

AVALANCHE DATA

The avalanche was a hard slab, triggered by the snowmobiler. The slope faced north-northwest, was very steep, and had an “overhanging cornice at the top.” The avalanche broke four to five feet deep and about 600 feet wide. Debris piled up about 10 feet deep.

COMMENTS

This accident illustrates the importance of two common avalanche safety messages: Get the gear; Get the training. This party was traveling without avalanche rescue equipment—avalanche transceiver, shovel, and probe. The lack of rescue tools made it very difficult to effect a timely companion rescue. It’s not clear what avalanche safety training the party had, or whether anyone in the party identified the slope the victim highmarked as a potentially dangerous avalanche slope. Basic avalanche safety training can help recreationists to recognize and avoid avalanche terrain. In this case, the slope’s steepness, the cornice, and the aspect were all signs of potential avalanche danger.

19970111b

DRY CANYON, WEST OF LOGAN PEAK, UTAH

January 11, 1997

Three backcountry tourers caught, buried, and killed while camping

High
avalanche
danger

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS

A rain crust, up to five inches thick, formed on January 1 and 2, 1997. Snowfall in the following week added about six inches of snow above the crust. The snow faceted and formed “recrystallized powder” by the morning of January 11.

A storm began January 11. About a foot of snow fell during the day. A cold front with strong northwest winds arrived around 18:00. The weather station on Logan Peak, less than a mile to the east, recorded 25 to 50 mph winds from the northwest with frontal passage. An additional foot of snow fell the night of January 11.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

On January 11, a group of three friends, Max Lyon (38), Keith Maas (36), and Karl Mueggler (29), left for several days of backcountry skiing and winter camping in the Bear River Range of northern Utah. All three were experienced backcountry skiers and mountaineers and very familiar with the terrain around Logan Peak. They were anticipating the oncoming storm and the improving ski conditions. Sometime during the night of January 11, a large natural avalanche overran their campsite and buried all three men.

RESCUE SUMMARY

The group was reported overdue on January 13. Authorities dispatched Cache County Search and Rescue that evening. A hasty party noted avalanche debris in Dry Canyon, and a search team was dispatched at 21:00. Information from the hasty party and from witnesses who had seen the trio on January 11 helped searchers locate the avalanche debris by 22:30.

One of the trio had left his avalanche transceiver on overnight. Rescuers were able to quickly locate the burial site in thick timber about 150 feet above the toe of the ava-

lanche debris. The trio was buried four to six feet deep, in their sleeping bags and tent. The tent was wrapped around an aspen tree.

AVALANCHE DATA

This was a hard slab, triggered naturally, very large relative to the avalanche path, and broke in old faceted snow above a crust (HS-N-R4-O). The avalanche occurred on a wide, planar slope facing southwest. Slope steepness was around 35 degrees.

**Persistent Slab
avalanche**

When the cold front passed over the area the evening of January 11, up to two feet of new snow was available for transport. The strong northwest winds rapidly drifted this snow into a thick, dense slab. Under the slab, the combination of faceted snow above a rain crust probably allowed the natural avalanche to run “farther and faster than might have been expected” for that slope.

COMMENTS

The men located their camp in a site that seemed outside the expected runout of avalanches. Unfortunately, the site was not safe in these particular conditions. As one investigator noted: “in 20 years of skiing, in that drainage I have never seen a slide of that magnitude on that slope, although trees show evidence of having been previously hit.” The accident underscores the importance—and difficulty—of placing camps well outside the potential runouts of avalanche paths, even when vegetation clues are present.

This accident occurred on the opposite side of the peak from an accident a month prior (19961206) that almost claimed the life of a snowmobiler. The bodies of three other campers were found on January 11 in Washington. They, too, had been killed when an avalanche overran their tent (19961228).

SWAN LAKE, SOUTHWEST OF RESURRECTION PASS,

19970117

ALASKA | January 17, 1997

One hunter caught, buried, and killed

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

Lance Domonoske (39), and John Lesterson were hunting for shed moose antlers using snowmachines and snowshoes near Swan Lake, southwest of Resurrection Pass in Alaska’s Kenai Mountains. They were both experienced outdoorsmen and familiar with the terrain, but neither had formal avalanche training.

Around 12:00, Domonoske spotted a pair of antlers high on a distant slope. Lesterson did not want to go after them, so they made a plan to rendezvous at the trailhead in the evening. When Domonoske failed to show up, Lesterson backtracked. Domonoske’s snowmachine was parked at the edge of a large avalanche, and Domonoske was “nowhere to be found.”

Traveling alone

Lesterson drove home and alerted the authorities. Searchers arrived around 20:30.

RESCUE SUMMARY

Domonoske was found by a search dog named Zip on January 18. Domonoske was buried face-down, about a foot below the surface and within 10 feet of the toe of the