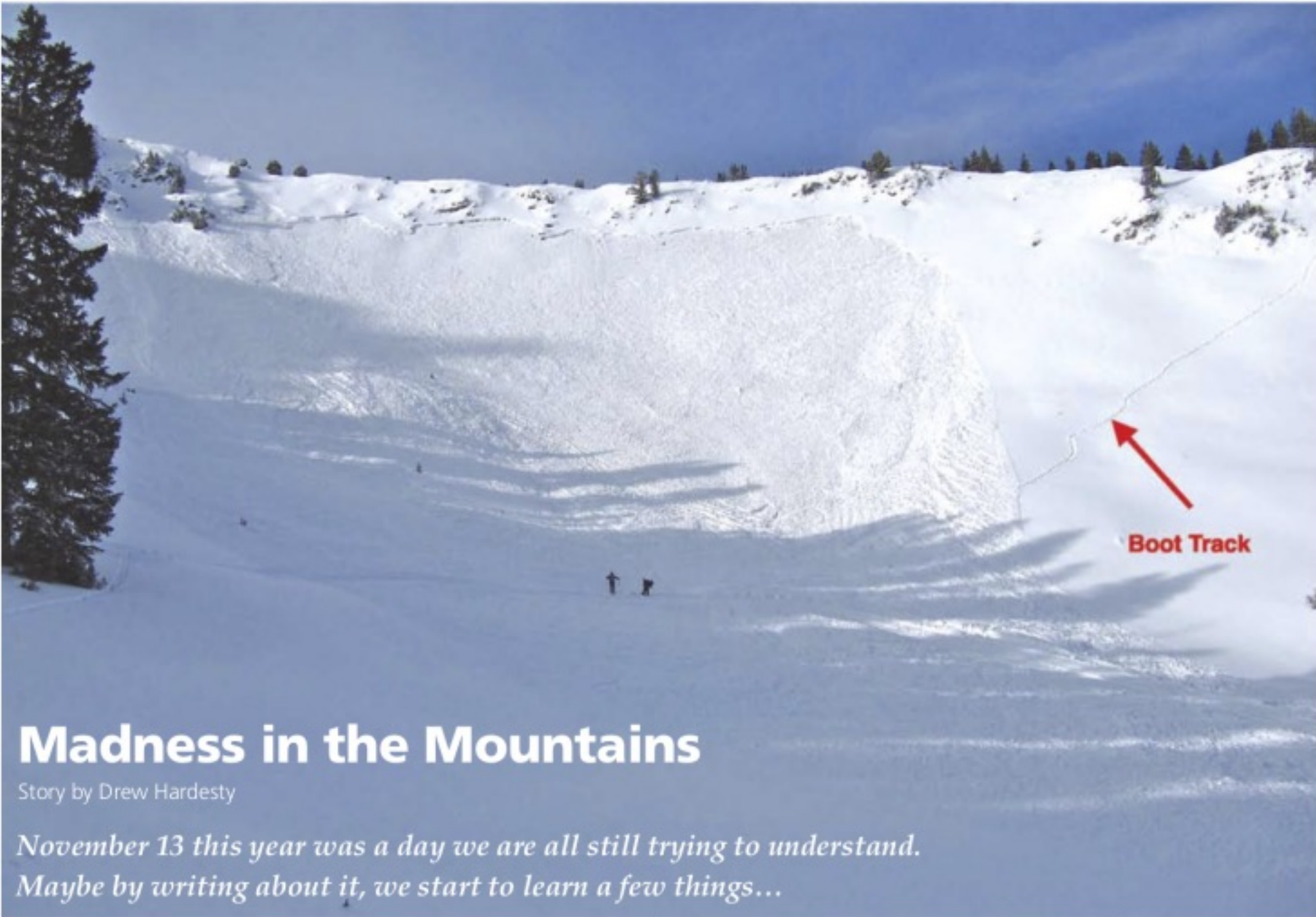




Madness in the Mountains

Story by Drew Hardesty

November 13 this year was a day we are all still trying to understand. Maybe by writing about it, we start to learn a few things...

It was madness. But I didn't know its full extent until I was in the thick of it myself. The wheels of the 747 had just hit the tarmac. It was November 13. I was just returning from a quick climbing trip to Red Rocks when I discovered the Twitter feed by colleague Brett Kobernik (of the Utah Avalanche Center) waiting for me on the iPhone.

- First human-triggered slide just reported, 12" deep, 9600' – north, remotely triggered.
- Sketchy details reported on second skier-triggered slab avalanche, Gunsight, Alta. Injuries reported.
- Likely no one caught in third slide. Fourth skier-triggered slide just reported, no one caught.
- Alta Snow Safety closing area to uphill travel.
- Yet another avalanche; two caught in Little Chute (Mt Baldy), lost some skis, no injuries.

