the dog. Follow it."

Within minutes Gerhart comes face to face with Taz. The dog takes off over a rise then down to an older Jeep track with Gerhart in pursuit on foot. Eventually Taz runs up into a

canyon too fast for Gerhart to follow, but the bushy rescuer doesn't need to. Trained by the U.S. Marshal's office as a desert tracker, Gerhart has spotted three prints in the soft dirt: a 2-day-old set of dog prints, a fresh set of dog prints, and a set of shoe prints "that certainly looked like they could be a female runner," he says. All three prints are headed in the same direction.

He hurries back to his Ranger and burns down the canyon, following the tracks. A few minutes later, at 3:38 p.m., he comes upon a stunning sight. Ballengee is alive, lying on her back crying as Taz lies next to her, his snout on her chest.

"I'm glad to see you," she says calmly, as tears stream down her face.



Seen here training on the shore of Dillon Reservoir, Danelle Ballengee was running a trail about 5 miles southwest of Moab, Utah, when she fell into an unnamed canyon last Wednesday.

Summit Daily file photo/Brad Odekirk

"I'm glad to see you, too," the relieved rescuer replies, "and I'm glad you can tell me you're glad to see me."

He wraps her in a down bag, gives her a pair of warm gloves, then radios to Marshall that he has found her, and that they're going to need the CareFlight chopper from St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction to evacuate Ballengee A.S.A.P.

He remains by her side for nearly 45 minutes before another rescuer arrives on scene. "I expected to find someone much more severe," he says later of her mental state. "She was fully lucid, which was stunning."

Ballengee is rushed to St. Mary's where her family and friends meet her. She has lost an extraordinary amount of blood to internal bleeding and her pelvic damage is extreme, doctors find. They tell her that most people with her injuries do not live longer than 24 hours. She lasted 52 on a cold rock in the middle of nowhere.

It has been less than a week since Danelle Ballengee's rescue made national headlines. On Tuesday she underwent a risky six-hour surgery, in which doctors successfully reconstructed her pelvis with a titanium plate and a number of pins and screws. Her frostbitten feet are beginning to return to their normal color, and on Friday she appeared on NBC's *Today* show from her hospital bed. It was the first time she'd seen Taz since the rescue.

She will likely spend at least two months in a wheelchair, though the doctors believe she will not only regain her ability to run, but also to compete. This pleases her in a big way, like a fish finding out it can swim again.

Reflecting on the living hell she endured, she offers a simple explanation. "I wasn't ready

to die.”

Many of the rescuers still have not gotten over what happened last Friday — the “Christmas miracle” that they saw for themselves. Gerhart calls it the “No. 1 stunner” of the hundreds of rescues he has been involved with during his career.

“I knew I was dealing with a really tough cookie,” says Marshall, drawing yet again on his Primal Quest memories. “However, the temperatures don’t play mercy on anybody.” Indeed, Ballengee’s survival came less than a month after two men froze to death near Moab in separate one-night incidents. Both men were wearing much warmer clothes and one was at a lower elevation than Ballengee, who was found at about 4,800 feet.

Marshall, like the other rescuers and particularly Ballengee herself, does not believe she would have survived another night in the canyon. Which is why he is so moved by this incident. “Sometimes you find ’em and they’re dead or just dealing with the worst day of their life,” he said. “And some people wonder why we do it, why we give up all of our time and do it all for nothing. This is why. This is the type of rescue that refuels us to do the type of things we do. So, we thank her for being alive.”

When it was all over, after the helicopter had taken off and the rescuers had retreated back to the trailhead, the question came to pass: What should be done with Taz tonight? The kennel was an option but nobody wanted that, least of all Marshall, so he scooped up the pooped pup and took him home. Taz hobbled into the house, headed straight for the carpet and dropped to the floor like he’d been tranquilized. It was 7:30 p.m.

The next morning, it snowed.

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