

Bountiful Peak, Utah
Snowmobile Fatality
December 7, 1996

A snowmobiler triggered an avalanche and is presumed dead on the east face of Bountiful Peak, which is in the Wasatch Range of northern Utah between Ogden and Salt Lake City. A party of four experienced local riders were high marking slopes in the area. They were a loosely organized group in which a father and son had agreed to meet others in the general area. Earlier in the day one member of the party, which was not present when the accident occurred, triggered a 2 foot deep, 150 foot wide avalanche in the bowl just south of the accident site.

Just before noon, four snowmobilers were high marking a steep, east facing bowl along the crest of Bountiful Peak. Although they were going one at a time, the others waited in the bottom of the bowl while they took turns high marking. A father and his son were in the bottom of the bowl, talking and working on their machines. One person had just come down from his high mark run while another (the victim) was ascending. The descending snowmobiler stopped by the father and son and noticed a large wall of snow halfway down the bowl. He yelled to "run" and he gunned his snowmobile and barely escaped the avalanche.

The slide knocked the father and son down as they ran downhill and the son was hit by his snowmobile flying through the air. The father was buried to his waist and the son had only a hand sticking out with his snowmobile nearly on top of him. After digging each other out, they did not see the fourth snowmobiler anywhere. None of the survivors noticed where the victim was on the slope when the avalanche broke. None of them carried beacons or shovels. They searched the debris without success and they sent one person for help.

Yesterday, the day of the accident, was my day off and I happened to be skiing that day with some friends, one of which carried his rescue pager. Although neither of our girlfriends were very happy about it, he and I skied out, drove to the staging area and we flew into the site with about 20 rescuers from the local search and rescue team. Several dogs and handlers from Rocky Mountain Rescue Dogs searched the debris. The rest of the crew did random probes and localized course probes. We could find no sign of the victim nor his snowmobile. We called off the search at dark.

This morning myself and Tom Leonard, the Ski Patrol Director at Snowbasin, flew back to the site at first light and did avalanche control on both flanks of the bowl which had significant snow still hanging above the rescue site. We got spectacular results on both sides of the bowl which put yet more snow on top of the already very deep debris.

The original slide averaged 2 feet deep, 200 yards wide and started on a 40 degree east facing bowl which spanned the aspects from southeast through northeast. It descended about 500 vertical feet with the crown face around 9100 feet in elevation. The debris covered an area of about 4 football fields and was up to 15 feet deep where it filled up a gully. And that was before we put more debris on it this morning with avalanche control. This morning one 4 kg hand charge triggered an avalanche on one flank 3-6 feet deep, 350 yards wide. The other flank broke out

2-3 feet deep, 200 yards wide with several 2 kg hand charges.

The avalanche ran on a stout rain crust formed about 3 weeks ago. The weak-layer was light density new snow which fell on top of the rain crust and subsequently metamorphosed into very weak 2-3 mm faceted snow. The slab, about 2 feet thick, consisted of the previous week's snowfall which came in two storms, both of which were relatively dense, rimed snow. The latest storm overloaded the weak layer producing widespread both natural and triggered avalanches throughout northern Utah. We have issued avalanche warnings for the past four days, and our daily bulletins called the danger of human triggered avalanches "high" on slopes fitting this description. It's an unusual instability because it occurs more at lower elevations instead of the upper elevation because of the presence of the rain crust at lower elevations--which is exactly the kind of terrain snowmobilers frequent.

The day of the accident dawned clear with warming temperatures and it was also a Saturday. It's early in the season with one of the first snowfalls of the season reaching the valley floor which invariably gets people excited about winter sports. It was a no-brainer that someone was sure to get caught in an avalanche that day. In fact I remarked to my girlfriend that morning that "Someone was going to get killed in an avalanche today. It's probably going to be a snowmobiler and it will probably occur in the Ogden or Logan area mountains." Unfortunately I was even more right than I imagined.

Yesterday there were 5 human triggered avalanche accidents in northern Utah, three of which involved snowmobilers. One snowmobiler was dug out after being buried for 15 minutes on Providence Peak near Logan. Three snowmobilers were buried with just their hands out of the snow 10 miles southeast of Heber and one person was buried for 25 minutes and still survived. As usual none of the snowmobile parties carried beacons or shovels. Two skiers were also caught in avalanches at lower elevations in the Salt Lake area mountains. Finally, as I write this, rescuers are searching for two snowmobilers who failed to return last night from the Monte Christo area east of Huntsville. No one knows if they were buried in an avalanche but there are several avalanches in the area.

As of this writing the snowmobiler on Bountiful Peak has not been found. Looking up at the bowl, the right half of the debris fills a deep gully and it was deeper than anyone's probe yesterday even before we piled 5-10 feet of additional avalanche debris in the gully this morning. Today the avalanche dogs were still not finding anything significant. The crews are continuing to probe.

Ironically, yesterday I was planning on teaching an avalanche class especially for snowmobilers at Plaza Cycle in Salt Lake City. It was cancelled due to lack of interest.

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