

Staying ahead of the spring snow avalanche

By

Doug Chabot

Spring skiing means two things to me--- carving turns on early morning corn snow as the sun climbs into the sky, and wet avalanches. The difference between savoring the one and being terrorized or killed by the other is sometimes a matter of minutes. "Timing is everything".

During the spring, wet snow avalanche hazard is generally lowest during the night and early morning when surface snow refreezes, especially if the sky is clear. Skiing at night is out of the question, so we take advantage of the early morning sunrise and ski the frozen surface before it starts to melt. Actually, a little melting is necessary for the soft, carvable crust that turns boilerplate into a magic carpet. But if we sleep in and get a late start we can miss this window and be in avalanche danger.

Wet snow avalanches have many causes, including rapid warming, rainfall, and solar radiation. As the snow melts water percolates down, weakening the snowpack as free water breaks frozen bonds. If this water hits an impenetrable ice crust it will flow horizontally, lubricating the bed surface and undercutting the snow above it. We can the avalanche danger is rising when we skin or boot uphill and the snow is wet, gloppy and deep. Instead of standing firmly on the surface, we sink deeper with every step. Once the wet snow reaches mid calf, retreat for the day and an earlier start the next is a good idea. The snow is getting ripe to avalanche when pinwheels grow as they roll downhill. The bigger they are, the wetter the snow, and once they reach the size of a basketball the snow is getting wet enough to avalanche.

Go to bed early, set your alarm and rise ready for the most carvable, dreamy turns you ever set your edge into.