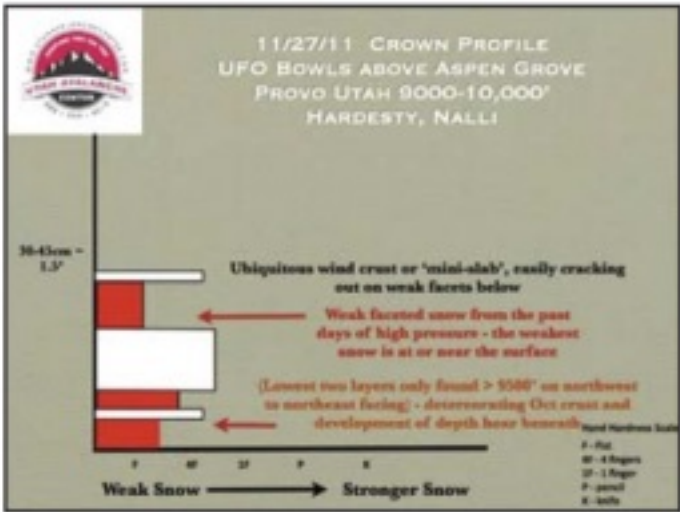
I hadn't gotten off the plane before I called Kobernik at the UAC office. There was no question – we had to go to Little Cottonwood Canyon to have a look for ourselves. It was 2pm.

La Niña had skunked us for most of October and November, and now 14" / 1.75" SWE had just walloped our thin and nearly rotten-to-the-core "base." Kobernik's forecast that morning: "The avalanche danger is a solid CONSIDERABLE in terrain above 9500' on northwest- through east-facing slopes. It could easily go to HIGH danger in the Cottonwoods if we see heavy snowfall this morning. Make no doubt that conditions are ripe for someone to get caught in an avalanche."

An hour later we were talking with some of the Alta Snow Safety crew: Titus, Howie, Grom, Damian. They had closed the area to uphill traffic only 90 minutes before. (Snowbird had been closed to uphill traffic from the day before – neither resort had yet opened for the season.) Grom (Dave Richards) had just returned from rescuing a skier who had fractured his femur from the slide in Gunsight. Things were not good. He and his team arrived to assess the scene from below in order to access and package the patient. The problem was the open terrain – and other potential triggers – above.

What happened next is inexcusable. Beyond so. The other parties on the ridge skied down, triggering more slides adjacent to the scene. Few realize the risks that rescuers assume to assist others, and it was luck that Dave's Wasatch Backcountry Rescue team was only dusted, not hit. I maintain that this type of event, or sequence of events would not have happened had it been outside of the ski area boundary. Move the crowds up and over the Cottonwood ridgeline to the north, and everyone likely would have been on their Ps and Qs.

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above: Jamie and his partner remotely triggered this slide, 2' deep and 600' wide, mid-Cirque of Peruvian Gulch at Snowbird. It then covered their boot pack.
Photo courtesy Utah Avalanche Center

left: Structure of a crown profile from Provo Canyon, similar to the snowpack in Little Cottonwood Canyon two weeks previous.

From Tom Kimbrough

For years we have been trying to keep people from triggering/getting caught in avalanches. Now, for the better riders, that is not the issue. I think the ski area complacency problem wasn't a factor for the better riders out there. All of the very good riders out there that day knew they were going to trigger avalanches. This goes especially for the fatality. I suspect they saw slides triggered before they left Alta. I suspect they were aware of the slide in the Cirque. So "look for signs," "the unopened resort is just like the backcountry," "ALPTruth," etc, isn't the answer for the present-day good riders. Look at the slide Paul [Kimbrough] triggers at Baker in the latest movie. I talked with him about that day. They were entirely aware of the avalanche problems that day. Their discussion of the conditions was about how to manage the slides that they knew they were going to trigger. When Jaime drops in he is fully aware that the slope is going to release. He expects to be able to "manage" the resulting avalanche. And he is not far from wrong. What can a good rider expect to "manage?" The slides aren't breaking deep. It is mostly a new snow problem. It isn't a hard slab. It isn't a wind slab. New snow, shallow soft slabs, easy to manage – they had handled those conditions many times without any trouble. What went wrong? When the slab broke it lost cohesion, and Jamie sank in down to the rocks and couldn't ride out of it. I have heard people recognize this in a way, saying that if it was February and the snowpack was deep, he could have taken the ride and probably been OK. That is true, but if it had been February he wouldn't have taken the ride at all. He would have "managed" the slide, getting off to the side if it had broken early or straightlined out if it had broken late. That's my take. TK

Tom Kimbrough has retired from prior careers as forecaster at the Utah Avalanche Center and Jenny Lake climbing ranger in the Tetons. He still teaches avalanche courses in the Wasatch and pays close attention to stability questions.





