

slide. At 1410, probes were assembled to search for Smoke and Lady. Since the dogs didn't have transceivers, the people who did left theirs on "transmit." A lookout was posted to watch for subsequent slides and warn those below should one occur.

At 1427, King skied out Day's Fork to report the slide, and others soon followed to the parking lot to catch a ride to the bottom of Big Cottonwood Canyon where they could take a bus to Alta. Pollish, Hanson, Johnson and Dassing said they would search for another half hour and then go out the same way. The dogs were not located and had perished in the avalanche.

Avalanche Data

The avalanche path has been appropriately named "Two Dog Slide" for Mark Johnson's faithful huskies, Smoke and Lady. The avalanche, triggered by the skiers on the slope, started at 10,250 feet on the northeast aspect of Flagstaff Mountain. The slide was an SS-AS-4 avalanche with a crown line 3–6 feet deep and 500 feet long. It ran down the 37° pitch some 500 vertical feet with enough velocity and volume to deposit 15–20 feet of debris in the runout zone. Onno Wieringa, avalanche specialist from Alta, was a member of an on-site investigation team the following day. In a fracture line profile, he found that the initial slab was comprised of 40 cm of recent snow overlying a 40-cm hard-slab. A thin layer of graupel was sandwiched in between. Together these collapsed on a 10-cm-thick weak layer of small, faceted ice grains. A thin crust, which had developed just above 90 cm of depth hoar, provided the sliding surface for the avalanche. The layering was strikingly similar to that of the slab that released in Porter Fork on March 1 (see accident 81-11).

Comments

This avalanche path had been skied numerous times in 2 days without incident. This created a false sense of security among the skiers in the area. While skiers in the three groups were conscious of avalanches and carried avalanche rescue gear (it's not known if all were similarly equipped, but unlikely if packs were left on the ridgetop while skiing), they ignored backcountry protocol of not exposing more than one person at a time to potential avalanche danger.

All the ingredients of an avalanche were

present: First, the snowpack contained multiple weak layers, a slab and a sliding surface. Second, the slope was steep enough. And third, there were 15 triggers (skiers and dogs) on the slab at the same time, seriously testing its weaknesses.

King's group was perhaps the most fortunate in that the snowpack suddenly cracked and collapsed, but stayed in place with eight people on the slope. If Hanson, Johnson and Dassing (all wearing avalanche cords) had been injured or buried, there would have been plenty of rescuers to increase their chances of survival. This is a rare benefit in most backcountry situations, and definitely better than skiing alone.

Actions taken by the skiers following the avalanche should be commended. Foremost, they quickly accounted for everybody in their groups. Transceivers were left on "transmit" should another avalanche occur from the slopes that didn't slide, and an avalanche guard was posted to sound the alarm if necessary.

This avalanche site has a special historic significance. On December 2, 1977, three well-prepared skiers were caught in a slide at this same location. One of the skiers was only partly buried and he rescued another whose hand was protruding above the snow. Together they found the third skier, buried 4 feet deep, with their Pieps avalanche beacons. It marked the first live recovery in the United States where the transceiver played a major roll in locating an avalanche victim. Day's Fork was the site of yet another dramatic avalanche accident in 1983 (see accident 83-16).

81-14
MARCH 15, 1981

Pyramid Peak, Colorado

1 backcountry skier caught and injured

Weather Conditions

Ski areas 7 miles away from this accident, Aspen, Snowmass and Aspen Highlands, had gotten little snow this season. Early March, however, brought two storms to the region. On the 2nd–4th, both Aspen and Aspen Highlands recorded 15 inches of light, new snow.

Another storm system moved through on the