Terminal Velocity (Outside magazine, April 1999)

Call it inevitable that Dan Osman found the fatal edge of his signature sport, a thing known as "free-falling." But were his leaps of faith—and thus his sad death—as profound as he imagined? Or just stunt taken to foolish extremes?

By Craig Vetter

IT WAS TWILIGHT IN YOSEMITE after a day of light rain. Headlights flickered in the dark of the valley floor below as Dan Osman took out his cell phone and called his friends Jim Fritsch and Frank Gambalie. "It's all set," he said. "Why aren't you here? You guys have to do this." Big storm, they told him. The roads out of Squaw Valley had been closed because of the snow. They wanted to be there, had planned to make the five-hour drive south to watch their friend take the longest, most dangerous plunge he'd ever attempted. Both of them were experienced jumpers. Gambalie was also a high-diving parachutist who'd made hundreds of leaps from bridges, buildings, cliffs, antennae—any lofty place with a landing zone; Fritsch, meanwhile, owned a bungee-jumping operation. But the fall Osman was about to make was beyond BASE or bungee. Dano, as they called him, was about to pitch himself off a rock pillar called Leaning Tower and plunge 1,100 feet tethered only to a climbing rope rigged to stop his fall just 150 feet above the boulder field at the base of the cliff.

Gambalie and Fritsch had taken these prejump calls before, had listened to Osman's countdown and then to the whistle of the wind as they marked the interval, had imagined the rush of the ground coming up as both of them had experienced many times themselves jumping on Osman's rigs. Osman himself had used his unique system of ropes, pulleys, and anchors more than a thousand times, and had developed a careful series of safety checks to assure that he and his equipment were ready. This time, however, in the chill of a late-November evening, he seemed hurried. He interrupted the countdown twice. Then, from an angle on the pillar he hadn't tried before, he leapt. The heavy whisper of the wind through the phone lasted ten, 11, 12 seconds, past what Fritsch and Gambalie knew to be the limit of the rope. The phone went dead.

No problem, thought Gambalie. He imagined the phone cutting out from the impact of the rope coming taut as Dano ran out of slack, bounced, and swung in a wide, jubilant arc at the bottom of the fall. Gambalie called back and was put into Osman's voice mail. "That was totally rad," he said. "We're on our way. Give me a call and let me know how it went."

At 35 years old, Dan Osman had long since become a famous name in the world of extreme—many would say senseless—risk environment. For close to a decade his bizarre specialty was jumps like the one at Leaning Tower: single-rope plunges from bridges or cliffs that Osman would make for videos

and commercials and, more often, just for the sheer hell of it. Though I'd never met him, I'd read about him, seen some magazine pictures—the long dark hair, the gymnast's body hurtling through the sky like a rag doll. Having taken more than a few unwitting falls on climbing ropes myself, I thought Osman's deliberate leaps into the void were reckless, nuts, a no-net circus act ultimately bound for catastrophe. My opinion was seconded by this magazine, which in January 1996 published a short but highly critical piece about Osman titled "Really Quite Stupid."

Osman began his career, not surprisingly, as a climber. His home turf was Cave Rock, the vaulted outside face of a tunnel near Lake Tahoe's south shore, where he spent years attempting difficult routes that spat him off the wall again and again. After high school he took off for a couple of years in Yosemite and fell comfortably into the lost-boy culture of drifters who live on the rocks during the day, sleep in the dirt at night, scrounge for food and showers, work only enough to earn whatever money it takes to keep them at their sport, and spend long periods away from telephones and mailboxes, outside the catch of ordinary responsibilities. In the mideighties he returned to Tahoe and continued his Peter Pan drift: He climbed and worked construction intermittently; he and his girlfriend had a child and then separated. His friends joked about "Dano Time" when he arrived a few hours or a few days late for appointments. His mother's childhood nickname for him, "Danny I Forgot," hung on in the form of unpaid speeding tickets, unregistered vehicles, broken steps to his small cluttered apartment that went unrepaired though he was an accomplished carpenter.

"It disappointed me that he didn't take care of those things," says his father, Les Osman, a Japanese-American man who was once a SWAT team cop. "And I finally told him I wouldn't bail him out when his unpaid tickets landed him in jail. But he never had a lot of money; he was grossly underpaid for the risks he took. He usually earned just enough to take care of his daughter, Emma, and to pay his bills, including his hospital bills. Things like traffic tickets just came last."

