

CHOSEN TO LIVE

A unique perspective to apply to our own lives.

by JERRY SCHEMME

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROBERT GOETZL



EVEN THOUGH I work for the Denver Nuggets, I'm not going to say much about basketball. I want to talk about something that's a little more important, at least in my opinion. I want to talk about a plane crash and how it's affected me. My intention is to leave you with a little seed planted.

On July 19th, 1989, I was the deputy commissioner of the Continental Basketball Association (CBA), which is the NBA's minor league system. Back then, our offices were based in Denver. I was traveling that day from Denver, making a connection in Chicago, and going on to Columbus, Ohio. At least that was the plan.

The CBA's college draft was scheduled for the next day. I was traveling with Jay Ramsdale, who was commissioner of the CBA league. Jay had become commissioner at the age of 23 — the youngest commissioner in the history of professional sports and a brilliant young administrator, obviously. Jay and I were also very good friends. We had known each other for a couple of years, working for different teams in the league before he came to the CBA office. I was hired to be his right-hand man just three months before we got on this plane.

We had arrived at Denver-Stapleton Airport at about 6:30 a.m. for a 7:00 flight. When we got there, we found out the flight had been cancelled for

mechanical problems with the airplane. So United Airlines put us on standby for the next four flights to Chicago. The original flight we were booked on had most of the people re-booked ahead of us because we had showed up fairly late. All of the flights that morning from Denver to Chicago were booked. Finally, at 12:45 in the afternoon, Jay and I had our names called. We got the very last two seats aboard that aircraft. We had waited almost seven hours to board the plane. I got handed a ticket in row 23, and Jay got handed a ticket in row 30.

In the eight-and-a-half years since this plane crash, there have been an amazing number of people who've said, "You know, I was supposed to be on your flight, but for some reason I didn't get on. I changed plans and did something else." Now, I've got to tell you — if everybody was telling the truth, about 8,215 people were to be on this plane!

We took off for Chicago under what I would call perfect conditions. It was 83 degrees when we left Denver, with almost no wind. About halfway into the two-hour flight to Chicago, above north-central Iowa, something happened that started a series of events that led us to crash land in Sioux City, Iowa.

We were about 150 miles away from Sioux City, cruising along on as smooth a ride as you can get, when an explosion occurred. When I say an explo-

sion, I mean it was just that. Not some little pop or bang, it was an explosion. There was a tremendous sound to it, as well as the force and feel. To give you an idea of what it felt like, the first thing that went into my mind was that a bomb had been planted on the plane and it has been detonated. In fact, the timing was only about five or six months after Pan Am flight 103 was downed by a terrorist bomb over Scotland. I thought, someone has planted a bomb, it's been detonated, and this is it for everybody because people don't survive planes that have bombs go off in them.

The plane went into a dip. We didn't drop suddenly or start a turbulent free-fall by any stretch. We kind of began to ease down in the airplane. After about 30 seconds, which seemed much longer at the time, we came out of that drop and leveled off again.

There was a tremendous amount of panic inside the cabin right after the explosion, as you might guess. One thing that didn't happen, though, which helped to mitigate things, was that we never lost cabin pressure and the oxygen masks didn't drop down. Among the 296 passengers there were 18 kids on board who were five years of age and younger. It was in the middle of summer and many families were traveling on vacation.

After we came out of the drop and we leveled off again, I tried to assess

what was happening. By this time, realizing the plane was moving forward and not dropping anymore, the chaos inside the cabin subsided very quickly. But I had a real strong hunch that something was still very wrong.

As it turned out, an engine had blown up, and the explosion was so violent that it took out the hydraulic system in the aircraft. If you don't have the hydraulics, you don't have a lot of things. It's much like having power steering and power brakes in your car — when they go out, the steering wheel locks up and the brakes don't work. It's the same thing in a plane that uses hydraulics; when they go out, you're not supposed to be able to fly the plane. But somehow, and I can't stress how miraculous it was, somehow the cockpit crew was able to keep that plane going. They didn't have any instrumentation; they didn't have any rudder, they didn't have any elevators, no ailerons, and no steering. The only thing they had to work with on this three-engine DC-10 was the remaining two engines.

