

The Powder Cloud



Newsletter of the Utah Avalanche Center

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March 2019

What's New

Who's Got Your Back?

What a winter it has been throughout Utah. With above average snow has also come above average avalanche danger over the past several weeks. We were fortunate to have two consecutive seasons with zero avalanche fatalities, but that luck ran out in mid-January with four tragedies occurring since then. These accidents all had one thing in common in that the parties were missing critical pieces of avalanche rescue gear. We can work together to keep each other safe by always asking our partners 3 simple questions:

1. Do they have a beacon, shovel, and probe?
2. Do they know how to use their rescue gear?
3. Have they practiced with their rescue gear?

If everyone in the group cannot answer "Yes" to all 3 of these questions, then avoid avalanche terrain.

Expansion of the Trailhead Avalanche Awareness Sign Program

The UAC uses forecasts, social media, education and awareness classes, and other outlets to spread the word about avalanche safety and preparedness. Our goal is to reach every backcountry user headed into avalanche terrain. One of our recent efforts includes placing avalanche transceiver checker signs at popular trailheads in the Logan, Moab, and Skyline zones. The checkers give passersby a green "O" to signal that their beacon is on and a red "X" if it's not. These are great tools that not only encourage carrying avalanche rescue gear but also help to increase general avalanche awareness. The signs are primarily funded from a Utah Outdoor Recreation Grant aimed at raising avalanche awareness across the state. Local organizations have jumped in and are sponsoring the signs as well. In Logan, Top of Utah Snowmobile Association, Northstars of Logan, Beaver Creek Lodge, and Utah State University Outdoor Program are supporting the project. In Moab, the Friends of the UAC Moab, Moab Gear Trader, and ROAM Industries are providing support. Thank you to the Utah Outdoor Recreation Grant Program and the local supporters for helping make this project successful.



Meet the Forecaster

Eric Trenbeath



What is your personal background?

I was born and raised in Utah, and my parents started me skiing at Powder Mountain when I was five years old. When we moved closer to Salt Lake City, I graduated to Brighton. It was still pretty rustic back then and I was enamored of the mountain people and their lifestyle. Later, when I was in college studying art and design, I became close friends with a guy who had worked at the Goldminers Daughter lodge (GMD) in Alta. He told me they would house and feed me there, and that I could ski every day. Two years later, I was designing ads at a junk mail advertising agency, while staring out the window at the Wasatch Mountains thinking there had to be a better way. The following year, I put all my stuff in storage and got a job at the GMD, and that started me on my path.

I spent 10 years in Alta; one year in Oaxaca, Mexico; worked as a river guide in Utah, Idaho, and Arizona; and have lived year-round in Moab since 1999. In addition to avalanche forecasting and river guiding, I also owned an art gallery and picture frame shop, and have worked as a freelance journalist.

How did you get into avalanche forecasting?

I'm a skier! I was caught in an avalanche in Days Fork and took a pretty serious ride. That definitely sparked my interest in figuring this stuff out a little more. Then I started working on the ski patrol at Alta. You get a lot of hands-on experience doing mitigation work, and that's when I really started paying attention to daily weather observations and trying to predict what was going to happen when we went out there in the morning.

How did you start working at the UAC?

In 1999, Craig Gordon and I were hired by the UAC to be snowmobile educators. My then wife and I had left Alta and were living in Moab year round. Craig took the north half of the state and I took the south. We also co-developed the forecasting program for the Manti-Skyline. In addition, the director of what was then called the La Sal Avalanche Forecast Center hired me as a part-time assistant. That set me up for the position I have today.

What was your greatest learning moment about avalanches and what was it?

Getting caught in an avalanche, and cartwheeling out of control while choking on snow was definitely a learning moment, but the first time I saw an explosive released hard slab, with the stauchwail rising up, and the blocks coming apart, that was a pretty watershed moment. That's when the mechanics really clicked.

What would you tell a 25-year-old version of yourself?

Hmmm. At 25, I knew that I was following the path that I wanted to be on in the outdoors and that it would be a lifelong thing, notwithstanding a derailment or two. We have to learn by doing, even if there are mistakes made so I don't think I would offer myself any advice in that regard. I guess, and maybe this is too personal, I would tell my 25-year-old self to be surer that I had chosen the right person to live this kind of life with.

What's one piece of advice you have about avalanches?

Take them more seriously. Even if you think you already do, take them more seriously than that. We think we understand the consequences of being caught in an avalanche, and possibly dying, but until it happens, it's really an abstract concept.

What do you like doing besides playing in the snow?



