

# SAR teams rescue hunter after fall

By Marshall Dunham

Staff Writer

On the evening of Friday, Oct. 21, and into the morning of Saturday, Oct. 22, the Upper San Juan Search and Rescue (USJSAR) team undertook a rescue mission for a man who suffered a horse riding accident.

The mission was executed in conjunction with Mineral County's search and rescue (SAR) team, as well as Archuleta County's emergency management team.

According to Archuleta County Deputy of Emergency Operations Matt Fine, a call came in between 6 and 7 p.m. for a man who had fallen off a trail down a steep incline while riding a horse along the West Fork Trail.

Fine estimated that the victim fell approximately 200 feet and said he sustained significant leg injuries.

A friend of the victim who was with him at the time explained to The SUN what he saw happen.

The man, Robert Gates, explained that himself and his friend, Thomas Faught, were riding horses during a hunting trip with Fawn Gulch Outfitters.

He explained that the group was 6.7 miles up the trail along a steep embankment when Faught's horse lost its rear footing, around 3:45 p.m.

Gates said that the horse began to slide down the embankment, and tried to recover by jumping back onto the trail.

When the horse jumped, it began to fall down the embankment, said Gates.

"I feared for my friend's life at that point," said Gates, later adding that the horse "cartwheeled down the mountain" with Faught being thrown from the horse as it tumbled.

"My friend would go airborne for 3 or 4 feet and then land and slide before going airborne again," said Gates. "I saw that three or four times."

Gates went on to explain that Coy Ross, Spur Ross, Brock Bagwell, and Darren Hockett, who were part of the outfit, and Justin Hawkins and Darrell Odom, who were hunting with the outfitters, slid down the embankment to assess Faught.

"I was afraid he was dead," said Gates. "I knew that if I went down there, and he was dead, I'd have a hard time getting out of there, so I stayed with the horses and mules."

After the five individuals assessed Faught's injuries, Coy Ross and Bagwell rode down the trail to a camp with a satellite phone.

Gates went on to explain that, when Coy Ross and Bagwell couldn't get a signal where they were, they rode back to the accident, where Ross scrambled up the mountain above tree line, gaining roughly 2,000 feet in elevation.

"He went straight uphill like a mountain goat," said Gates.

From there, Coy Ross was able to get a signal, said Gates.

Gates added that members of the hunting expedition removed their coats, with Hawkins making several trips down to Faught, bringing him the jackets as well as a bed roll.

Gates said that, around 9 p.m., Fine and Archuleta County Director of Emergency Management Mike Le Roux arrived to the scene.

Fine explained that, upon arriving, himself and Le Roux began setting up anchors for a ropes team to pull Faught up the embankment.

Fine explained that, when USJSAR and Mineral County SAR arrived to the scene, the teams assessed Faught's injuries and, using the ropes team, pulled him up to the trail, and then to a ridge above the trail.

Gates estimated that the ridge was 100 yards above the trail, and that, due to how late in the evening it was, the entire party and both SAR teams had to spend the night on the ridge.

Coy Ross, Spur Ross and Bagwell

used hand saws to cut down an estimated 30 or 40 trees, ranging from 10-18 inches in diameter in order to create a landing zone for a helicopter, said Gates.

He added that, at 2:30 a.m., Coy and Spur Ross rode down the mountain in the dark to retrieve IVs and medication, as well as food and water for everyone involved.

Fine explained that, at around 9:30 a.m., a Black Hawk helicopter from the National Guard was able to land and fly Faught to Farmington, N.M., though he was later transferred to the University of New Mexico Hospital in Albuquerque, N.M.

"He had surgery Saturday night, and surgery Sunday morning," said Gates. "They're expecting four to six more surgeries, but they believe his leg is saved. He's in good spirits, and looking forward to coming back and hunting next year."

Gates went on to put emphasis on the fact that this accident was nobody's fault.

"This isn't on the outfit, this isn't on my friend, or his horse. I watched the whole thing," said Gates. "It was an accident. You put a sword in the fire and then cool it to strengthen it, and this was our fire. It was the ultimate test of teamwork."

In addition to the individuals already mentioned, Gates wanted to extend gratitude to USJSAR members Wes Laverty, Janna Ranson, Jim Bodoh, Colton Logan and David Hickle, as well as Mineral County SAR members John Steele, Jess Biernat, Jay Thompson, Terry Morgan and Jim Adelman.

Gates also wanted to thank Troy and Loretta Ross for helping gather all of Faught's possessions after the incident.

"I want to extend thanks, for myself and Faught, to everyone involved," said Gates. "Because without their help, he wouldn't have made it off the mountain. It would have been a recovery, not a rescue."