

Sidecountry is Backcountry

By: Doug Chabot

The third week of December provided some valuable avalanche lessons when three people in two separate incidents triggered and were caught in avalanches near the Bridger Bowl boundary. In both cases the parties exited the ski area into the backcountry. The first incident involved two highly experienced skiers on Saddle Peak. Like they have done for years, they rode the Slaschman's lift and hiked to the top of the peak. They skied at the same time, but had some distance between them. A few hundred feet off the top one skier triggered a slide on a thinly covered, rocky area and was caught. Luckily he was able to grab a small tree and hold on for dear life. His partner was not caught. The avalanche went over cliffs and would have been unsurvivable. They both skied away unscathed, but shaken by the near-death experience. The next week a couple was near the north boundary of the ski area near the top of a small bowl when an avalanche broke and carried them both over 1,000 feet down slope. No one was buried but one skier had a serious leg fracture. Gallatin County Search and Rescue, with the help of Bridger Bowl, responded quickly and rescued them both.

The lessons from each are varied, but worth mentioning. Avalanches are unforgiving and have unpredictable outcomes. Sometimes people survive long, dangerous slides while other times small, innocuous slides are killers. The bottom line is that survival is not guaranteed.

Anytime two people are caught, or almost caught in the same avalanche we can deduce that they were on the slope at the same time. This was the case in both these instances. "Going on-at-a-time" is a mantra we repeat in our classes and advisories, but is sometimes misunderstood. When we say "one at a time" we mean that in the literal sense. One person skis down while a partner watches from a safe zone out of the potential avalanche path. Only after the skier exits the path does the next one descend. This practice is difficult and sometimes impossible in areas adjacent to the ski areas, which we term "sidecountry". Sidecountry is backcountry terrain that can be easily accessed from ski lifts. One at a time is hard to do because other skiers can overcrowd and stack up above you. This is a dangerous situation because a stranger can put you at risk by triggering an avalanche which sweeps you to your death. They'll likely be infinitely sorry, but you'll be dead.

The avalanche danger on both days was quite serious. Our avalanche advisory gives a broad brush danger rating for each mountain range with slope specific assessment left up to the individual skiers. The goal of the advisory is to give you relevant information in order to make good decisions about whether to ski a particular run or not. The avalanche danger on the day of the Saddle Peak slide was rated Considerable and three days later when the couple was caught it was rated High. In other words, human triggered avalanches were either likely or very likely. Avalanches were expected. It is very possible to ski in the backcountry during a heightened danger, but it requires careful snowpack assessment and a conservative approach. You are poking the avalanche dragon after all. In both instances new snow and wind-loading added weight onto a weak snowpack. This combination is never good.

Skiing the sidecountry is fun and can be done safely. We must never forget that sidecountry is backcountry. The terrain within the ski areas boundary is closely monitored and controlled with explosives. The snow on the other side of the boundary is not. It may be easy to get to, but that ease is not a reflection on its safety. A skier doing laps within sight of the ski area is no safer from an avalanche than someone deep in the backcountry. The snowpack does not know about the ski area; it's either stable or unstable with similar odds of triggering no matter how far away the ropeline is.

In these two incidents, one party needed a rescue while the other did not. Rescues are tricky and risky. Here in Bozeman we rely on Gallatin County Search and Rescue (GCSAR) which is run by the Sheriff's department. They have a roster of professional quality volunteers who are willing to risk their lives to aid a victim. The skier with the broken leg was rescued by GCSAR volunteers who had to make a serious decision on whether to launch the rescue or not. The avalanche danger was bad and the rescuer was going to be exposed to slides. It was decided that the exposure could be kept to an acceptable level, but it's risky nonetheless. The rescuer who went out there was taking a calculated, but personal risk to help someone in need. It easy to imagine a situation where the risk is too great and rescuers cannot enter the scene, even within sight of a ski area. Personal responsibility, doing your homework on snowpack stability and practicing safe travel protocols will keep the odds of safe winter skiing stacked in your favor.