

COMMENTS

Well-developed hazard mitigation techniques make in-bounds ski area accidents rare. However, this accident and 19930103—both without tragic consequences—occurred late in the day during periods of active or even intense wind-loading. Avalanche conditions may change more rapidly than expected in such conditions, necessitating more frequent avalanche mitigation. This accident might have been prevented had patrollers not postponed repeating the control route until the next morning. Nonetheless, the witnesses and patrol conducted a highly effective rescue that reached the victim within about 15 minutes of the avalanche, right about the time statistics indicate that survival rates begin to plummet. The proximity to the lift, as well as the proximity of patrollers to the top of the lift, contributed to the buried victim's survival.

Sadly, one of the rescue leaders, 64-year-old Max Kirkland, died of a heart attack three days after the accident. He had been a ski patroller for at least 25 years and had been part of the search party in the 1967 accident. The ski area established a safety week in his honor; the National Ski Areas Association gave it their “Best Community Outreach Program” award in 2014.

19950114a BEN LOMOND, NORTH OF OGDEN, UTAH | January 14, 1995

Two snowmobilers caught, fully buried, and killed. The two riders had separated from others in their group when they triggered a “massive avalanche.”²⁴ Searchers found one body the day of the avalanche and the second nine days later, buried under 15 feet of debris.

SITE

Ben Lomond (9,712 feet) is the high point of the cliffy ridge that rises abruptly above Ogden. The peak's backside, out of view from the city, is a steep bowl that can be accessed by motorized and human-powered recreationists via routes in Cutler Creek or on Cutler Ridge. While many of these approaches are relatively low-angled, the terrain steepens abruptly at the base of the bowl, which primarily faces northeast and is leeward to prevailing winds.

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK SUMMARY

A dry December left faceted snow near the ground in many parts of the northern Wasatch Range. That layer was buried by sustained snowfall from January 5 to 14. The Ben Lomond Peak SNOTEL (7,689 feet; 0.8 mile north-northeast) on Cutler Ridge recorded snowfall each day of the nine days (0.3 to 2.6 inches of SWE per day).²⁵ A total of 10.8 inches of snow-water equivalent accumulated over the period. Strong southwesterly winds accompanied the snowfall. Temperatures warmed from the low teens to near freezing on January 9 to 10, then cooled briefly during the most intense precipitation.

On Mount Ogden, wind gusts reached 75 mph the night before the accident. On the morning of January 14, Snowbasin Resort reported six inches of new snow the morning of the accident. The Ben Lomond Peak SNOTEL recorded a high in the mid-thirties that afternoon. Powerful storms returned on January 15.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

On Saturday, January 14, Devon Wheeler (31) and Richard Scothern (25) were riding in the Cutler Creek area. They were close friends who worked together testing auto

safety equipment. Gregg Chambers (29) and Wheeler's brother Douglas (33) accompanied them. A sheriff's deputy described all four as "experienced riders and familiar with the area."²⁶

The group separated into two pairs. At some point, Wheeler and Scothern were buried by a very large avalanche in a steep ravine near the intersection of Cutler Ridge and the summit ridge of Ben Lomond. No one in the group was wearing an avalanche transceiver.

**No rescue
equipment**

RESCUE SUMMARY

Chambers and Doug Wheeler became alarmed when they could not hear the other pair's snowmobiles. They rode to look for them and found one ski of Devon Wheeler's snowmobile sticking out of a large field of avalanche debris. Chambers called for help on his cell phone at 11:26, then left to meet rescuers. Doug Wheeler continued searching at the site.

A Weber County Sheriff's deputy met Chambers at the trailhead at 12:15. After an avalanche worker from nearby ski area Powder Mountain assessed avalanche danger at the site, an air ambulance ferried seven rescuers to a landing site near the accident scene. Two additional rescuers arrived by snowmobile. A second air ambulance brought two search dog teams from Alta. About 15:00, roughly four hours after the accident, rescuers using probes found Devon Wheeler's body under five feet of snow, wedged against a tree about 15 feet uphill from his snowmobile. He had died of suffocation. Flight nurses on the scene attempted resuscitation with no results. A search dog alerted in a narrow part of the gully, but rescuers could not locate Scothern's body by nightfall.

