

Snowbasin skiers survive avalanche

□ Heroic doctor helps rescue others after he digs himself out

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SNOWBASIN – Five lucky skiers walked away from an avalanche that buried two of them and partially buried the others.

Friday, a group of eight friends were skiing just below where the Strawberry Express gondola unloads. The group

was involved with the NorAm Super Series downhill race on the other side of the hill, but were taking a few runs before the races began.

Dr. Jeff Harrison, an orthopedic surgeon at McKay-Dee Hospital, described what happened next as he waited for the rest of his group just below the ridge.

"We stopped to wait for everyone. The next thing I know, we were tum-

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AVALANCHE SURVIVOR: Dr. Jeff Harrison, a volunteer for both the Snowbasin Ski Patrol and the U.S. Ski Team, shows a trace of frostbite on his ear after he dug himself out of an avalanche and helped rescue others at Snowbasin Friday.

BRIAN NICHOLSON
Standard-Examiner

Skiers

From 1A

bling and buried under the snow. It was like a big slab of concrete coming over you. It was big, we're turning head over heels."

The avalanche was triggered at 11:49 a.m. It covered an area of about 100 feet by 150 feet, was 4 to 7 feet deep and slid 400 feet. The entire avalanche area was within Snowbasin boundaries.

As the snow tumbled over him, Harrison said he tried to swim to stay above it. It seemed to go on forever. Then it stopped.

It took Harrison 20 to 30 seconds to climb out. He said he pushed up on his feet, trying to feel the pull of gravity and headed against it.

Once out, he immediately started searching for his friends.

"The biggest thing was, is anyone else still buried," he said.

One hand stuck up from the snow, waving. Harrison grabbed his shovel and began digging out Karen Marriott of Park City.

Harrison, who volunteers once a week at Snowbasin as a physician for the ski patrol and for the U.S. Ski Team, was prepared. He called on his radio. Within minutes other members of the ski patrol responded.

He also had the shovel and a beacon which sends a signal from under the snow.

Thomas Hofmeyer, a student at Weber State University, arrived on the scene just after the avalanche hit. From the catwalk just below the slide area, Hofmeyer watched the mass of snow come toward him and stop.

Then he saw Harrison, digging and coordinating the rescue. Hofmeyer joined in with his poles.

Hofmeyer, who is from Sweden, said he used to help at French ski resorts. He began probing for other victims. He watched in awe as Harrison kept his head, rescuing others in his party before the ski patrol arrived.

"He was just amazing according to me - so disciplined."

David Smith, public relations representative for Snowbasin, said Harrison was nothing less than a hero.

It only took 15 to 20 minutes to make sure the rest of the group was accounted for. But, ski patrolmen continued to probe the area until 2 p.m. to make sure no one was missed. Snowbasin's new avalanche rescue dogs aided in the search.

The gondola was shut down for the rest of Friday and is expected to be open again some time today.

While swimming through the wave of snow, Harrison said he lost his hat, one glove and his goggles. The whipping wind and stinging snow left him with frost-bite on his ear and two fingertips as he searched for the rest of his group.

Marriott suffered a neck sprain, according to Harrison. Park City resident Marianne Waters tore a ligament in her knee while she was partially buried. Two men were also partially buried in the avalanche, but suffered no injuries.

Harrison said he had just been up on the mountain Friday morning doing avalanche control with the patrol.

Gray Reynolds, general manager at Snowbasin, confirmed the area had been checked for avalanche danger early Friday morning.

"One thing about snow is that it isn't a perfect science," Reynolds said. "We do our very best to make it as safe as possible. Safety is our primary concern."

With well over 3 feet of new snow in the last 24 hours and winds up to 70 mph in the Strawberry Bowl area, Reynolds said the danger of an avalanche was very high.

Reynolds said the ski patrol would be back out today to blast for avalanches. After another check of the area, Strawberry Bowl will be available to the public. The Super Series downhill races will also continue today. They were postponed Friday due to the weather conditions.

Tom Kimbrough, Forest Service avalanche forecaster, said an avalanche warning is out through the weekend.

"There was plenty of light fluffy snow and northwest winds today that helped create ideal avalanche conditions. If people go out over the weekend, they should stay away from steep slopes and run-out areas in the backcountry," he said.

In the Snowbasin avalanche, it is suspected a skier or snowboarder just made an unfortunate cut in the snow. With a new hat covering his red and swollen ear, Harrison said he felt very lucky.

"It's not something you want to do twice."

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