The tail engine, the number two engine, was the one that had exploded.

It actually ripped out the back of the plane and fell 37,000 feet to the earth after it blew up. The remaining two engines, the wing engines, number one and number three, were still running. To this day the cockpit captain, Captain Alan Haynes, doesn't know why or how he thought of a solution to guide the plane. He grabbed the remaining two engine throttles and manipulated them to fly the plane. This was a completely unprecedented maneuver he had never been trained to do, but for the next 45 minutes that's how he got us to Sioux City.

The crew figured out right away, even with the little bit of control from the throttles, that they couldn't fly straight and they couldn't turn left. The only way to maneuver the plane was to take right turns. Each time we got a heading for the Sioux City Airport, where we were directed to make an emergency landing, the plane would veer off to the right. Each time we had to circle around and line up again. We did that 11 different times en route to Sioux City. There have been a lot of times in the last eight-and-a-half years since this crash when there's been a lot of stress and

pressure in my life, but when I put myself in that captain's chair, those times didn't seem so bad.

We were coming in on our final approach to Sioux City with an air speed of 255 miles an hour. A normal DC-10 landing is about 120 miles an hour. The runway we were trying to land on was 6,600 feet long; a DC-10, under normal air speed and normal rate of descent, takes a minimum of 8,000 feet to land. Our rate of descent was ten times the normal rate.

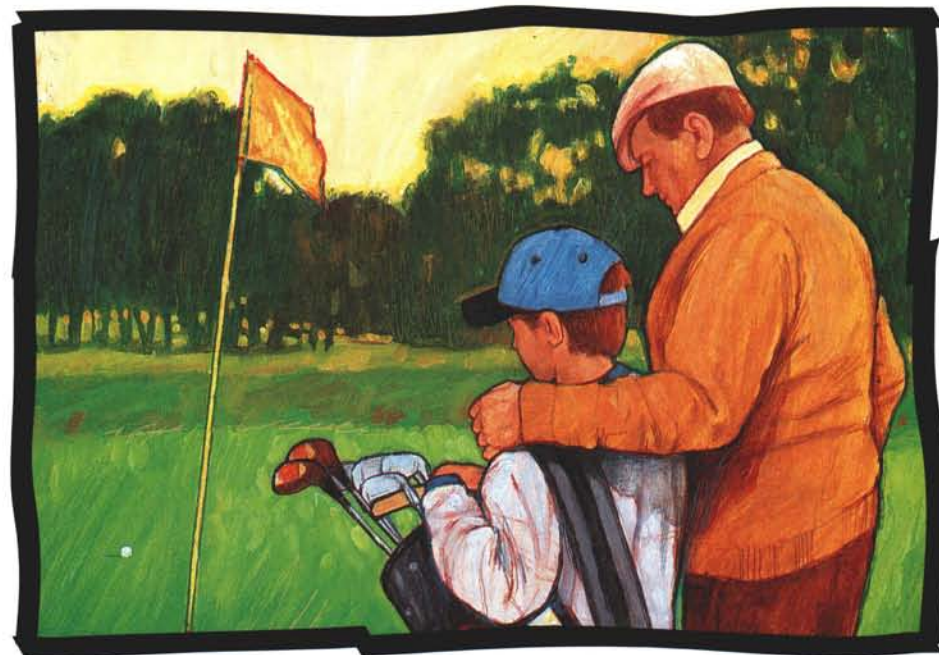
Perhaps the biggest factor and concern, at least in the mind of the captain, was coming in on that final approach, looking out the windshield, and seeing the left side of the runway lined up with fire trucks, helicopters, and ambulances. In amongst that group were 310 people. The emergency team had been alerted to the potential disaster and they were on the scene waiting for us to come in. They lined up on the runway we were trying to land on. The steering wheel inside the plane was completely locked up and the crew couldn't control the plane from veering from one side to the other once they got down. Captain Haynes has



said, "When I saw that group of people and those vehicles, I said a simple prayer. I said, 'God, if we have to veer in any direction, let us veer off to the right.'"

