

Not a Second to Waste

Carve, February 2016

By: Doug Chabot

Over the last ten years the US has averaged 27 avalanche fatalities a year. This season is on track to easily meet that. This January there were 11 fatalities in the west, one of the highest Januarys on record. Statistically, February is no better so brace yourself for more tragedy. Here in southwest Montana there have been two avalanche fatalities so far (as of February 1) with an additional 32 close calls reported.

Not getting caught in avalanches is the goal, yet people get unlucky or make poor decisions and get caught anyway. Many times there are no lasting consequences and soiled undies are the only reminder of poor judgment or bad luck. Other times people are traumatized or killed. Having a goal of safety and a plan for the worst is imperative.

A rescue plan requires basic gear, training and practice. In 92% of fatal avalanches either the victim or someone in their party triggered the slide that killed them. 25% of victims died of trauma, the other 75% of suffocation. Unlike drowning in water where death occurs within minutes, avalanche victims have more time because snow contains air. A fully buried person dug up within 10 minutes has an 80% chance of survival. At 12 minutes those odds halve to 40% and halve again to 20% survival at 30 minutes. Rescue within this ever shortening window can only be done by partners since search and rescue teams are too far away.

For rescue to be effective everyone must carry the proper gear. An avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe pole are minimum requirements. Avalanche airbags, Avalungs and other personal protection such as helmets can help push the odds in favor of the one buried. Without rescue gear or if your partner doesn't know how use his transceiver, you cannot be found. If your partner panics and leaves the scene to get help, you will likely die. Only with practice can a person become proficient and confident with a transceiver to pinpoint their partner's exact location and dig them up within a 10 minute window.

Avalanche rescues are adrenaline filled, chaotic, emotional messes. Training, practice and planning for the worst is the only way to save a life under these pressures. If you are buried your future is in your partner's hands, so choose partners wisely. How fast can they reach through all their jackets and flip the transceiver to "search"? Is their shovel handle stored next to the blade? Are they practiced at deploying a probe pole smoothly? These are a few of many questions that need answers before going out.

Once an avalanche has occurred action must proceed methodically. Rescuing your partner, friend, sibling, spouse or child, requires a practiced response. First, before anyone goes out onto the slope it must be determined safe. Rescuers cannot get caught in adjacent slides. Next, from the top of the slope go to their last seen point and turn your beacon to "search". At the bottom of the hill, start the beacon search at the toe of the debris. If one person is buried, one person will do the beacon search; if two people are buried, two will search. All others will turn their beacons off so they do not interfere. More than one rescue has been delayed because someone kept transmitting a signal confusing the beacon searcher. All shovels get assembled and probe poles snapped in place. One person will shadow the beacon searcher ready to probe and dig while everyone else looks for clues in the debris---a hand or airbag sticking out of the snow. Probe around likely burial spots: near the toe of debris, around any gear, near a snowmobile, on the uphill sides of trees.

As the beacon searcher gets closer they will switch from a fast-paced coarse search to a detailed fine search in order to pinpoint the victim. Once the beacon's readings show the distance getting no closer, assume the victim is buried near by. Probing in concentric circles 10" apart will lead to a strike. When that happens, leave the probe in as a marker and have everyone dig. Digging is efficient if rescuers are in an inverted "V" formation with one person at the probe pole and others flanked downhill to the sides. This allows the snow to be moved quickly, especially if the victim is buried deep.

Rescue is a last ditch effort to turn a bad situation around in a stressful race against time. Practice is the only way to get faster. Rescuers have been known to lose valuable minutes doing the beacon search, especially pin-pointing. At Beall Park the Friends of the Avalanche Center and the City of Bozeman installed a "Beacon Park" to help people get better with rescue. Six beacon simulators have been buried and a control panel allows a person to turn one or more on to search and probe for. It's free and open from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. daily. The Friends also offer 6-hour Companion Rescue Clinics (www.mtavalanche.com/workshops/calendar). Take advantage of these opportunities; your partner will be grateful, and so will you.