

Episode 12: Matt fell through the ice

Our story today takes place on the west coast of Finland. January 5, 2017 was a sunny winter day. And it was also very cold: -4 degrees Fahrenheit, which is -20 degrees Celsius.

That day, there was a woman who was at home, but outside. She was looking west, out over the Gulf of Bothnia – the body of water that separates Finland’s west coast from Sweden’s east coast. It’s about 60-70 miles across, and the surface is frozen in the winter.

As she is looking out over that ice-covered body of water, she sees a person skiing across the ice – about 500 yards away from land. And during that brief time that she’s looking that direction, she sees that person drop right through the ice into the water.

The person she saw go through the ice was an 18 year old man named Matt.

That was a pretty scary day for Matt. He could have died that day, but he didn’t. Thankfully he survived, and he told me exactly what happened that day.

So without any further ado, here’s my conversation with Matt.

Scott

Matt, thanks for coming on the show.

Matt

Thanks for having me, Scott.

Scott

Now, you live on the west coast of Finland, right?

Matt

Yeah.

Scott

And you told me the area where you live is called the Kvarken area - is that right?

Matt

Yeah, the stretch of water that connects Sweden and Finland is called Kvarken.

Scott

Okay. How cold does it usually get there in the wintertime?

Matt

It usually gets around -4 degrees Fahrenheit in January - obviously, some days can be much colder.

Scott

So this body of water that separates Finland's West Coast and Sweden's east coast is called the Gulf of Bothnia - is that right?

Matt

Yeah, that's right.

Scott

How far across is that? Is it roughly, like, 100 kilometers, maybe?

Matt

Around 100 kilometers.

Scott

So, it's about 60 or 70 miles - something like that. I mean, that's a big body of water. Does it usually freeze all the way across?

Matt

Yeah. In some winters, it's so cold that it'll actually freeze all the way across.

Scott

So on some winters, you could walk all the way across from Finland to Sweden.

Matt

Yes, that is correct.

Scott

Okay. Have you ever done that?

Matt

No. That'd be rather difficult, I believe.

Scott

Yeah, it probably would have been difficult with no shelter or anything. How many times before this day had you skied on that ice?

Matt

Several times per week, every winter.

Scott

So, you're pretty much an outdoor guy. Do you love being outdoors?

Matt

Yeah. I love being outdoors.

Scott

Had you been on that same ice that winter before this happened?

Matt

Yeah, I've been on that ice a couple of times, actually, prior to this and had no problems whatsoever.

Scott

When you're skiing, how do you recognize a weak area? Is there a way to recognize it?

Matt

Well, if there are parts of the ice that are not covered in snow and are actually exposed to the eye, then you might be able to spot some major cracks or something like that. I guess the way to recognize it is just by keeping your eyes and ears open and making sure nothing seems too fishy.

Scott

So you're not really looking for big holes - you're mainly looking for cracks - in the ice. Is that right?

Matt

Yeah, if I'm worried it's gonna break. Normally, I'll look for cracks but there's not a chance it's gonna break. So, I'm usually not too worried about it.

Scott

Yeah. This was in January, so it had already been cold for a while. So, it should have been thick enough.

Matt

Yeah, it should have been thick enough.

Scott

Alright. When you're skiing, what you're really doing - the way I think of it - is you're cross-country skiing, right? Just like you would on land.

Matt

Yes.

Scott

Can you describe what does your equipment look like when you were on the ice that day? I mean, what kind of gear did you have?

Matt

Well, in general, I tend to carry light gear - like, nothing too heavy. Obviously, it can get quite difficult and strenuous on your body if you have lots of fit clothing. Also, if you end up breaking through the ice, you don't want to be pulled down too much by the heavy clothing. I guess I didn't have too much cargo with me. I had my phone, a backpack with some water, and very little stuff.

Scott

Oh, that's one of the things that I was gonna ask - do you normally carry your phone with you? I mean, most people do. But if you're down in the water, your phone might not be workable anyway.

Matt

Unless you have some sort of waterproof casing.

Scott

Okay. this event happened on Thursday, January 5, 2017. So, it's almost two years ago. On that day, how far out did you go from land?

Matt

I actually didn't go too far. I think I skied about 3-4 miles - something like that. Nothing too harsh at all.

Scott

That's still quite a distance away, though. I mean, 3-4 miles away from land is--

Matt

I was not heading straight across the ice. I was, kind of, in an inlet. Where I live, there is a small inlet that's about like 10-miles long or something like that. I was heading, like, out from the land towards the ocean, but I haven't really got to the open ocean yet.

