

BYU student rides avalanche

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By Deseret News, Dennis Romboy, Staff Writer

Riley Siddoway helplessly watched a massive wave of snow sweep his best friend down the mountainside to what he thought was certain death.

An avalanche killed a childhood pal from his hometown of Coalville only three months ago, and Siddoway feared a similar fate awaited Joe Soelberg Thursday afternoon in an area known as Lost Canyon. "I guess that's why I freaked out so much. I wasn't about to see another one of my friends die in an avalanche," said Siddoway, a 22-year-old Utah Valley State College student.

Once the thundering snow and ice came to a stop about 1,500 feet from a ridge directly across the gorge from Bridal Veil Falls, Soelberg popped up. Siddoway yelled to him - triggering two more snowslides - and Soelberg waved back as snow rumbled around him.

Relieved but not quite sure what to do, Siddoway hustled down the backside of the mountain to where the two hikers had started about 5:30 a.m. Thursday. He ended up at the Provo Police Station about 10 miles away around 4 p.m.

The Utah County Search and Rescue Team arrived at the Bridal Veil Falls overlook armed with binoculars and climbing gear. Searchers spotted Soelberg on the face between a pair of pine trees.

Gusty winds and extreme avalanche danger kept a LifeFlight helicopter from landing or dropping rescuers near him. A four-man ground team started up the mountain on what was anticipated to be a four- to five-hour climb.

Meanwhile, a helicopter hired by a television station arrived. Utah County Sheriff's Lt. Jim Tracy said the experienced pilot, Mike Stapley, asked and was granted permission to attempt to pluck

Soelberg off the mountain. The chopper fluttered over a rocky ledge at the 9,000-foot level while a TV news photographer pulled the stranded man inside about 6 p.m.

"That was a lifesaver," said Soelberg, 22. "That guy's my hero."

Siddoway watched the daring rescue from below. The two friends embraced when they were reunited.

Soelberg, a Brigham Young University student from Seattle, Wash., said he doesn't know how he ended up on top of not one but two avalanches that took him on the scariest ride of his life. He dug himself out of waist-deep snow once only to have a second wave of snow dump him over some cliffs. Soelberg said he was pushed under the snow several times and chunks of ice bashed him in the head.

"I thought for sure I was gone," he said. Other than some minor cuts to his face and hands, however, Soelberg appeared unhurt.

Soelberg and Siddoway had been planning their hike for about six weeks as a way to celebrate the end of final exams and take advantage of the sunny weather. Indeed, sunbathers dipped their toes in a pool at the base of Bridal Veil Falls while a couple posed for wedding pictures just across the canyon from the avalanche.

The two free climbers, outfitted with crampons and ice axes, reached the 10,500-foot summit of Lost Canyon in the early afternoon. They were on their way down, Siddoway said, when Soelberg started sliding down the face on his rear end. The heavy, wet snow soon gave way, carrying Soelberg with it. Another large avalanche occurred less than a mile up the canyon from where the hikers were.

"We definitely didn't think there was any slide danger today," Soelberg said. "But I guess there always is."