BAILING OSMAN OUT OF HIS JAMS often fell to his friends, many of them rock rats like himself, others more attuned to the day-to-day realities of adult life but nonetheless charmed by Osman's perpetual good nature.

"Whatever rough edges there were got smoothed out by a genuine fondness for the guy," said Roger Rogalski, a climber and orthopedic surgeon who became Osman's doctor, as we sat in his south Tahoe office. "He had his demons, sure, but I can't say a single bad thing about him."

By the late eighties Osman had made a name for himself as an accomplished rock and ice climber and as a no-ropes free soloist. Rogalski, who treated him mostly for small injuries—broken ribs and ankles—often suspended his payment, and Osman responded by gifting him with jackets and shoes that he had begun to receive from a handful of climbing sponsors. But Osman's

interest in the sport was flagging. In 1989, working with a top rope to put up a 5.13 climb at Cave Rock that he called Phantom Lord, he fell 50 times trying to place a single bolt above a particularly torturous move. In the process he discovered that he was more exhilarated by the falling than the climbing.

"I'm not sure why," Rogalski said. "Maybe when a couple of the hot French guys came along and did Slayer on sight—a 5.14 route that took Dan a year to put up. Sometime after that he sort of drifted away from serious climbing and got very into the jumping. Most of us thought it was crazy, putting your life in the trust of a rope, but he was a passionate guy, and when his passion for climbing cooled he had to replace it with something. And it wasn't going to be backgammon."

Osman took small jumps at first, the length of ordinary climbing falls that could be caught by traditional belays and anchors. Then, as the falls got longer and longer, as he grew confident of the equipment, he began designing complex systems to anchor the lines in a way that would spread the load at impact and allow him to plunge from heights that no one had ever dared to try on climbing ropes. In Yosemite and elsewhere, he gathered groups of climbers to take turns at his new "sport," sometimes called "body hurling" or, as one oxymoron had it, "controlled free-falling."

"When I finally did it, my brain just balked," says Gambalie, 28. "This wasn't like skydiving, where the ground is never really in perspective, or even like bungee, where you start decelerating long before you get to the bottom. On Dano's system you got so close to the ground before the rope caught, it really scared me. The rush was just phenomenal, because there was no comfort margin like there is in BASE jumping, no margin for error."

If anyone needed proof of the zero tolerance for mistakes in Osman-style rope jumps, it came in 1994 at a Utah bridge. Bobby Tarver, a 25-year-old climber, rigged a new set of ropes for a 250-foot jump. Climbing ropes are designed to stretch when fallen on, and Osman always prestretched new ones with a series of short falls to determine their maximum lengths, something that Tarver failed to do, though it was part of the detailed written instructions that Osman had given him. Tarver's jump stretched the unused rope far enough to slam him into the canyon wall, killing him instantly. His death was chalked up to pilot error, and Osman continued to encourage his friends to try jumping.

"He wanted me to do it, but I wouldn't," said climber Ron Kauk. "I was intimidated by it—it's super scary. It's against my nature to let go of the rock."

ON A BRIGHT WINTER DAY NEAR YOSEMITE'S CAMP FOUR, Kauk was scrambling like a spider up the side of a big boulder. We were just out of sight across the valley from the overhanging granite wall of Leaning Tower, which rose 1,300 feet behind the thundering rush of Bridalveil Falls.

Kauk, 41, is a longtime valley local and one of its best climbers, and he and I had known each other since my years as a beginning climber on rocks not far from the trees we were under. I'd never gone much past novice climbs, but when I talked about the special fear I always felt when I was rappelling or otherwise depending entirely on a piece of equipment rather than on my hands and feet, Kauk nodded.

"Dano knew what he was doing, knew more about ropes and rigging than anybody," he said, "but I didn't like the idea that others who didn't know as much might try it. It's how I felt when John Bachar started free soloing back in the mideighties. I thought it was taking climbing in a direction I didn't want to see it go."

Dean Potter, a 26-year-old climber and Camp Four search-and-rescue team member, was working on a nearby boulder. Potter had helped put up the Leaning Tower rig and had jumped with Osman from a valley landmark called The Rostrum. "I did that one jump and I didn't like it," he said. "My climbing has always been about control, so throwing myself off the rocks like that—thinking maybe I live, maybe I die—pretty much freaked me out. But Dano was a master at this stuff. He had these elaborate drawings, and while we were working on Leaning Tower, he'd get up all excited in the morning, saying he hadn't slept all night thinking about the rig."