Another one of the many miracles that day was when we hit the ground and the plane broke into literally millions of pieces, not one of them ever went to the left. Everything veered off to the right side of the runway, stayed on the runway, and landed in a cornfield next to the airport.

Because of our rate of descent, air speed, and so little control of the plane, we came in at a 19-degree angle.



Whenever the flight crew pulled back on the throttles trying to slow down for a regular air speed landing, they would lose control. The plane would start to rock to the right and, I'm told, almost went into a spin three times. We came in so fast, so hard, and with so little control, we hit with the right wing of the plane first. That initial impact was pretty incredible. It was almost like we dropped out of the sky and just hit the ground, which I guess under the circumstances is about what happened.

Immediately after impact inside the plane there was a tremendous amount of chaos. Bodies were being thrown about, there was smoke and fire, and there were people being thrown out of their seats. Some were still strapped in their chairs going the other direction. I remember the plane hitting with the initial impact, and then I could feel it bounce a couple of times, which is actually what happened — the nose

bounced a few times and then we started sliding. About the time I thought we were going to coast to a stop, our momentum cartwheeled the plane forward and it flipped over frontwards. We started sliding upside down, and, from my vantage point, upside down and backwards as well.

Once we turned over, the piece that I was in (I did not know at the time that the plane had broken into pieces) continued to slide another 5,100 feet. We slid almost a mile after cartwheeling upside down. We veered off the right side of the runway, crossed a soybean field, crossed another runway, and then

went into the cornfield next to the airport.

When we came to a halt, we were still upside down, and I was still strapped in my seat. I was one of the very few people in my area who was still in that position. I unbuckled my seatbelt and got onto the floor, which was now the ceiling because we were overturned. I had to ask myself at that point: "Am I alive or am I not?" I was convinced for a long time before we hit that I wasn't going to make it. I really believed that my number was going to be called that day. And so, in that moment, I wasn't sure if I had survived the crash or not. I looked down at my clothes and I saw no blood, and I didn't feel any pain. When we flipped over, I had this excruciating pain shoot up my legs and my back, and into my neck. I remember thinking I had been either electrocuted or broken my back. That pain was completely gone. Here I was standing and looking around the

plane without any pain or blood. I got my answer pretty quickly when I felt pain on the back of my right hand. I looked down and fire was coming from the floor. It burned the back of my hand and my knuckle.

I looked around the inside of the plane and I didn't see any way to get out. I remember thinking, "All right, I've survived this impact and now I'm going to suffocate or burn up in this piece of plane because it's filling up with smoke and fire very rapidly." The emergency exit in front of me was gone; now it was a wall of burning steel. I looked around the inside of the plane and saw two other guys standing. As I stepped over to them, one of them said, "Let's just start helping some people and maybe we can find a way out in the process." That's what we started to do. We realized right away that there were a lot of people in the area who were not survivors, but a lot of them were. It turned out to be about half and half. In the process of trying to help people, we saw an opening in the fuselage. It was actually where our section had broken off from the rest of the plane. We stayed as long as we could to help, which was about three minutes at the most, and then the smoke chased us back to the exit hole.

The two guys who were helping me stepped out in the cornfield. I watched the second guy look around a little bit and then take a right turn. I figured that's what I had to do as well. I got outside the plane, took a couple of steps into the cornfield, and then heard the cries of a baby. I'll tell you what I didn't do. I didn't stand there and weigh the risks. I didn't think about going back in the plane and not finding my way back out. I didn't think, "If I go back into this thing it might explode." I certainly didn't stand there and think, "If I go back in and rescue this 11-month-old girl, I'll come out a national hero and the USGA will invite me to speak at their convention in eight years or Oprah will have me on her show. I honestly didn't think about it at all, and it's important for you to understand that as well. I believe that everybody would have done the same thing under those circumstances.

