

WOLVERINE CIRQUE, BIG COTTONWOOD CANYON, UTAH | 19930403a

April 3, 1993

One backcountry tourer caught, buried, and killed. The third skier to enter a chute triggered and was carried in a small avalanche. The small avalanche triggered a much larger slide in the bowl below the chute, and the skier was buried deeply.

SITE

Wolverine Cirque in upper Big Cottonwood Canyon, between the Brighton and Solitude ski areas. Backcountry users often start at Alta, in Little Cottonwood Canyon, and climb about 1.5 miles to the ridgeline above the Cirque. Many steep couloirs drop from the ridge into the cirque.

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK SUMMARY

There is no weather data for this accident.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Roman Latta (22), Andrew McLean, and his wife Christina McLean met at the Grizzly Gulch trailhead in Little Cottonwood Canyon, near Alta, at 08:30. Latta and Andrew worked together at Black Diamond Equipment. At the trailhead, they met Chris Harmston, another Black Diamond employee, and Harmston's friend Tim Gibbs. The five decided to tour together to look at steep chutes in Wolverine Cirque.

On the tour to Wolverine Cirque, the group noticed several avalanches and watched the Alta Ski Patrol trigger a large slide during avalanche mitigation. The party "knew there was a high slide potential."⁸⁹ On the ridgeline above Wolverine Cirque, the group examined several couloirs, knocking cornice blocks into them with no resulting avalanches.

The group stopped at the top of what Andrew was calling "The King Chute." On belay, McLean again knocked cornice blocks into the chute with no result. He made a short rappel into the chute and, still on belay, made several "ski cuts" across the top of the slope. Again, no avalanches resulted.

Christina rappelled into the chute and skied through. She stopped below the chute, tucked under the cliffs to the side.

Latta was third to ski. Foregoing the rappel, he planned to jump into the chute. "... instead of oozing over the cornice, Roman backed up, got a bit of speed, and jumped far enough off the cornice to land on a whale-sized pillow of snow... When he hit, the entire pillow broke loose, and he started tumbling down the chute in a frothy cloud."⁹⁰

The snow was billowing and filling the chute from side to side. Roman was still on top of the pile swimming fiercely. As the slide reached the end of the chute, Roman disappeared into the churning white ball of snow."

(At this point, I knew it was a serious slide and we would have to get to him quickly, but thought there would be a good chance that he would be on the surface, or easy to find. From the amount of snow in the chute, I expected a small powder avalanche 2-4' deep.)

I heard Chris scream and thought she had been caught in the slide and was screaming as she was pulled down. I started a high speed side slip down the chute which was by now a smooth hard surface.

I slipped toward the mouth of the chute, panicked by my wife's screams and envisioning her buried. As I reached the end of the rock band, I felt a flood of relief as I saw her standing there.

Then I saw she was standing on top of a horrifying 3-4' fracture line. It was sharp, clean and had slid on a hard billiard table flat surface. It seemed to go on forever in both directions. I looked down into the cirque and got my first glimpse of the magnitude of the slide. It was huge. The small sluff slide that Roman had been caught in had triggered a far larger slide below with him in the center of it.⁹¹

RESCUE SUMMARY

Choking back panic, McLean put his transceiver in search mode and began heading down the debris pile. The others searched too. Harmston found a signal first, and the group began digging almost immediately. When the excitement of having pinpointed a beacon signal wore off, someone pointed out that Latta was buried deeply. Soon, the hole was over the rescuers' heads and excavation became increasingly difficult.

Wolverine Cirque is easily visible from Brighton and Solitude Ski Resort. Resort employees saw the avalanche, the party searching, and alerted authorities. A helicopter from Wasatch Powderbirds brought in additional rescuers, followed by medical support from Flight For Life.

Latta was pulseless when excavated. The medical team was able to establish a pulse before flying Latta to a hospital. Latta died three days later. He never regained consciousness.

AVALANCHE DATA

The initial avalanche that Latta triggered was small. It was big enough to send Latta tumbling down the chute. Below the chute in the bowl, the small avalanche triggered a much larger, deeper avalanche. That avalanche was the one that buried Latta.

COMMENTS

"It seemed like we were ...being safe. In retrospect, we were clueless novices, and made some very basic, obvious mistakes."⁹² Interestingly, McLean does not discuss what those mistakes were in an article published in *Backcountry* Magazine. In other writing, McLean notes the disconnect between the group's considerable climbing and skiing skills and their less developed snowpack assessment skills. They had the ability to comfortably ski in the steep terrain, but maybe not the skills to effectively evaluate the snowpack. Since the avalanche accident, McLean has had a long career as a ski mountaineer, guide, and even as an avalanche forecaster. He has written about the accident multiple times.

19930403b ODYSSEY MOUNTAIN, NORTHEAST OF THOMPSON PASS, ALASKA | April 3, 1993

One skier caught and killed. The skier, a contestant in an extreme skiing contest, was standing on a cornice when it collapsed beneath him. He died from trauma suffered in the ensuing fall.