

19981107 **MOUNT BALDY, SOUTH OF ALTA, UTAH | November 7, 1998**

Five backcountry tourers caught; one seriously injured, one killed

**WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS**

The first significant winter storm occurred on November 5 and dropped about 17 inches of snow at the Alta Ski Area. November 7 was a sunny Saturday.

**ACCIDENT SUMMARY**

The boundary between Alta Ski Area and Snowbird Resort runs over Mount Baldy, 11,068 feet, in Little Cottonwood Canyon east of Salt Lake. On November 7, neither ski area was open for the season. A group of five snowboarders hiked up the peak. Shortly after 12:00, the group descended the “West Baldy” ski run one at a time.

**In avalanche  
runout**

The fifth snowboarder, Jeff Clement, (21) triggered an avalanche as he descended. He was fully buried in the avalanche. The avalanche swept down and caught all four of the other snowboarders in the group.

**RESCUE SUMMARY**

**No rescue  
equipment**

The four friends were buried “up to their armpits in snow, but each was able to dig out.” They searched for Clement, but they did not have avalanche rescue equipment and were unable to locate him. They left to seek help.

Search and Rescue responded to the avalanche, along with members of the Alta and Snowbird ski patrols. They transported one of the riders, who had suffered “leg and hip injuries,” to a nearby hospital.

An avalanche dog from Alta alerted on Clement’s body about two hours after the avalanche. He was buried under about three feet of avalanche debris and appeared to have suffered significant trauma. Because of deteriorating weather, rescuers postponed the body recovery until the following day.

**AVALANCHE DATA**

**Persistent Slab  
avalanche**

Clement triggered this avalanche, which was about 1.5 feet deep and 80 feet wide. The avalanche ran about 500 vertical feet through cliff bands and exposed rocks.

**COMMENTS**

Before—and after—ski areas operate for the season, the snowpack within their boundaries is equivalent to a backcountry snowpack and must be treated as such. Too often, riders familiar with the terrain bring an “inbounds” mentality to the early season snowpack and ride as if the snowpack had been controlled and mitigated. Often people do not carry avalanche rescue equipment, as in this case. “The problem was they were in a ski area, but they were faced with backcountry conditions. They are lulled into a false sense of security, but there’s no control work done and this is the tragic outcome,” Sgt. Gil Howard, Salt Lake County Sheriff’s Office, said about this accident.

The group rode the slope one at a time. This is standard practice to minimize exposure to avalanches. Unfortunately, they did not move out of the potential avalanche terrain at the bottom. All four were caught and partially buried. Having to first rescue themselves added significant time to their potential rescue of Clements.