I heard the baby crying and the next thing I know, I was back inside the plane. She wasn't very far back inside the wreckage. I was on all fours because it was completely filled with black smoke. I got on top of the crying sound, and it turned out this little girl was actually trapped inside one of the

overhead compartments of the plane, which was now the floor of the plane.

When I got outside the plane with the baby in my arms, I do have to admit that all those years of watching too much television just kicked in. What happens on TV when the hero gets out of something that's burning? It explodes every time! On *McGyver* it happened once every episode. Every time *McGyver* got out of something burning, when he was a safe distance away it exploded, throwing him 20 feet in the air. He lands, rolls around a little bit, and then gets up with that black dirt on his face and his hair never moves. For the first time since the plane hit the ground I thought about the plane exploding. I ran away from the plane with the baby in my arms, but it never exploded. It burned up into a black shell.

I got into a little clearing in the cornfield where most of the people were assembled. Many were hurt very seriously. I don't know how some of them made it from the wreckage to where they were. I recognized a woman who had come out in front of me and I handed the baby off to her. The baby had stopped crying, and she looked like she was fine. I told the woman, "I don't know who the baby is, but please take her. I'm going to start helping these other people."

The woman I handed the baby to made her way out of the cornfield to the runway area. They were both checked out by paramedics and were without any serious injury. They sat down on a blanket on the runway waiting for the ambulances to take them to the hospital. The baby's parents, who were on board with two other boys aged five and seven, recognized their little girl being held by this woman and were reunited with her again.

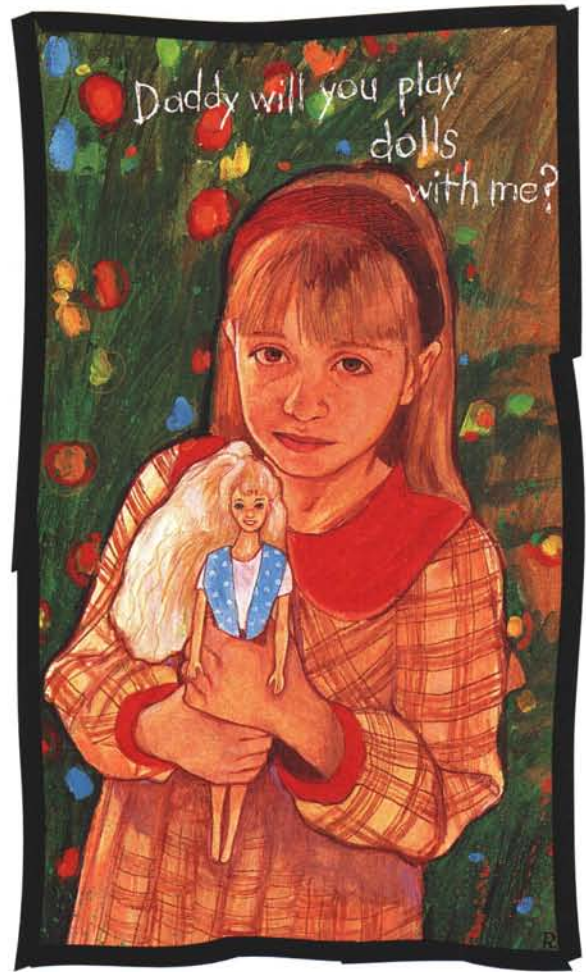
For 45 minutes they thought they had lost their little girl and the rest of the family had survived. Both parents thought the other had the child as they exited out in separate directions from the plane. They were sitting in front of me in row 11. The baby was on the floor between her mother's feet with pillows around her, which was the policy back then for infants in emergency landings. As a result of our crash, that's changed now. When I picked her up, I'm guessing she was in row 26 or 27. She was thrown about 15 rows and the extent of her injuries was a little scrape on her face below her left eye.

