

The next day, two searchers, including a sheriff's deputy, looked for Miller. Hampered by the storm, they found nothing. A large search effort commenced later that day, but over two feet of snow had fallen in the past two days, covering all clues.

Search dogs alerted near the slope where Miller's body was eventually found. Searchers, though, determined the alert area was too avalanche-prone and hazardous to examine further. Searcher Kevin Kobe, an experienced backcountry tourer, thought he saw evidence of avalanches on the slope. The following spring, Kobe "was quite sure that the toe of the avalanche ended above where the body was found."³ Searchers continued to look for Miller for more than a week.

Six months later, on May 22, 1990, backcountry tourers Scott Datwyler and Dan Miller (no relation to Mark) were spring skiing when their dogs began digging in the snow. Datwyler and Miller dug down and found a ski pole. Moving uphill of the pole, they dug down and found Miller's body under 5.5 feet of snow.

On May 23, avalanche forecasters Bruce Tremper and Kevin Kobe visited the site and recovered Miller's equipment. His skis were buried about two feet from the body.

Miller's body was found lying on his right side, facing uphill. His right (bottom) arm was pointed up the slope. His left arm was "bent with the elbow pointing upward and cocked almost behind his head as if it had been pushed in place."⁴ There were about 16 inches of snow between Miller's body and the ground surface. He was still wearing sunglasses and a hat. His poles were about four feet downslope, and his skis were slightly uphill and two feet from his boots. The binding heel had released on one ski, as if he had fallen forward.

The state medical examiner's report, by Dr. Carol Snedaker, determined that Miller died from asphyxiation caused by an avalanche. The examiners found no evidence of trauma or injury consistent with hitting a hard object, as in a fall.⁵

AVALANCHE DATA

There is no information on the actual avalanche. In his report, Tremper concluded that Miller likely triggered a small avalanche from the bottom of the slope. It would have been sufficient to knock down and bury Miller, but not carry him very far. The avalanche probably broke in the old, faceted snow with the foot or so of storm snow sliding down—a persistent slab avalanche.

Miller was found near the base of a north-facing, "very obvious avalanche path."⁶ The slope is 500 vertical feet, with slope angles near 40 degrees at the top. Miller was found 380 feet below the top of the slope, at 8,360 feet elevation, where the slope angles decrease to around 30 degrees.

COMMENTS

Miller had not taken any avalanche classes. "If he had more avalanche knowledge...he would have avoided this slope," Tremper wrote. Obvious avalanche terrain, with recent, rapid loading on a weak snowpack, is not a safe combination.

Miller was alone. If he had been traveling with a companion, they might have been able to dig him out of the (presumably small) avalanche—especially if they were both equipped with avalanche safety gear.

Early season eagerness may have played a part, as is the case in many early season avalanche accidents. It must have seemed like an innocent slope...had very little snow on it. Many people get sucked in by the "there's not enough snow to slide" trap. It was early season with the first skiable snow of the season and passions run high when ski fever sets in."⁶