

Deadly avalanches

Ephraim snowboarder, Mt. Pleasant snowmobiler caught in massive slides

By Suzanne Dean

Publisher

Fresh snow, strong winds and warming temperatures proved to be a deadly combination Saturday, Jan. 8 as two men died in separate avalanches in the Manti-LaSal National Forest.

Louk Gordon, 26, of Ephraim was snowboarding in Bluebell Chute on the northeast face of Haystack Mountain just after noon when an avalanche carried him 880 feet down the slope and buried him in snow, according to Max Forgensi, avalanche forecaster for the national forest who investigated

the incidents. Haystack Mountain is about 8.5 miles from the mouth of Ephraim Canyon.

About 15 miles away and about an hour later, David Wayne Johnson, 42, of South Jordan, who owned a cabin east of Mt. Pleasant, was caught in an avalanche while snowmobiling in the Choke Cherry Ridge area of Mt. Pleasant Canyon. He died from internal injuries after the slide propelled him into a tree. His snowmobile ended up in the tree branches.

Both the Gordon and Johnson parties had taken safety precautions, says Forgensi. People in both groups, including the victims, were



Louk Gordon of Ephraim, pictured with his wife, Brooke. Gordon was killed in avalanche in Ephraim Canyon on Saturday.

wearing avalanche beacons. Gordon's companions were carrying snow shovels and probes. But the treacherous conditions overshadowed the safety measures.

Gordon was in the mountains with his brothers, Cory and Durke,

and a friend Kelly Moysh, all of Ephraim. They were running a "snowmobile shuttle," in which two men each rode up on snowmobiles and then one rider got off each snowmobile and

(See "Avalanches" on A8)



David Wayne Johnson, of South Jordan, was killed in a slide east of Mt. Pleasant on Saturday.

Avalanches

(Continued from A2)

snowboarded down the mountain.

On the second run, Gordon and Moysh were snowmobiling down the chute when a slab of snow 50-70-feet wide broke loose. "It was big," Forgensi says. "He was caught right in the middle of it. It carried him all the way down and buried him."

Forgensi says Moysh was ahead of Gordon and, "far enough down the slope that he was able to move out of the slide path. The avalanche went by him."

Gordon's brother and friend located the victim by following sounds from the avalanche beacon and began digging him out. Meanwhile, Cory Gordon called 911 on a cell phone. The call came at 12:30 p.m.

"They said it took 15 to 20 minutes (to dig Louk Gordon out), maybe a little longer, but time doesn't mean anything to you in that situation," says Kerry Nielsen, a leader in Sanpete Search and Rescue, who received the call to Ephraim Canyon but diverted to

Mt. Pleasant Canyon when the second call came in.

Preston Pritchard of Ephraim, another Sanpete Search and Rescue volunteer and Nielsen's brother, along with a friend and two EMTs from Ephraim, reached the site about 30 minutes later. The rescuers administered CPR until a Life Flight helicopter landed at the site and airlifted Gordon to Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, where he was pronounced dead.

Johnson was part of a party of 6-10 snowmobilers who were taking the sheep trail up Mt. Pleasant Canyon to Skyline Drive. Toward the top, the trail runs along the narrow Choke Cherry Ridge. According to Nielsen and Forgensi, Johnson's machine slipped over the ridge and got stuck on the slope below.

Another person in Johnson's party turned his snowmobile in Johnson's direction with the intent to go help him. As he turned the machine, what Forgensi describes as a "wall-to-wall avalanche," 200 to 300 feet wide, broke loose, car-

rying Johnson into the tree.

Members of the party went to Johnson's cabin several miles away and called 911. That call came at 1:30 p.m. But because of conditions, it took Nielsen and other Search and Rescue volunteers two hours to reach the victim. By then, he was dead.

"The snow was deep, and there was a risk of triggering other slides," Nielsen explains. It took rescuers until 7 p.m. to get Johnson's body off the mountain.

The Forest Service had issued a high-danger avalanche warning for Saturday and Sunday. The warning was broadcast Saturday at 7:30 a.m. on KMTI, posted on a national website, www.avalanche.org, and recorded on 1-800-OHV-Ride, the Manti-LaSal National Forest information line.

Both deaths occurred on windswept slopes. Forgensi said avalanche danger is especially high when wind is transferring the snow load from one side of a slope to the other side.

An **avalanche**-prone slope is like a two-layer cake resting on a cake plate, says Forgensì. The bed layer, comparable to the cake plate, is a hard surface, such as rocks or ice frozen into the mountainside.

On top of the bed layer is a weak layer of snow prone to sliding along the bed layer. On top of the weak layer is a slab of cohesive snow that can be as small as 6-feet by 6-feet and up to several hundred feet wide and a mile long.

If wind starts shifting the snow load on the slab, or if human activity disturbs the slab, the weak layer can start sliding down the bed layer. As that happens, the slab come apart and snow pours down the slope.

When **avalanche** danger is high, or if snow has fallen within the previous 24 hours, "stay away from steep, wind-loaded terrain," Forgensì advises. "Stick to designed snowmobile trails, such as the Ephraim Canyon Road, or to flat meadows with slopes of 30 degrees or less."

Funeral services for Gordon will be Wednesday at noon at the Ephraim LDS Stake Center, 400 E. Center St. Services for Johnson are scheduled for Thursday, 11 a.m., at the Glenmoor 3rd LDS Ward, 9455 S. 4800 West in South Jordan.