

December 26, 1996
Flagstaff Pk., near Alta Utah
Snowboarder Fatality

Greg Dres, 35, from Park City, Utah was killed in an avalanche he presumably triggered while snowboarding alone in the backcountry near Alta Utah. He was reported missing and a search team located his body with a beacon two days later.

The first sign of trouble occurred when he failed to pick up his girlfriend from the airport that evening at 8:00 pm. He was last seen around 3:00 pm heading up Flagstaff Mountain, a popular snowboarding area in the backcountry above the town of Alta. His girlfriend began the search for a missing person that night when she noticed that his snowboard gear and beacon were gone. His friends said that he was planning on taking a quick run at Flagstaff before he picked up his girlfriend at the airport. By the following morning they discovered that his car had been towed at Alta that night. It was parked at the common departure point to Flagstaff ridge.

Al Soucie, the Forest Service Snow Ranger for Little Cottonwood Canyon, flew in a Life Flight helicopter to search for the victim late in the day on December 27th. They noticed a large avalanche in Day's Fork, the drainage just to the north of Flagstaff Mountain. However it was too windy to land and also too late in the day to launch a search, so the search began at 7:00 am the following morning.

According to his girlfriend, he would often boot up Flagstaff ridge, take a quick run in Day's Fork, boot back up to Flagstaff and snowboard back down to Alta. So the Day's Fork slide became the primary search area. She also said that he always wore an avalanche beacon.

At 7:am the morning of the 28th, myself and several other searchers broke a trail up the south-facing Flagstaff ridge, dropped into north-facing Day's Fork and searched all the avalanche debris with beacons. It was a very large avalanche which broke several hundred yards wide and the debris covered several acres. However we found no beacon signal and avalanche search dogs were called in.

Immediately myself and Dave Medara, a Utah Department of Transportation avalanche forecaster, headed onto the south side of the ridge to see if he was caught while descending back to Alta. There was avalanche debris on that side but it was assumed the debris was from routine avalanche control over the village of Alta from the previous morning.

We found his beacon signal near the toe of the avalanche debris in the bottom of a narrow gully, about 1000 vertical feet below the starting zone. He was buried 3-4 feet deep, face down, head downhill with his snowboard still attached to his feet. With his hands near his chest, he was not able to make an air pocket.

The avalanche broke on a south facing, 35 degree slope at around 10,000 feet in elevation. The starting zone was a commonly-windloaded bowl and drains into a narrow gully. Although subsequent snow, wind and avalanche control later covered up the evidence, we assume it broke about 1-2 feet deep, within new snow,

with a light-density layer within the new snow as a weak-layer. The slab was a moderately rimed wind slab which was being formed the same day as the accident. The bed surface was a subtle rain and rime crust which formed on Christmas day.

The avalanche bulletin for that morning called for a high danger on any slope steeper than 35 degrees especially in wind loaded areas. No one knows if he called the avalanche bulletin that day. The weather was snowy and windy with a rapidly rising avalanche danger. An avalanche warning was issued by the following morning for widespread natural avalanche activity.

Reported by
Bruce Tremper
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Snowboarder is killed in Snowbird avalanche

LITTLE COTTONWOOD CANYON — A 21-year-old snowboarder was killed after he was buried by 2 feet of snow in an avalanche Saturday.

Searchers found Jeff Clement, 21, buried on Mount Baldy at Snowbird. He was dead when rescue crews got to him. Weather conditions, including wind gusts up to 75 mph, prevented efforts to remove the body. Crews left markers and will attempt to remove the body Sunday if conditions improve.

Suzanne Tremblay, also in her 20s, was seriously injured in the slide, Salt Lake County Sheriff's Lt. Steven Chard said. She was in stable condition at Alta View Hospital late Saturday.

"She's doing OK," a nursing supervisor said. "We just want to watch her for 12 to 24 hours to make sure."

The two were snowboarding with two other men and a woman when the avalanche started about 12:30 p.m., Chard said. The group was descending Mount Baldy at Snowbird when about 500 vertical feet of snow broke loose and swept up the snowboarders as the avalanche rushed down the mountain of cliffs and exposed rocks.

The falling snow "It was awfully lucky for any of them to survive," Sheriff's Lt. Lane Larkin said.

Two of the snowboarders were not completely buried and were able to dig themselves free, Larkin said. They made it to a lodge at Snowbird and called for help.

The other snowboarders were identified as Justin E. Kihell, Sean Mceigh and Nicole Auletta. The five apparently moved to Utah from the East Coast about a month ago, authorities said.

The snowboarders started out at the Alta ski resort and made their way to Snowbird. The group ignored no trespassing signs and posted warnings of avalanche danger, as they hiked into Snowbird, Chard said.

Neither resort is open, so no avalanche control has been done. Authorities are urging recreationists to stay away from the slopes — calling conditions "extremely dangerous" — until the resorts open.

Authorities estimate the avalanche covered an area about 500 feet long, between 20 and 30 feet wide and up to 3 feet deep.

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Snowboarder Loosens Avalanche, Dies in Snow Pile Near Alta

BY MICHAEL VIGH

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

A snowboarder, who triggered the first avalanche of the season in Little Cottonwood Canyon, died Saturday afternoon when he was swept away by the thick, wet snow.

Police declined to release the name of the victim, pending notification of family members. The victim's female friend suffered leg and hip injuries and was transported to Alta View Hospital in Sandy. She was listed in stable condition late Saturday.

Three other friends were with the two victims, but police said

they were unharmed in the avalanche estimated as 3-feet deep, 20-feet across and 500 feet in length.

