

20031226 **ASPEN GROVE, WEST OF SUNDANCE RESORT, UTAH**

December 26, 2003

Five snowboarders caught; two partly buried, three buried and killed

WEATHER AND SNOWPACK CONDITIONS**High
avalanche
danger**

A few days before Christmas 2003, the second-largest storm in the history of Salt Lake City began. When the storm ended a few days after Christmas, the city had gotten about three feet of snow—with four feet piling up on the “bench” on the east side of the city. The Wasatch Range got five to six feet of snow, with most of this falling in two days. On Friday, December 26, the Utah Avalanche Center rated the avalanche danger as High.

ACCIDENT SUMMARY

On the day after Christmas, Friday the 26th, a group of five young men set out for a day of backcountry snowboarding in the Provo area of Utah’s Wasatch Range. From Provo Canyon, they went past Sundance Resort on Highway 92 and parked at the Aspen Grove Recreation Area. This area is on the lower northeast slope of 11,750-foot Mt. Timpanogos.

**More than one
person on a
slope**

The five men were Adam Merz (18), Mike Hebert (20), Rod Newberry (20), J. D. Settle, and Matt Long. They ended up snowboarding in the Robert’s Horn Chute area—a chute between cliffs where avalanches that release from large slopes above must pass through. These five men were not alone in the area: an estimated 14 people were on lower slope when a natural avalanche released from high above.

J. D. Settle later recalled that the time was about 16:25 when the group of five stopped to take a break. They were well up the slope, above all the others in the area. A minute later, Settle heard a sound that he thought could be an earthquake. He looked up: “It looked like pure white coming at us. I’ve never seen anything like it.”³ A family snowshoeing near the bottom of the slope saw the avalanche hit the five men, who disappeared in the moving snow.

One of the witnesses made a 911 call that was received by the Utah County Sheriff’s Office at 16:27.

RESCUE SUMMARY**No rescue
equipment**

None of the five men had avalanche rescue gear. Settle and Long were lucky. Settle was buried to the neck and was able to dig himself out; Long was under a foot of snow but was able to clear his face and breathe. They got themselves out and began the search for their three companions. Others in the area joined Settle and Long in the search for Merz, Hebert, and Newberry. There were no surface clues.

Settle grabbed a tree branch to scuff and probe the snow, and while he was searching, a second avalanche came down. “The second one hit me right in the back and brought me down right to the bottom,” said Settle. “That’s the one that trapped me and I got an air pocket. I could get my head above the snow, but I was trapped. My legs, I couldn’t move them.” Other searchers managed to dig him out. (Settle was briefly hospitalized for hypothermia and a knee injury, but was back at Aspen Grove on Sunday to join the search.)

Shortly after 17:00, the first SAR team arrived at the site, but they found no clues to the three missing men before authorities suspended the search because of darkness and the threat of more avalanches. On Saturday the 27th, prior to putting rescuers on the lower slope, a helicopter dropped explosives into the starting zone and triggered no further avalanches. Then several dog teams and probe lines went onto the debris area, which was enormous—estimated to be 22 football fields (about 28 acres) in size. The primary search area below where the three missing victims had last been seen was still overwhelming—estimated at 11 football fields (14 acres) and 10 to 20 feet deep. Probing was exceptionally difficult, first because the debris was often deeper than the length of the poles, and second because many poles broke in the hard snow. Searchers found nothing on Saturday, though an avalanche dog showed interest in one area.

The recovery mission resumed on Sunday morning the 28th. Dogs again alerted in one general area, and probing and shoveling uncovered a ski hat, backpack and snowboard within 100 feet of each other. A probe then struck the body of Mike Hebert under four feet of snow. He had been carried about 1,000 feet from where the avalanche hit the group. Further searching produced nothing, at which point the rescue effort was put on hold indefinitely.

It would be more than three months later that the recovery effort came to an end. On April 11, searchers recovered the body of Rod Newberry. Then, on April 17, they found the body of Adam Merz. The two men had been carried about 1,700 feet down the slope and buried about 90 feet apart in a ravine near a footbridge at the bottom of the slide.

AVALANCHE DATA

The continuing storm prevented good observations of the starting zone of this avalanche, so little data is available. We do know that the avalanche was a natural release, that it released on a northeast-facing slope and fell several thousand feet, and that the volume of snow was very large. Therefore, it was most likely classified as SS-N-R4. It may have been mostly storm snow.

**Storm Slab
avalanche**

COMMENTS

When interviewed after the avalanche, J. D. Settle said his group talked about and was aware of the avalanche risk, but with so many feet of fresh powder, they couldn't resist. Once tasted, the lure of fresh powder is strong, but when people push the limits of gravity and physics, avalanches will happen, and some victims are going to die.

These young men dearly needed guidance, a responsibility that is both theirs and their parents'. Backcountry safety comes with experience and education. And the public school districts in Utah have bought into this idea: "Know Before You Go" is an avalanche awareness program created in Utah for middle and high school students. Part of the instruction is a lively and entertaining video showing the power and effects of avalanches, with the strong message that awareness and education are keys to avalanche safety. A video news clip of this fatal Aspen Grove avalanche is part of Know Before You Go's hard-hitting message that only awareness and training can prevent tragedies like this. With the schools starting the education process, parents of kids drawn to winter recreation should be certain they are prepared for rescue—which is inevitable in the long run—by having the equipment that may save their lives. In 2016, the Know Before You Go program expanded into Colorado, and has now been used internationally and presented in several languages.