

ARE YOU READY FOR AN AVALANCHE?

Training can help you keep a cool head when backcountry conditions turn south

By Doug Chabot

I can't believe this is happening. I watch my friend ski a beautiful line, but the slope avalanches in slow motion. It swallows him from behind and I can't see him. I scream, "Avalanche!", but I don't know if he heard me. He's buried. I know it.

Have you, dear reader, given this scenario some thought? Have you wondered about what to do to turn the tide of a really bad situation around? Call for help? If there's a group, do some ski out to sound the alarm? Answers to such questions are not easy, but thinking and replaying bad dreams like this sharpens our focus when reality comes unexpectedly knocking.

This happened to me once. I saw my partner get hit and disappear from view. I took a few breaths and told myself that it was Game Time. I knew what had to be done because I had trained years for this moment. First, I let a few seconds pass to calm myself. This is a technique taught in Wilderness Leadership classes, the military and in professional rescue work: a few seconds of focused calmness blocks panic from taking charge.

Now it's time for the business of clear action.

I first assess scene safety because a dead rescuer can't help. I confirm that there's no hang-fire or adjacent slopes waiting to bury me. I get out my beacon, put it on "receive" and ski down the hard bed surface to his last-seen-point (LSP). The LSP is crucial information because I know that he is not above this point and is likely in the fall line. It cuts the search area down to a manageable size. As soon as I pick up the beep of his transceiver I see him, buried to his waist, yelling that he's ok. Whew. He lost a ski, but is fine. We're both pumped on adrenaline. We were lucky and only nipped by the Avalanche Dragon, not eaten by it.



The 15 minutes immediately following an avalanche are critical. The victim has a 90% chance of survival if dug up in that time. At 30 minutes the odds drop to 50-50. After that they diminish quickly. Because of these time constraints it's imperative that everyone stays to help, no matter the group size. It's an All-Hands-On-Deck situation without exception. If one person is buried, then one person will do the initial beacon search. Everyone else must turn their beacon off to not interfere with the search. This is common sense and sounds simple, yet is repeatedly missed. Last winter a young man and his dad snowmobiled to an avalanche on Mt. Jefferson. They stopped at the toe of the debris and immediately recognized a problem: the person doing the beacon search had his head down walking in circles. He was following the guy in front of him who forgot to turn his beacon off, a rookie mistake. The young man had done rescue drills in one of our avalanche classes and knew how to fix the problem. He ran up on the debris, turned the guy's beacon off and instructed

his dad to follow him with a shovel and probe as he completed the search. Although the victim was located soon after, he was buried too deep to survive.

With one person doing the beacon search, at least one other should shadow him with a probe pole and shovel ready for action. Others should also have their shovels and probes out, actively scouring the debris for clues. Many people are alive today because a rescuer saw a glove, gave it a yank and found a hand attached. Years ago in West Yellowstone a snowmobiler was found by the shiny toe of his new boot sticking out of the snow. And a wife found her husband when she saw his hand hidden behind a snow block, invisible to everyone above. Spot probing above trees, in debris piles, around clothing or helmets can only help because sometimes we get lucky. The clock is ticking. Everyone needs to be searching.

Once the primary searcher gets a beacon signal he should start yelling out his digital display reading, "30, 25, 20" as he gets closer to the buried victim. Folks should congregate around him, ready to dig hard and fast. When he reaches the lowest numbers, it's time to probe. Probing locates the person with precision; there's no chance of missing by inches. Leave the probe in the snow after a strike to not lose the location in the fury of shoveling.

Only after the victim is recovered, ideally alive, will you contemplate sending folks out for help. An exact location, description of injuries and situation should be written down and sent out because Search and Rescue depends on it.

Getting caught and buried in an avalanche is often fatal, usually the culmination of compounding mistakes. Avalanche rescue is a last resort to save the day, but it doesn't always work. Not needing a rescue in the first place is what we strive for. Assess the snowpack carefully and play conservatively if there are any doubts about the stability. Practice and be prepared for a potential avalanche nightmare, and make sure the people you regularly ski or ride do the same---your life depends on them knowing what to do.