The result of Flight 232 was that 112 of the 296 on board died that day, including my travel companion and great friend, Jay Ramsdale. Jay was sitting in row 30, about where the plane broke off from the rest of us. He got trapped in the tail section, which burned very badly. In fact, they didn't identify Jay's body until four days following the crash, after his parents brought dental records to Sioux City.

Besides the question of how would you ever get back on a plane again, I think the most often asked questions of me after this tragedy are, "How has this thing changed you, your life, and what has it done to you?" In general terms, it has changed me in a very drastic way. My priorities are completely different from what they were before the crash. Today, spiritual convictions are my top priority: I try to live my life as a Christian man the best that I can. My family comes after that. Whether the Nuggets win or lose a particular game is way down on my list, which when you're 4 and 42 is a very healthy perspective, let me assure you!

More specifically, what this crash has done is to cause me to reevaluate something. It's caused me to redefine a particular word in our American vocabulary, and that word is *success*. I think we talk about and listen to the word and what's behind success all the time. It's rampant in our society. I think for the most part the American public has the same basic definition of the word *success* — it is setting the goal and striving to achieve it, including the financial rewards and material things that come along with it. Americans dream success.

I have a little bit different definition of success after becoming a survivor of this plane crash. To me, success is not necessarily setting a goal and striving to get to this level and the things that go with it. To me, success is not measured by where we're at or by the plateau we've reached. To me, as a survivor of this tragedy, success is measured by what we did along the way to get to where we are today. I think the questions we really have to ask to decide whether we are successful or not in our lives as we climb that



ladder are, "Did we step on some toes and/or some fingers, did we hurt people on the way, or did we do things with honesty and integrity?" Now I think a real question we have to ask is, "Did I neglect my family along the way?"

I think many of you have heard of the American speed skater named Eric Heiden. He won five Olympic gold medals in speed skating back in 1980 at the Lake Placid Olympic Games. In the 1976 Olympics, his best finish in one particular race was 19th. Four years later he won five gold medals. He is probably one of the greatest speed skaters of all time. I read an article about Eric Heiden a couple of months after the Olympics. The jist of the article was that for two-and-a-half months after the Olympics, he didn't know where his five gold medals were; he didn't know if they had been stolen, if he accidentally threw them away, or if they were packed away somewhere. The article included a quote by Heiden: "I don't care one iota where those gold medals are." I thought to myself, "Eric Heiden is crazy. If I had won one bronze medal from the Olympics, I would have the thing in glass, with

security guards around it. I would sleep with it and never let it out of my sight.”

He had five gold medals and he didn't care where they were. I thought Eric Heiden had the whole thing all wrong.

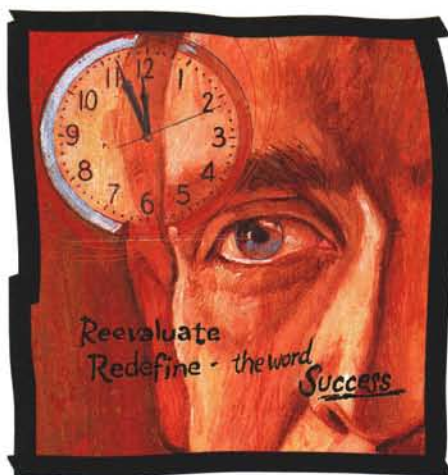
The article described Eric Heiden, his exploits and the incredible success that he had, and the work that he had put into it. At the end of the article there was a quote from Eric Heiden: “I get no satisfaction out of looking at my five gold medals. My satisfaction comes from looking back at the hard work I put in and the sacrifices I made to get those five gold medals.”

Eric Heiden had the right idea about success. You know what he was doing? Eric Heiden focused on the journey and the destination took care of itself in the form of five Olympic gold medals.

