

Four Perish in Washington Avalanches

Contributed by The Editors

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Following a storm that brought nearly 40 inches of snow to much of Washington's North Cascades, four backcountry riders perished in two separate avalanches on Sunday. Three experienced backcountry skiers died in a slide at Stevens Pass, and one snowboarder died when carried over a cliff by an avalanche at Alpental.

At Stevens Pass, the three were skiing with a group of 12 in the Tunnel Creek drainage, a popular sidecountry zone accessible from the backcountry gate off the Seventh Heaven chairlift.

According to reports confirmed by ESPN.com, Jim Jack, head judge on the Freeskiing World Tour, Chris Rudolph, director of marketing at Stevens Pass and John Brennan died in the slide. Pro skier Elyse Saugstan was caught and buried, but credits her avalanche airbag with saving her life. Backcountry contributor Megan Michelson (Road Closed, February/March 2012) was among the group and told ESPN.com that each member of the party was carrying avalanche rescue gear and practicing safe skiing protocol.

According to Michelson's report, the slide broke 30 feet wide and three feet deep before propagating wider through trees where several skiers were waiting below. Saugstan, Jack, Rudolph and Brennan were carried between 2,000 and 3,000 vertical feet.

On Sunday morning, Stevens Pass reported 14 inches of snow overnight and 26 inches in the previous 24 hours. The Northwest Avalanche Center (NWAC) indicated high avalanche danger above 5,000 feet with considerable danger below. "This heavy snowfall caused widespread natural and triggered soft and windslab avalanches," NWAC reported on Sunday. Slides between one- and two-feet deep had been reported by ski patrols at Mount Baker, Stevens Pass and Alpental, NWAC added.

In a sidecountry zone at Alpental, a snowboarder died earlier Sunday when swept over a cliff. According to the Seattle Times, 41-year-old Karl Milanoski of Seattle triggered the avalanche, which carried him 500 feet over a cliff.

The American Avalanche Association has confirmed 14 avalanche-related ski and snowboard deaths since November.

Updated on February 23, 2012.

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