Pretty much anything outdoors, from hiking and biking to climbing. I like to follow snow downhill after it melts and turns into rivers. I like adventures of all kinds, and they can come from a good book, a ride through a subway beneath Mexico City, or from staring at a large piece of abstract art.

Education

FACETS: Not Just Snow Crystals

Human factors or heuristic traps are decision making patterns that lead to increased risk-taking and increase the probability of accidents. The 6 common heuristic traps in avalanche incidents were identified by Ian McCammon using the acronym FACETS (“Heuristic Traps in Recreational Avalanche Accidents: Evidence and Implications” (2004)).

Familiarity

We can become too comfortable in a familiar environment. In the backcountry, terrain is the environment in which we can fall into the heuristic trap of familiarity.

For instance, when the avalanche danger is considerable natural avalanches are possible and human-triggered avalanches likely on all aspects of your go-to stomping grounds. We may become complacent and take greater risks in familiar areas, compared to unfamiliar terrain where our decision-making process is contoured differently.

Even when we are traveling in familiar terrain, our home turf, evaluate terrain and conditions each day and remember that no mountain is the same today as it was yesterday.

Acceptance

Everybody wants to fit in with the cool kids. Sometimes the cool kids of the backcountry take questionable risks and you feel the need to play along to get a spot in the gang. Perhaps you are the lone female and you feel like your voice is not equal to that of the rest of the group. These types of situations can lead us into the heuristic trap of acceptance and to not speak up or digress from group decisions.

Accepting high risks and poor decisions made by those around us in the backcountry could turn our day “[To Hell in a Heartbeat](#)”. In the backcountry, managing risks and having a personal decision-making process leads to longevity.

Consistency

Two riders made a plan early one week for the next Saturday to ski objectives around Mt. Wolverine (upper elevation steep skiing) in Little Cottonwood Canyon, particularly the cirque. Friday evening the riders speak again, confirming their plans to head to Wolverine Cirque the following day. They note the avalanche forecast had increased greatly since they made the original plan. After not riding all year together they stayed committed to their original plan.

Saturday morning the UAC upper elevation avalanche terrain rated Considerable. Rider one skied the slope without issue and pulls out to an island of safety. Rider two drops into the same run. On his sixth turn, the slope collapses and rider two watches the bowl around him shatter a thousand feet wide and the avalanche instantly engulfs him.

Moral of this story? Always have an A, B, and C plan. Skiing is not trophy hunting. The mountains are not going anywhere and patience tends to be rewarded.

Expert Halo

Everyone starts from the bottom and no one knows all the “secrets” of staying safe in avalanche terrain. But what we do all have is that one friend who knows more than us and who we trust.

By following these “experts” into this environment our brains can be overwhelmed with all the decisions that need to be made, allowing us to follow blindly. Everybody's voice in the backcountry is equal. From Bruce Tremper to Johnny No-Name, everyone has the responsibility of making decisions as a cumulative group.

Trust is dangerous. Although the “Expert” may know a thing or two, having the ability to independently make decisions with confidence is vital to becoming a solid backcountry rider and contributor to the group while retaining responsibility for your own safety,

Tracks

Like a fish in water, the fish sees the bait but not the hook. Once the fish bites, maybe he won't be going home to his family and friends ever again.

Seeing tracks is not a sign of stability. Real people like you and me made those tracks, and we are not perfect and neither are our decisions in the mountains. Trusting other tracks is bait.

Contemplate where you are putting yourself in the mountains and think twice when following pre-established tracks. Sometimes those who wander are actually lost. Don't be afraid to find your own way. It's part of the fun!

Social Facilitator

Did anyone see that ride line that Jerry and John Facet rode the other day? The line was killer and it was all over Instagram. You have to check out those videos!

All of us know folks whose lives are governed by social media. Used properly, social media is another tool to gain real-time observations from the backcountry. But seeing is not always believing. A party may check off a large objective or a trophy line, share it on social media and the public may assume that terrain is "open" or safe.

Social media does not tell us where to go or desensitize us to the risks and hazards of the backcountry. Maybe Jerry and John made a good decision, or maybe they got away with it without knowing if they did or did not make the right decisions.

Technology is a great asset for trip planning and traveling in the backcountry, but it is not a device to "open" and "close" terrain.