A complex, extended search for Scothern ensued over the following nine days. On January 15, the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center issued an Avalanche Warning. Poor visibility and a foot of additional snow prevented searchers from resuming the search. It was "just too dangerous,"²⁷ according to the Sheriff's Deputy leading the search, Jeff Malan. Several more feet of snow fell in the following two days.

Once conditions improved, searchers used explosives to bring down a cornice above the site. The depth of the debris—up to 25 feet—complicated the search. Searchers used a snow cat to shave off the top layers of debris, which allowed them to probe and dig. On January 18, search dogs alerted in the lower left toe of the avalanche. Using a metal detector, dogs, and probes, searchers found Scothern's snowmobile and dug it out from under 12 feet of debris. It was sitting upright and pointed downhill, leading rescuers to conclude Scothern had been trying to outrun the slide when he was caught.

By Thursday, January 19, seven dog teams and numerous volunteers were searching the site, despite difficult flying conditions for helicopters transporting them. Scothern's wife waited at the command post, thanking volunteers for their help. The next day, searchers found a boot. On Sunday, January 22, searchers found another boot, then, about three feet away, Scothern's body. His body was on the edge of the gully, uphill of his snowmobile, amongst trees, face down, and under 12 feet of snow.

"It was a very, very long week," reported Sheriff Craig Dearden. "About 20 people have been there every day digging. It's good to have it done for the family so they know it was really over."²⁸ All told, the search and recovery efforts involved more than 65 volunteers, 2,000 person hours, and \$10,000 in helicopter costs.

AVALANCHE DATA

UAFC forecaster Tom Kimbrough skied to the site on Sunday, January 15. He reported a crown face 200 feet wide and six to 11 feet deep. He estimated the debris as up to 25

feet deep. Snow profiles on adjacent slopes “revealed a 12 to 18 inch layer of faceted snow, produced by the December clear spell and presumably the weak layer. The slope [was] heavily loaded by southwest winds, providing the overlying slab.”²⁹ The investigators identified the possible trigger point as “a rock outcrop in the center of the bed [that] probably had associated faceted snow.”³⁰

Terrain trap

The slide started at 8,800 feet elevation and ran down an hourglass-shaped gully, the “wrong place”³¹ to climb to the ridgeline. “There was a bunch of ways to get killed there,” reported Kimbrough; “The bottom is full of trees. If you didn’t get buried in the gully, one of those trees is going to have your name on it.”³²

TYPE	TRIGGER	R SIZE	D SIZE	BED	ASPECT	CHARACTER
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COMMENTS

Both Wheeler and Scothern were married and had children. Their deaths gave them the unfortunate distinction of being the first snowmobilers to die in an avalanche in Utah. Several characteristics of this accident would be repeated in many fatal avalanche accidents involving snowmobilers in subsequent years: expert riders, steep terrain and terrain traps, riding immediately after heavy snowfall, no rescue gear, multiple fatalities, and a prolonged recovery effort. The accident report from the UAFC closed with some trenchant comments:

This accident need not have become such an extended tragedy...While transceivers do not guarantee survival they do insure 65 searchers don’t spend a week digging for your body while the wife and kids wring their hands in the parking lot. People knowingly traveling in avalanche terrain for recreation owe themselves, their families and society the advantages provided by an avalanche transceiver. Even more to the point, just a little education can go a very long way in preventing avalanche accidents.³³

19950114b CRYSTAL CREEK, SOUTHWEST OF FRANCIE’S CABIN,

COLORADO | January 14, 1995

One backcountry skier caught, fully buried, and killed. The solo skier cut under a steep but short slope that fractured above him. He was reported overdue that evening; a rescue dog found his body the next day.

SITE

A two-mile approach puts backcountry riders on the deck of Francie’s Cabin (11,360 feet) near the mouth of Crystal Creek. At the time of the accident, the cabin was still a novelty; it opened in 1994. Mount Helen (13,164 feet) looms southwest of the cabin, and a tour up the valley leads below Mount Helen towards the crest of the Tenmile Range. With such dramatic scenery dominating the view, it is easy to overlook short but steep slopes near the valley floor.