The five people hiked to Mount Baldy between the Alta and Snowbird ski resorts Saturday morning. Just after noon, the five snowboarded down the mountain one at a time. After the first four were partially down the mountain, the male victim began his descent and triggered the avalanche.

The four survivors were covered up to their armpits in snow, but each was able to dig out. The surviving snowboarders could not find the victim's body, which was

later discovered in a pile of snow by a member of the Alta Ski patrol and his dog.

However, Salt Lake County Sheriff's search and rescuers called off the recovery of the victim's body late Saturday because of further avalanche danger.

"We are trying to be careful, making sure that our rescue people are going to be all right," said Salt Lake County Sheriff's Lt. Stephen Chard.

Sgt. Lane Larkin said authorities would intentionally set off avalanches today at 6 a.m. to bring down loose snow. After they determine it is safe, they will retrieve the body.

"We want to try to make the recovery before the next storm hits," Larkin said.

National Weather Service senior forecaster Peter Wilensky said the avalanche danger could be furthered in the next week as more snow is predicted to blanket the mountains.

"We are looking for quite a stormy pattern continuing between now and Saturday," he said. "And I'm sure that will increase the avalanche hazard."

Wilensky said there is a winter storm warning continuing through tonight in the area mountains.

Avalanche Survivor Has Some Advice

Be prepared for the worst,
he tells Utah's extreme skiers

BY SKIP KNOWLES

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Extreme skiers and snowboarders flock to Utah for killer snow. They should be prepared to die in it, says a survivor of Saturday's fatal avalanche in Little Cottonwood Canyon.

"If you go up there, the possibility of death exists, and you had better be prepared for things to go wrong," says Justin Kittell, a 25-year-old Sandy resident who writes for *Snowboarding* magazine. "You can minimize that threat, but you can't ever eradicate it."

Kittell and four friends from New England rested on their snowboards Saturday after making a run off Mount Baldy near Snowbird. An avalanche cut loose as they watched Jeff Clement, the final member of their fivesome, carve turns in the powder.

"It happened instantly," recalls Kittell, who led the group of boarders from Vermont and New Hampshire up the mountain. "I turned around to watch Jeff and saw the snow flying around him. I thought it was just the rooster tail from the snowboard. It wasn't until the wall of snow hit me that I realized it was an avalanche."



Al Hartmann/The Salt Lake Tribune

James Oyler of Salt Lake City catches some air near the bottom of Alta earlier this week. Oyler was in an area not likely to be avalanche-prone.

"I didn't hear it. It was like being hit by a huge wave. I didn't register any pain. But it wasn't a blur . . . I was pretty aware of what was going on and what I needed to do to survive. I felt it when I went over a cliff. I tried to keep my board even or above my body because I know it can drag you down. I was backstroking as hard as I could, swimming like hell, trying to keep it up and stay prone."

When the 20-foot-wide slide lost its momentum, all four survivors were half-buried. Clement, however, was be-

low the surface.

The Henniker, N.H., resident died, and was flown home for burial. His friends, sombered by the power of the Wasatch, returned for the funeral. Kittell saw them off at the airport.

"It was good to be around them, to talk and laugh again," Kittell says. "I'll go again [in the backcountry]. I knew this could happen when I went up; I was aware of the risk."

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Survivor Warns Extreme Skiers Of Avalanche Peril

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Saturday's slide was one of about 1,000 documented avalanches each year along the Wasatch Range, says Tom Kimbrough of the Avalanche Forecast. And 10 percent of those involve people.

Some skiers and boarders wrongly presume that avalanche danger is low early in the season. And some extreme skiers and boarders hike up mountains before resorts open and avalanche-safety crews have done their work.

"It's public land and they have the right," says Kimbrough. However, he adds, "If there's enough snow to slide on, there's enough snow to slide and avalanche."

The most deadly areas are the

ones that attract the extreme crowd, Kimbrough says.

"The type of slope that slid on these folks is the exact kind of area you want to be careful of — 35 to 40 degrees in steepness, an upper elevation, wind-affected, and with drifted snow," he adds. "Right now that is where the best turns are and where the most danger is."

Lane Larkin, commander of Salt Lake Search and Rescue, notes that because the mountains are backed up against the metropolitan area, they can be deceptively dangerous. Although some storms drop little precipitation in the valley, the mountains often get pounded with powder snow.

"We're minutes away from real hazardous terrain," Larkin says. "It's right here on our doorsteps."

Early in the season, the Wasatch is more prone to avalanches than the Sierra and Cascade ranges, which set up with cement-like snow that piles up on ridges. Snow here tends to dry out. Crystals don't bind together well.

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Lane Larkin

Commander of Salt Lake Search and Rescue

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Over-eager skiers and boarders are perhaps a bigger problem, Kimbrough says. "The Alta parking lot was full Saturday, and there were no lifts running whatsoever."

Yet Kimbrough does not view this phenomenon as an out-of-towner problem. It's local people ignoring danger signs.

Adds Natalie Mead of The Breeze ski shop at Snowbird: "Yesterday when I left work there were two kids who came right through [safety] lines and signs up all over saying, 'Avalanche Danger' and 'Area Closed.' I don't know how it could be any clearer."

The Kittell party survivors were lucky to be able to move. In most avalanches, friction melts snow, which sets up like concrete the second the slide stops.

That's why backcountry enthusiasts should carry portable compact shovels with them — as did Kittell. A beacon, which can be purchased for about \$200, also is a must.

"Ninety percent of the time it's going to be a self-rescue, or by the people you are directly with," Larkin says. "The majority of the time it's a body recovery for us."

The Avalanche Forecast Center will have a slide show and class on avoiding avalanches at Recreational Equipment Inc., 3285 E. 3300 South, on Dec. 1 and Dec. 15 at 7 p.m.