Scott

Okay. So you would, like, go out a little ways and then head north or head south?

Matt

Yeah. Okay. That's what I'd do.

Scott

Okay. What was your first indication that there might be a problem?

Matt

Well, I've started to hear these very, very slight cracking noises, but it could easily be mistaken for, like, the snow underneath the skis. So, I wasn't really too suspicious because it is crunching just like snow. But then, eventually, everything broke at once - like a large sheet of ice just slowly sinking down into the water.

Scott

So, it was fairly quick and you could, kind of, see it happening?

Matt

Yeah. It happened over the course of, like, maybe a 1-2 seconds.

Scott

Oh, well, that is pretty quick! When that happened, did you completely just got into the water at that point?

Matt

There really wasn't anything I could do because, I guess, the area that's breaking was, like, too large for me to kind of get away from. So basically, I just panicked. I went straight into the water. My head never went under the water, thankfully.

Scott

So you were mostly under the water. Do you know what the temperature of the water was that day?

Matt

I never got that checked, but I knew that the air was -4 degrees Fahrenheit. So, I guess the water couldn't have been too pleasant.

Scott

No. That's got to be worse than taking a cold shower. That's got to be quite a shock not knowing that you're going in and being submerged in the sudden freezing water.

Matt

Yeah, definitely. You got the whole adrenaline rush going.

Scott

Right. A lot of things happening at once. How did you keep your head above the water?

Matt

I was just treading water, I guess. For some reason, I thought I was gonna end up under the water but I was able to tread, float, and keep my head dry.

Scott

Did you still have your skis on?

Matt

Actually, the first thing I did when I plummeted was taking my skis off because I knew there was not a chance of getting out with them on. So, I kind of pulled them off and threw them up onto the surface.

Scott

Oh, okay. So you didn't just kick them off and let them sink to the bottom. You wanted to save them, right?

Matt

Of course. They're new.

Scott

Okay. So your skis were off and you were able to just tread water. Do you know how to swim?

Matt

Yeah, I know how to swim. I guess the drowning wasn't as dangerous as freezing in this situation for me, at least.

Scott

At that point, what's going through your mind?

Matt

Well, first of all, I guess you never expect these things to happen to you. When it does, you get kind of confused. It feels unreal, in a way. But I guess, once I came to my senses, the first thing I thought was, "I need to get out of this situation quickly because the longer I wait, the colder I'll get, the more difficult it will be, and the more stamina I'll end up spending." So, all I knew was I needed to get out of the situation, like, right away.

Scott

How were you trying to get out? I mean, did you have your arms up on the edge of the ice trying to pull yourself up, or were you not able to grab onto any ice at all?

Matt

My arms were up on the surface. I was trying to swing my legs up because that is usually a good strategy if the ice that you're surrounded by is strong. In this case, the ice is very, very thin, about 0.5 - 1 inch, maybe - it wasn't thick at all. So every time I tried to swing my legs up, I just keep just breaking off the sides of the hole. So, the hole would just get larger and larger as I was trying to get up. When I realize that was not working, I used my arms to crawl straight up against the ledge which kept breaking off over and over again.

Scott

How many times do you think that happened?

Matt

Definitely, a lot of times. I was in there for about 7 minutes, I think, so I was at it pretty much the whole time.

Scott

Would you describe yourself as being in, kind of, a state of panic? Or were you thinking, kind of, clearly?

Matt

I don't know. It's kind of both at the same time because I got, like, these primal instincts and adrenaline kicking, rushing, and everything. So I guess I might be quite panicked but my body, for some reason, knows what to do.

Scott

Had you ever been in any kind of situation like this before? Did you, kind of, have any training for this?

Matt

No. I have done ice swimming before - which is a thing here - where you just cut a hole in the ice and jump in. So, I guess that it wasn't too cold for me to handle. That's what I'm trying to say.

Scott

If you look back on it now, how long do you think you could have stayed in the water before hypothermia would set in?

Matt

I really do not know. I do not know because I was in there for 7 minutes. By the time they checked my temperature, I did have hypothermia but I do not know if I reached that temperature in the water or while transporting me out of the danger zone.

Scott

At any point during this, did you kind of think in your head, "Well, this is the end. This is how I die."?

Matt

Yeah, definitely. I guess what separates this incident from other people's near-death experiences is that breaking through the ice, drowning, or anything like that is a very slow and long experience. So, you have time to think about all the possible outcomes of the situation. So yeah, that was definitely a thought on my mind, like, "Is this it?"

Scott

This whole time when you're trying to get out, you're also yelling for help?