Yosemite authorities, not surprisingly, cast a jaundiced eye on Osman's activities. They had outlawed BASE jumping in the park years earlier, and though what Osman was doing was not illegal, the rangers clearly worried about adding him to their already long list of potential search-and-rescue victims. They were particularly irked by the fact that many of Osman's jumps were filmed for commercials and adventure videos and photographed for print ads. To them, Osman's work for the cameras was an open invitation to every adrenaline-addled kid with a climbing rope.

Soon I would get my first look at one of the videos that had made Osman's jumps famous. It was called Masters of Stone 4, and I couldn't help but be amused by the warning that opened the film. "If you want a long and happy life," it read, "don't attempt the radical activities depicted in this program."

That's exactly the kind of caveat that makes dangerous games irresistible to some people, including me. I've taken long falls out of airplanes and on bungee cords, I've ice-climbed, ski-jumped, and even gone hand-over-hand onto the wing of a biplane, as if for me, neither a long nor a short life could ever be happy without taking a few gratuitous chances. But most of the risky things I've done, I've done only once, and though they've all scared the hell out of me, none of them has put me or the equipment near the breaking point. But watching Dan Osman cartwheeling off high sandstone cliffs and then riding a bicycle and then a skateboard over the brink, I couldn't shake the feeling that he was trapped in a reach for limits he was most likely to find only in a death fall. It doesn't matter how well designed and executed a system is,

things can go wrong, things that might or might not have anything to do with your abilities. Osman, to my eyes, was flying without a parachute in a plane that had "experimental" stenciled on the tail.

Sadly enough, watching someone in danger has an undeniable magnetism to it, and if the many TV shows and commercials built around such thrill scenes are any evidence, our appetite for seeing other people do things that might kill or cripple them is insatiable. And though it's often called sick, I've always considered it just a vivid way of thinking about death, a no-risk look down the dark hole that all of us eventually fall into. But to keep us tuned in, the athletes who star in these video moments have to push further toward the deadly edge every time out. Osman, at age 35, was caught in the hard choice between the nerve it takes to keep going higher, faster, closer to the invisible line between life and death and the very different kind of courage it takes to step back from the game, from the adulation, and figure out what you're going to do with the rest of your life.

Osman arrived in Yosemite late last October determined to make a record-breaking jump. With the help of several friends, he rigged anchors and lines to the Leaning Tower rocks. The rig consisted of a 1,200-foot Tyrolean traverse, a thick line strung like a tightrope, between the tower and a smaller outcrop called Fifi Buttress. The jump line was fastened near the tower side of the traverse so that he would fall away from the rocks. Osman made his first leap on 600 feet of rope, and over the course of a week the jumps got longer—750, 800, 850, 900 feet.

ON OCTOBER 26, just as Osman was preparing for another jump, he got a cell phone call from his 12-year-old daughter, Emma, who lives in Gardnerville with her mother. She was crying, worried about him, she said, and he responded without hesitation. He told his friends he had to leave, got in his truck, and headed off to be with her. Osman was by all accounts dedicated to Emma and concerned that his high jinks put her in a precarious spot that she had not chosen. He talked about his anxieties in Andrew Todhunter's book about him, the breathlessly titled Fall of the Phantom Lord, published in 1998 before the Leaning Tower jump. "By dying," Osman said, "I would be letting everybody down—my family, my friends ... My daughter will manage, she'll be okay ... but I'd be robbing her."

Two days later, as he arrived back in the Valley, he was confronted and taken into custody by park rangers. The arrest had nothing to do with his jumps; rather, he was charged with a loose-end collection of Danny-I-Forgot offenses that had multiplied and festered as the result of his chronic inattention to the nagging details of everyday life, including driving with a suspended license (a federal misdemeanor because he was in a national park), a state felony for having failed to register for probation, and a state misdemeanor for unpaid traffic tickets. He was held in the Yosemite jail for 14 days—its only prisoner for most of that time—while friends and family raised money and pledged collateral to post the $1,500 federal and $21,000 state bonds.

He was released to his sister and brother-in-law, who took him back to Reno, where he spent time with Emma and filmmaker-friend Eric Perlman, who had offered his house against bail and who now suggested to Osman that it was time for him to get his life in order.

"I told him, 'You've gone far enough, pushed it probably farther than it should be pushed. Nobody's going to touch this one for a long time. Take the rig down, show the judge you're serious, that you're playing by the rules here,'" says Perlman, who filmed Masters of Stone 4, among other Osman videos. "And he agreed absolutely. He said, 'You know, you're right. It's what I should do. And my guardian angels need a break anyway. They've been working overtime for me.'"