Two views of the South Chute at Snowbird, where Jamie Pierre triggered this slide on his third turn and was subsequently tumbled through the rocks. Photos courtesy UAC

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We hitched a snowmobile tow to the base of Greeley Bowl to conduct an investigation. It was shocking – nearly everything steep enough to slide had come down. All the slides were 12-20" deep, perhaps 100-200' wide. We skinned up, fearful of hang-fire above. Kobernik's phone rang...and the message prompted his last Twitter message of the day:

One more avalanche incident at Snowbird. This one does not sound good.

Jamie Pierre had long been a celebrated extreme skier in the Wasatch, Montana, and the Tetons. In 2006 he broke the record for the highest cliff jump with a 255' huck off a cliff at Grand Targhee Resort in Wyoming. He, his wife, and two children had only recently moved to the Big Sky area to be a ski ambassador for the Moonlight Basin resort near Big Sky.

On this day, however, he was skiing in his old backyard – Little Cottonwood. He and his partner left Alta, traversed beneath the northwest chutes on Baldy, and entered the mid-Cirque of Peruvian Gulch at Snowbird. Booting, they soon gained the Peruvian/Gad Valley ridgeline, but not before remotely triggering a 2' deep and 600' wide avalanche in the mid-cirque. It's unknown whether the two realized the slide's giant debris pile had engulfed part of their bootpack (poor visibility may have played a role). They strapped on skis and board and descended north along the ridge and then hesitated. The pair were above the South Chute – a steep, treed, rocky, northwest-facing 1000' long run that dropped into lower Gad Valley. With his partner watching, Jamie traversed in, made three turns – and that was it.

By our count at the Utah Avalanche Center, 18 unintentionally human-triggered avalanches that day led to at least six catch and releases, one fractured femur, a yard-sale worth of lost gear, and a fatality that prompted international headlines. These incidents are difficult to understand, and I maintain that this was, yet again, the tragic intersection of instability and desire. The problem was that everyone understood the instability – they just couldn't reign in the desire. Many ski parties triggered or walked past recently triggered slides before jumping into an adjacent slope. What contributed to this day of madness?

- ✗ It was the first powder day of the winter – and it fell on a Sunday. *Hunger and competition.*
- ✗ Everyone we interviewed was an expert skier/snowboarder with at least a modicum of avalanche education. Each knew the (unopened Alta or Snowbird) terrain intimately. Jamie had skied the South Chute the pre-season before. *Familiarity.*
- ✗ Their collective experience told them that ski areas are safe – no need to assess the stability, no need to follow safe travel protocol, no need to be equipped with rescue gear. *Complacency.*
- ✗ November 13 was only a few short months removed from a 700" season capped by a stable spring season that lasted well into July.

To be sure, this broad-brushes the crowd. Not every skier or ski party could be defined by these terms – but most of them could. Jamie and his ski partner weren't the only ones to make the wrong call that day. Perhaps their luck had run out. Without question, to know the snowpack takes knowledge. To know oneself takes wisdom. We have a long way to go. This is how our winter began in the Wasatch. As I write this – the day after Christmas – it's the fourth driest season since 1945. It might be a long winter.

Drew Hardesty is a forecaster for the Utah Avalanche Center.



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Drew, First of all I will say that Sunday the 13th was one of the strangest avalanche events that I have ever been involved in. Within five hours I had responded to a large slide with injuries, witnessed a second which quite frankly should have killed someone but didn't, and finally lost a friend to a third. Upon first contact with both of the first two parties the first thing said to me was, "Hi Grom." I mean what the hell is going on around here.

I will agree that the powder panic, the terrain familiarity, and the group mentality/race for the goods all played a part. But I also think that when people reach a certain point in their ski careers they begin to think that this kind of slide is a manageable deal. The case in point being me that day. As we went out in response to the first event I went high so that I might be able to ski cut a bit and "cover" the approach for the rest of the crew. It wasn't until I triggered the first piece that I realized just how unmanageable this stuff was. I should have known that before! (Gabe warned me.)

We have to find a way to drill into experienced people like this that there is something different about every day. That every slide is different – and just because you have ski-cut snow like this before, in terrain like this before, on days like this before – today isn't just like before. I don't know how to do that, but I am really sure that it is not another acronym. We have to find a way to diminish confidence.

Finally I want to say that although the accident scene in Gunsight was dusted by another group, that happened before we arrived on scene. We were never directly put in danger by another group. Although I will say the guard was up due to the sheer number of people blundering around in the cloud that day. I mean Jesus! Here we are at the toe working on an injury, and there are other groups just marching by like nothing is going on. They were oblivious!

I've analyzed this day a lot since then, and I still don't know what to say to people to prevent it in the future. I do agree about the "madness" part though.

Go Gently, Dave Richards "Grom"

For the past 11 years Dave has worked as a full-time Alta ski patroller and a part-time helicopter ski guide for Wasatch Powderbird Guides. He is also an avalanche rescue dog handler and member of WBR. Prior to his career at Alta, Dave traveled around the world competing extensively as a professional big mountain free-skier. He has been featured in countless films and magazine covers and brings a vast amount of knowledge and an edgy approach to the KBYG program.