Avalanche Skills eLearning Program

If you have not checked out the new Avalanche Skills eLearning Program, we highly encourage you to do so. Whether you are new to the backcountry or a seasoned veteran, this is a great way to freshen up your avalanche skills. This set of interactive online avalanche eLearning courses is based on the 5 Know Before You Go Points: Get the Gear, Get the Training, Get the Forecast, Get the Picture, and Get Out of Harm's Way. These free courses are available online at kbyg.org/learn. All you need to do is create a login. The course content is a mix of text, images, animations, videos, links to additional content, and interactive exercises embedded in a website that you can access from any online device.

Tech Tips

Inclinometers in the Backcountry

Do you use an inclinometer in the backcountry? If so, please [consider sharing how you use inclinometers in this short survey](#).

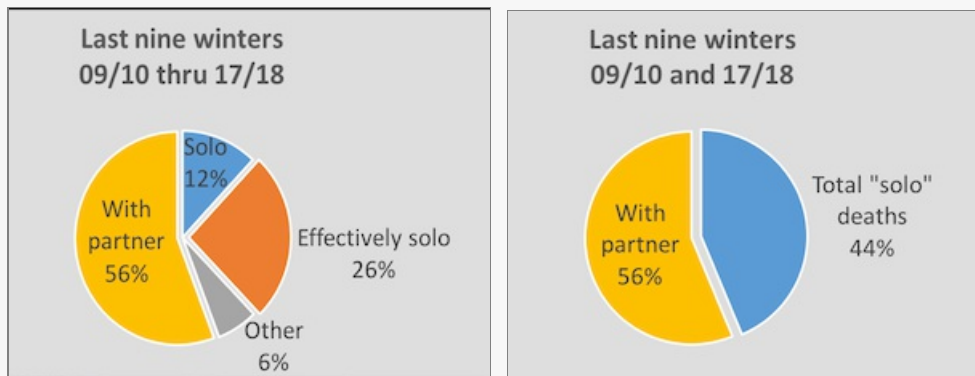
Where's Your Partner - Effectively Solo

In the winter of 2016/17, a quarter of avalanche fatalities were solo travelers. Having a partner to perform a rescue and choosing a safe uphill route are two fundamental parts of avalanche safety. We looked at how many people in the US were dying solo. The initial focus on solo avalanche fatalities brought to mind a handful of snowmobilers where the victim had left the group and was alone at the time of the avalanche. How often this was an issue with skiers and other user groups? What other situations were there when an avalanche victim with partners was "effectively alone"? How often are your partners in a good position to rescue you?

We defined "effectively alone" as situations when you have a partner who can't perform a fast, efficient rescue because they are:

- Out of sight
- Too far away
- Also caught in the avalanche

The numbers from the 2 winters shocked us so much that we decided to examine the last 9 winters of solo and "effectively solo" avalanche fatalities as well. In the last two winters, 55% of people killed in avalanches were either solo or effectively alone. Looking back over 9 winters, 44% were either solo or effectively alone.



Some of these victims would have died regardless, due to trauma, but a partner could have made a difference. An effective partner might have dug them out alive. A partner might have stopped the bleeding or taken some other life-saving measure. In a few cases, the victims survived the avalanche and were conscious. More importantly than performing a rescue, a good partner may have also questioned the original decision to get on the slope that slid.

We don't want to discourage true solo travel because it can be very rewarding, but travelers must acknowledge there is simply no room for error. We want to emphasize how we travel alone or with partners using fundamental concepts for safe or low-risk travel. 44% of fatalities involved someone either solo or effectively alone. 33% of non-motorized fatalities occurred on the ascent. These results suggest that backcountry travelers should spend more time considering "where's your partner" and "how are you ascending".

Giving Back to the UAC

Did You Know You Can Support the UAC with Planned Giving?

Charitable giving can play an important role in many estate plans. Philanthropy cannot only give you great personal satisfaction, but it can also give you a current income tax deduction, let you avoid capital gains tax, and reduce the amount of taxes your estate may owe when you die.

There are many ways to give to charity. You can make gifts during your lifetime or at your death. You can make gifts outright or use a trust. Here are some of the more common ways that you can support the UAC with your giving.

1. Making outright gifts
2. Donor Advised Funds
3. Will or trust bequests and beneficiary designations
4. Community Foundations
5. Charitable trusts, charitable remainder trusts, and charitable lead trusts
6. Private family foundation

If you are interested in including the UAC in your planned giving, please speak with your financial advisor/estate planner or contact the UAC for more information about the various ways to give.

The Details

Upcoming Classes

For a full list of classes and Know Before You Go presentations, see the [UAC Education Page](#)

Upcoming Events

For a full list of events, see the [UAC Event Page](#)

Update Your Information

We are working to update our contact database. [Please use this link to update your UAC profile.](#)

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