Despite Osman's acquiescence, Perlman sensed a dour restlessness in his friend. "He was depressed as hell after all that time alone in jail," he says. "And when he got back to Yosemite and saw all the hard work and creativity it had taken to put up the rig..." Perlman's voice trails off.

Osman called his friend Miles Daisher on Wednesday, November 18, and said he needed a ride to Yosemite so he could take the rig down; the rangers had threatened to confiscate it. The two of them left late on the 20th, arrived the next day, and climbed to the tower that night. But the following afternoon, instead of removing the rig, Osman made a 925-foot jump on ropes that had been hanging in intermittent rain and snow for more than a month.

"I asked him about that," says Daisher, "because I'd heard that rope loses strength when it gets wet. He said it did lose a little but that these ropes were the kind they use on Everest, that they were designed to hold up in wet, freezing conditions, that they'd be fine. So he jumped, and it was a good one, no problem. Then I jumped, and it was great. We were having a blast."

That night the two of them shopped for food at the village store and chatted with friends about the record jump Osman intended for the next day. There was no talk about dismantling the rig.

At 4:15 on the afternoon of the 23d, Daisher made a jump and lowered himself to the ground with rope carried in a waist pack. When he got back to the tower at about 5:30, he found Osman hurrying to reset the rig, trying to beat the encroaching darkness to make his grand jump.

"I had a bad feeling about it," says Daisher. "He was jumping from a different angle than we usually did, which meant he had to jump over the retrieval line, which he wasn't even going to be able to see, as dark as it was by then. And he'd added 75 feet to the rope, which was about three times more than he usually added from one jump to the next. So he was jumping on a thousand feet of line, which meant he was going to be only about 150 feet off the

ground when he stopped. I was really skeptical. I kept saying, 'I don't think so, Dano, I don't like this.'"

OSMAN ASSURED HIM THAT ALL WAS SET and then took out his phone and called Fritsch and Gambalie, snowed in at Squaw Valley. "This is it," he told them, "I'm going big." He put the phone in a case on his chest and began his countdown. Then he stopped. "You got the spot?" he asked Daisher, who was crouched on the rock, ready to throw a coiled length of the jump line once Osman went over the cliff. "Got it," said Daisher. Osman began another countdown but stopped again and asked into the phone, "Did you guys say something?" No, they told him, go for it, and this time he finished the count and flew from the rock.

"I watched his headlamp disappearing into the dark," says Daisher, "going and going, and in about ten seconds I saw the rope straighten, heard it start to whip—what Dano called flossing the sky—but it didn't make the full whipping sound. Then I heard him yell—'Ahhhhhh'—and a crash like a tree had broken in half, and I thought, 'Holy shit, he's swung into one of them.' I pictured him down there hanging from a limb, injured and bloody. I yelled to him, got on the radio. Nothing. Quiet. Then I started freaking."

Daisher rappelled to the base as fast as he could and followed the beam of his headlamp through the rocks and trees until he finally saw the ragged rope end dangling from branches above him. Then he spotted Osman, lying peacefully on his side. He checked for a pulse and, when he found none, sprinted off through the boulder field to a parking lot pay phone where he made a panicked call to Fritsch. "Dano's dead," he said, crying. "He's on the ground, I just saw him, he's dead."

Fritsch and Gambalie told him they'd be there as fast as they could, and Daisher called 911 to report the accident. A coroner arrived with rangers who started toward the scene but turned back because of the slippery going over rain-soaked boulders. A while later they phoned Dean Potter at search and rescue and asked him to find the body and camp next to it overnight to ward off bears and coyotes.

Three weeks later, the rig was still hanging between the tower and Fifi Buttress, as was a long section of the broken jump line. Park authorities were involved in an investigation that was taking longer than Osman's friends thought it should, and in December a group of them retrieved the upper sections of the jump line and sent it to Black Diamond Equipment for analysis. The results, which they have since submitted to the Park Service, postulate a theory that seems to indicate not system failure but human error: In short, Osman had failed to realize that changing his jump angle would ultimately place an unbearable load on one of the knots that connected the ropes of his jump line. The rangers, who are still working on their report, have not yet confirmed the cause of the accident.

A memorial service was held on November 28 at Cave Rock. Osman's ashes were scattered over Lake Tahoe while more than 200 of his friends stood in the cold, snowy wind to speak loving words, place flowers, and organize a benefit and a memorial fund for Emma. And to absorb the shock of a death that shouldn't have shocked them at all.