

19961207a **CURRENT CREEK PEAK, SOUTHEAST OF HEBER CITY, UTAH** | December 7, 1996

Three snowmobilers caught and partially buried

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

More than one
person on a
slope

Several snowmobilers were highmarking a very steep (45-degree) slope near Current Creek Peak between the Wasatch and Uinta Mountains, about 10 miles southeast of Heber City, Utah. One rider got stuck high on the slope. Another rider got stuck just below him on the same slope. A third snowmobiler rode up to help. The avalanche released and caught all three.

RESCUE SUMMARY

No rescue
equipment

All three riders were partially buried-critical with just their hands sticking out. One rider freed his hand and eventually got himself out. He then helped dig one of the other riders out. They could not find the third rider.

The two broke off tree branches and began to randomly probe the debris. A number of other snowmobilers in the area joined the search. One of the pair who self-rescued was probing about 100 feet above where he was buried. He saw the fingers of a glove sticking out of the snow.

Rescuers dug down about three feet and found the rider blue in the face and not breathing. He started breathing on his own and eventually recovered enough to ride out. Rescuers estimate the third rider was buried about 25 minutes. He was wearing a helmet with a face shield, which was not filled with snow.

AVALANCHE DATA

Persistent Slab
avalanche

This avalanche broke four to five feet deep and 150 feet wide. The bed surface was a three-week-old rain crust. The weak layer was faceted snow on top of the crust. The avalanche occurred on a steep, east-facing slope. It was a sunny Saturday, and the day after a storm.

COMMENTS

Three very lucky riders. The next report describes a similar incident that occurred on the same day and also involved multiple riders caught with no companion rescue equipment. One of those riders was not so lucky. The incidents are two of five avalanches that caught 10 people on December 6 and 7, all documented by the Utah Avalanche Center. An avalanche warning was in effect from December 3 to 6.

19961207b **BOUNTIFUL PEAK, EAST OF FARMINGTON, UTAH**

December 7, 1996

Three snowmobilers caught; two partially buried, and one buried and killed

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

A group of four snowmobilers, Rick Adams (37), Todd Lomax (29), J.D. Horne, and Chad Horne, were riding together. They were highmarking a steep, east-facing bowl

along the ridgeline of Bountiful Peak in the Wasatch Range, east of Farmington, Utah. Each rode the slope one at a time while the others waited below. Adams was riding near the top of the slope when the avalanche released around 11:40.

Lomax was below Adams. "There wasn't a sound at all. I just looked up and saw a wall of snow coming at us. I just yelled 'Run!' I just took off." Lomax sped downhill and outran the avalanche. He yelled a warning to the Hornes, who were on foot and working on their sleds.

The Hornes ran downhill. The avalanche caught J.D. and buried him to his waist. Chad was hit by his snowmobile, which the avalanche had sent tumbling through the air. Chad was almost completely buried, with only one hand above the debris and his snowmachine almost on top of him.

RESCUE SUMMARY

Lomax helped rescue the Hornes. None of the group carried avalanche rescue equipment. They saw no sign of Adams. They searched the debris surface and sent one person for help.

About 20 search and rescue personnel, including dog teams, arrived at the site in the afternoon and searched until dark. On the morning of December 8, searchers conducted explosive mitigation and got "spectacular" results, triggering avalanches on both sides of the initial avalanche. Searchers probed the debris for two days before the suspending the search.

Adams was recovered on December 19, 11 days after the avalanche. A group from the University of Utah's Department of Geology brought in a magnetometer. A few days prior to their search, friends of Adams had found snowmobile tread marks on a tree in the upper track. The geologists began searching a swath downhill from the marked tree. They "hit a huge magnetic spike" in a group of trees about 100 feet above the toe of the debris. They dug down five feet to find Adams's snowmobile.

They began a fine probe search from the snowmobile working uphill. The probe line found Adams 30 feet uphill from the snowmachine, under four feet of snow, lying horizontally with his head pointing upslope.

**No rescue
equipment**



Investigators on the debris next to two of the party's snowmobiles. *Photo Bruce Tremper, Utah Avalanche Center.*

AVALANCHE DATA

The initial avalanche averaged two feet deep, 600 feet wide and started on a 40-degree, east-facing bowl which spanned the aspects from southeast through northeast (SS-AMu-R3-O). It descended about 500 vertical feet with the crown face around 9,100 feet in elevation. The debris covered an area of about four football fields and was up to 15 feet deep where it filled a gully.

The avalanche ran on a stout rain crust formed about three weeks prior to the accident. The weak layer was two to three mm of faceted snow, formed from low-density new snow that fell on top of the rain crust. The slab consisted of snow from two storms in the week prior to the accident, both with relatively dense, rimed snow.

The structure described above was capable of producing large avalanches, as exemplified by the "spectacular" results on the morning of

**Persistent Slab
avalanche**

December 8. Specifically, one 4kg hand charge triggered an avalanche on one flank three to six feet deep and over 1,000 feet wide. The other flank broke out two to three feet deep and 600 feet wide with several 2kg hand charges.

COMMENTS

High
avalanche
danger

The Utah Avalanche Center issued an avalanche warning on each of the four days prior to the accident. The center rated the avalanche danger High on slopes like the one that avalanched. These riders were among the 10 backcountry travelers caught in avalanches in northern Utah on December 6-7.

This group was riding the slope one at a time. However, the rest of the party had not moved far enough from the slope and were still exposed to potential avalanches. When the avalanche released, it caught three of the four riders.

None of the riders were equipped with avalanche rescue gear. With transceivers, probes, and shovels, it is possible they could have located Adams and excavated him in time. It certainly would not have required several days of search and rescue volunteers conducting a fruitless search in potentially dangerous conditions.

19961223

CHAIR PEAK, NORTHWEST OF SNOQUALMIE PASS,

WASHINGTON | December 23, 1996

Two climbers caught, fully buried, and killed

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS

In the Snoqualmie Pass area of the Cascade Range, over two feet of snow fell between December 20 and 23. The new and drifted snow buried several layers of surface hoar and storm instabilities. Snowfall was light and scattered on Sunday, December 22. The weather deteriorated significantly Sunday night, with an additional seven inches of snow and 0.7 inches of snow-water equivalent falling with increasing southwesterly winds. Temperatures warmed during the day on Monday. An additional 1.3 inches of snow-water equivalent fell with strong southwesterly winds on Tuesday, December 24, with significantly rising temperatures and freezing levels.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

On Sunday, December 22, two climbers, Robert Mattson and Matthew Ichihashi, both 19, headed out to climb Chair Peak. Chair Peak is a popular climb about four miles northwest of Snoqualmie Pass. The pair snowshoed in on Sunday to establish a base camp. Rescuers assume the pair climbed Monday morning and triggered or were caught by the avalanche Monday morning or early afternoon.

RESCUE SUMMARY

Family members reported the climbers overdue around 20:00 on Monday, December 23. King County Search and Rescue teams began searching early Tuesday morning. Deteriorating weather hampered the search. Rescuers experienced rising temperatures, increasing snowfall, and poor visibility. Avalanche conditions were dangerous, with