Matt

Yes. I was yelling as loud as I possibly could. I can barely talk for a week after that because I had pretty much screamed my throat out.

Scott

How far do you think you were from the nearest house or where someone might hear you?

Matt

Well, I was skiing parallel to land so I wasn't too far away. The nearest house was, at least, 500 yards away or something like that. Thankfully, a woman who was there had seen me crush through the ice. So, she sent her son to run out there and try to save me - that did take some time. I also heard that there were people who had heard me across the ice on the other side, at least, a mile away.

Scott

You didn't even realize that when you're trying to scramble and get out, there was this woman who just happened to be looking at you when you went through the ice.

Matt

Yeah. I had no way of knowing that. I thought I was all alone.

Scott

How did her son get out there safely? Was he endangering his own life to get to you?

Matt

He's definitely endangering his own life to get to me because he had to, kind of, maneuver around because there's thick ice and very thin ice, like, right next to each other. So he had to, kind of, maneuver around that area to get to me.

Scott

A lot of times, you hear about somebody jumping in to save a person who's drowning and then both of them end up drowning. So, I wonder if that thought, perhaps, went through this guy's mind. How old was her son, roughly?

Matt

He's in his 30s or 40s, something like that.

Scott

Okay. So did he ski out to you or did he just run out?

Matt

He had a kicksled which is, kind of, like a sleigh with a seat on it. So basically, he was running with the sled in front. On his way out, he stopped at the point where the ice got weaker. At that point, he could kind of see the thin ice started sinking and sogging - it's a bit darker - so he ran out there. He was about 20-30 yards away from me when he threw a rope out to me. Basically, I just grabbed the rope and he pulled me up. The ice kept, like, being crushed underneath me as I was being pulled up. So, I got these skin cuts, like, on my wrist because of it.

Scott

Yeah, because he was pulling you in the direction of the surface. How many times did he have to throw the rope before you got it?

Matt

Only, actually.

Scott

Oh, that's good. When you grabbed the rope and got pulled to the surface, how far away were you from him at that point?

Matt

I guess I'd say about 10 yards, something like that.

Scott

Obviously, where he was was still safe ice. So once you're on the surface, he could just pull you over to him, probably, without too much effort because you're just sliding on ice. Did he then take you back to his house?

Matt

Yeah. He put me on the sled, pushed me over to his house, and we went inside. They called an ambulance because I was probably going to get hypothermia. They laid me to rest on a couch, gave me a quilt to stay warm underneath, and then they just called my parents.

Scott

And where were your parents? Were they at home during this time?

Matt

My dad was at work. My mom was at home.

Scott

That's not the kind of phone call a mom or dad wants to get, of course.

Matt

No, apparently not worse.

Scott

Of course, by that time, the news was good because you had been rescued. Yeah. So what was your medical condition at that time? Were you hypothermic then?

Matt

Yeah, that's correct. I didn't really notice that I was freezing too much as I was being pushed towards his house. My clothes were freezing. I could barely move my arms because my jacket

had frozen. It didn't feel too bad at that point because I had some adrenaline running. Once I, like, laid on the couch with the blanket, that's when I really started to freeze.

Scott

Wow. You were back in a warmer environment and that's when you started to feel the real effect of the cold?

Matt

Yeah, I haven't really felt it until then.

Scott

Did you end up going to the hospital?

Matt

Yeah, they drove me to the hospital because my body temperature had gone under 94-95 degrees Fahrenheit - I think that's where it starts to officially count as hypothermia. So, they drove me to the hospital and kept me warm in the ambulance. When I got to the hospital, the local news had, like, actually written an article about me already. So, that's kind of weird.

Scott

Wow. That must have been a slow news day or something for somebody who's waiting for something to happen. Did everyone in your town know what had happened and what you've just gone through?

Matt

Everyone pretty much knew right away. I got lots of messages from people and stuff like that.

Scott

So you're, kind of, a celebrity for a little while.

Matt

Yeah. 15 minutes of shame.

Scott

Looking back on this now, is there something you could have done or signs you could have seen to avoid this happening?

Matt

I really thought about that a lot. In general, what I was doing wasn't dangerous because, usually, that part of the ice is thick. The ice had been really nice and strong for several weeks. The night before I had gone out, there had been this, like, really strong windstorm that had broken off, like, a very large section of ice from this inlet that I was skiing in and pushed it across the ocean, basically. So, the only ice I was skiing on was the ice that had frozen overnight which was why it suddenly got so thin. I guess, as a safety precaution, I could have, like, checked with my dad or someone else if they knew anything about the conditions of the ice. Or I guess, I could have checked the weather history from yesterday or something like that.

