

Land, Water and People

Avalanche Awareness: Back to Basics

By Mike Blakeman

As I write this, there have already been four avalanche fatalities in Colorado this winter and eleven avalanche fatalities nationally. According to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, Colorado has averaged six avalanche fatalities a year over the last decade.

Many folks believe that if they don't snowmobile, ski, snowboard or snowshoe in the backcountry, they don't need to be concerned about avalanches. Yet, people have died in avalanches while tubing on hillsides, driving over mountain passes and even standing below pitched roofs. This year, three people have died in three different states while skiing or boarding inbounds at ski areas.

These statistics are not designed to scare people from visiting the mountains in the winter, rather I share them in hopes people will be motivated to learn about and practice avalanche safety.

Avalanches generally occur during or right after a winter storm on slopes ranging in steepness from 30-45 degrees. Thirty-six to thirty-seven degree slopes tend to be particularly dangerous. Windy days may also increase avalanche risk as snow is transported from the windward to the lee sides of slopes.

It is safest to travel on the windward side of ridges or on low-angled slopes well away from avalanche runout zones. Avalanche runout zones are those areas below avalanche paths where the snow piles up. Traveling through thick trees is often safe, but even these areas can slide when conditions are severe. If a questionable area must be crossed (really think about that "must be crossed" part), then one person should cross it at a time while others watch.

All members in a group traveling in the backcountry should be equipped with, and be proficient at using, avalanche beacons, probe poles and shovels. These pieces of equipment are not a substitute for good judgment, but if things go wrong, they will help those not caught in a slide to quickly locate and dig out buried group members.

Many people that had been trained in avalanche safety and carried all the right equipment have still died in avalanches. Most of these deaths were preventable and were the result of bad decisions. Common threads that have led to disregarding avalanche risk include:

- Traveling in an area because there are already tracks;
- Fatigue;
- Taking a short-cut;
- Peer pressure;
- Showing off (accidents are more likely to occur in mixed-gender groups);
- Goal oriented;
- The lure of un-tracked snow.

Regardless of how logical we believe we are, decisions are made with a lot of help from the emotional centers of our brains. For this reason it is helpful to carry and refer to a decision card when recreating in the backcountry. The decision card should include weather, topography and snow condition factors to assist in analyzing avalanche risk. The card should also include the question, "Why am I making this decision?"

I made the decision long ago that skiing in 14" of new fluff trumps watching the Super Bowl. That said, sometimes conditions warrant that it is best to suppress my excitement of making turns in the powder and instead kick back and watch the game, that way I will live to carve up the snow another day.

For more information about current avalanche conditions or avalanche classes, check out the Colorado Avalanche Information Center website at: <http://avalanche.state.co.us/index.php>

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