I think the real meaning of success is a focus on the journey and not the destination. If you start focusing on the journey, incredible things start to happen. You become more focused; your perspective on things becomes better. You gain an attitude that I'm going to go out, roll up my sleeves, and do the best job I can under the circumstances. To me, that means with the ability God has given us and not worrying about the result. I know if I focus on the journey, the destination is going to take care of itself. If you do that, I promise you that it will happen to you. I'm a small-town kid from South Dakota. I didn't have much going for me, not more than anybody else, anyway, and if I can do it and these amazing things can happen to me, let me guarantee, you can do it as well. The real meaning of success is a focus on the journey and not the destination.

I know what some of you are thinking right now — this is just another guy talking about business ethics, doing the right thing, honesty, integrity, and all that kind of stuff. It's a lot more than business ethics. It's life.

I came out of that plane crash without any serious injury. When the plane came to a halt, I was still strapped in, hanging upside down. When I unbuckled my seatbelt, stood on the floor, and looked up at where my seat was, mine was the only one hanging there. Everybody around me in that crash died: the guy to my left, the woman across the aisle from me, her eight-year-old son, the guy behind me, and the one-year-old boy sitting on the floor between his mother's feet in front of



me. Everyone around me in that crash died, and I came out of it without any serious injury. I feel like my life has been given back to me. I've got a second chance that most people experiencing a plane crash don't get, and for that reason I feel like I've found the real meaning of success.

I'd like to close with a question that I'd like you to think about. What do you think we thought about in that plane before we hit the ground? There were 45 minutes between the engine explosion and us hitting down in Sioux City. We were going to crash; we were told in so many words by the captain that we were not going to land safely and walk off that plane. In fact, the last thing he said to us was, “Folks, I'm not going to kid anybody. This is going to be rough. This will be rougher than anything you've ever been through.” We knew from the start to the end that we were going to crash.

I can tell you first of all what we didn't think about. We didn't think about what kind of car we had parked back at the Stapleton Airport garage; we didn't think about whether it was a BMW or a VW. We didn't think about our house and how big it was or how many square feet we had. We didn't pull out our business card and say, “Boy, I'm president of this company and I'm going to die a big shot.” None of us pulled out our business cards and thought, “I'm the golf course superintendent of So and So Country Club.” We didn't think about money, cars, or material possessions.

I think you have a pretty good idea of what we thought about — we thought about spiritual convictions, relationships, and family. Do you know why we thought of these things? Because we were trying to determine, thinking about the idea that we might not survive, if we had been successful

in our lives. You know what we did to find that out? We looked at the journey to find out whether we had been successful or not. Everything we thought about in those 45 minutes was the journey, not the destination. We were trying to figure out if we had been successful because I can guarantee every one of us on board thought about dying.

The real meaning of success is focusing on the journey. You say, “What does that mean?” What that means is the task at hand — you roll your sleeves up and do everything you can to do the best you can. At the same time, keeping perspective, not neglecting your family, and doing things with honesty and integrity.

When I say not neglecting your family, that hits so hard for me; I have a five-year-old daughter. I've determined how kids spell love. They don't spell it L-O-V-E. My daughter spells love T-I-M-E. She doesn't care if I buy her something, she doesn't care whether the Nuggets win or lose a particular game, she doesn't care about money, or about how big a house we have. She cares about spending some time with Dad; she cares about Dad playing Barbies with her or just going for a walk with the dog. Kids spell love T-I-M-E.

I think the real meaning of success is to focus on that perspective, that journey, and then things don't get fouled up along the way. I think you keep the right perspective and then amazing things start happening to you.

Do you want to try to protect your investment and to protect yourself? Then I have a turf tip for you — focus on the journey. Because when you do, the destination takes care of itself.



JERRY SCHEMSEL has been the voice of the Denver Nuggets since 1992. His sportscasting career spans 16 years, including radio and television play-by-play. He is the author of the book *Chosen to Live*, published in 1996 by Victory Publishing Company, Littleton, Colorado.