Scott

Are there organizations, weather groups, or something that kind of monitor the condition of ice in various areas?

Matt

Yeah, but not too actively.

Scott

Okay. All right. Would it have made a difference if you were with someone rather than being all by yourself out there?

Matt

It really depends on how tightly they'd be following me because, I guess, if there are 2 people skiing out there beside each other, the same thing would have happened to both of them. I guess if 1st person is a few feet ahead of the other one, then 2nd person could save the 1st person if anything goes down.

Scott

This happened almost two years ago and I understand it took you a while before you could actually talk about it. Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

Matt

Well, I guess, before you're able to actually, like, mature your view on the whole situation, you have to, like, go through a whole process where you stop worrying, theorizing, and imagining different possible outcomes of the situation that didn't really happen. When you start to think about all the different outcomes, I guess that can get quite scary.

Scott

Yeah. Like what would happen if that lady hadn't been out and happened to be looking at you when you went through. You said there was someone else that heard you yelling but they were, like, a mile away. That's a long way for sound to travel!

Matt

Yeah. They're in this village that's, like, across the inlet. I remember my dad telling me that they could hear me from there and they had also been able to spot me with binoculars at that point. I guess sound just travels really well across the water.

Scott

If they were the only ones to hear you, it would have taken them quite a bit longer to get to you than it would for this other for this man.

Matt

Yeah, it would have taken way longer for them.

Scott

And that may have been too late.

Matt

Yeah.

Scott

I think it might be good - if you, maybe, haven't done this already - if you tell your story at some local groups or clubs or something to people who are interested in the outdoors so that people

might be more aware of this - it might save somebody else's life. Have you thought about that at all?

Matt

Well, I haven't really done it at any clubs, but I guess I have, kind of, talked to people about it and advocated ice safety like looking for the obvious giveaways and taking the proper safety precautions before you do anything like that.

Scott

Having this happen, has it changed your outlook on life in any way?

Matt

Well, I don't know. Maybe. I suppose death seems a bit more spontaneous because, like, you expect it to happen a lot further down along the way.

Scott

How old are you?

Matt

I'm 20 at the moment. I was 18 then.

Scott

Yeah. At 18-20 years old, you don't really think about death at all, right?

Matt

No. It's just like any regular morning.

Scott

Since this happened, have you gotten to know the man that came out and saved your life?

Matt

Well, I was familiar with him. I kind of knew his family and who he is. We live in an area where lots of people know each other.

Scott

He might be one of the guys who you would want to buy a beer for or something.

Matt

Yeah, definitely. I gave them a card where I, basically, thank them for saving me. I gave them a gift card to a restaurant.

Scott

That's nice. Are you planning to go out on the ice again this winter?

Matt

Yeah, I probably will this winter. I wasn't able to do it too much last winter because I was in the military, which all men in Finland have to do as a conscript. So, I wasn't at home too much last winter but I'm definitely planning on going out on the ice this winter.

Scott

If you weren't tied up with the military last winter, would you have done it then? Or do you have any hesitation about going back out on it because of what happened?

Matt

Not really. I have been out on the ice but not as far as that time. I've been, like, walking with my dog on the ice, as an example.

Scott

Yeah. If you love the outdoors, it's kind of hard to not do outdoor stuff, right?

Matt

Yeah.

Scott

Matt, what a great story! I mean, obviously, things could have turned out completely different, but I'm glad it turned out the way it did. Thanks for sharing your story!

Matt

All right. Thank you for having me.

Scott

Thanks for listening to this episode. My goal for each show is to introduce you to people and stories that you just won't find on other podcasts. If you want to help support the show, you just need to subscribe! That way, you'll never miss an episode. You can click on any of the 'Subscribe' buttons on the website, which is WhatWasThatLike.com. You'll see all the links right there at the top, where you can subscribe directly to this show on Apple podcast, Google podcasts, Google Play Music, Spotify, Stitcher, radio, or on whatever app you use to catch your podcasts. You'll see there are also links to Twitter and Instagram - so, you can follow us there and I hope you do. If you really want to connect with me and get in on the discussion with other listeners to the show, you can join our private Facebook group. You can find that at WhatWasThatLike.com/Facebook. Of course, you can always email me directly at Scott@whatwasthatlike.com, or just go to the website and click on 'Contact'. I'd love to hear what you think of this episode or a previous episode. Thanks again for listening and I'll see you on the next show where we'll once again ask the question, "What was that like?"