

The Protagonists: Remembering two of Jackson Hole's most prolific backcountry skiers

Contributed by Jeff Burke

On March 7, ski mountaineers Steve Romeo and Chris Onufer were killed in an avalanche on Ranger Peak in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. Backcountry Editor-at-Large Jeff Burke remembers two of Jackson Hole's most prolific backcountry skiers.

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No one wants to die in an avalanche. So, whenever I hear the phrase "at least they died doing what they loved," the hackles on my neck go up. It's often spoken when people we know fall prey to misadventure. To me, it's a last-resort catchphrase that completely misses the point, a consolation prize that somehow justifies a negative event to reduce the swarm of feelings that descend on us when people we know die prematurely. There is nothing romantic—nothing lovely—about being swept up in a torrent of snow as Mother Nature moves forward with a careless air.

Two men I knew, ski mountaineers Steve Romeo and Chris Onufer, were killed in an avalanche on March 7, 2012, on Ranger Peak (11,355 ft.) in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. They were ascending the mountain's southeast aspect when a large slide captured and carried them nearly a linear mile down the path. A search party was scrambled later that evening after Chris failed to pick up his father at the airport. Rescuers found them at the bottom of the large slide the following morning.

I wasn't very close with either of them. I worked with Chris indirectly at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort since I took a job with the ski patrol six years ago. Chris began working in lift ops in 1993, and most recently worked as tram maintenance manager. I've known Steve for well over a decade, editing some of his work he'd submitted to Backcountry over the years. He's primarily known for his blog, TetonAT.com, where he celebrated his number one passion: backcountry skiing. Both men were as dedicated to the adventure of wild snow as any two I've ever known. Both men lived to ski.

While I never toured with either of them specifically, I've shared the same bootpack and skintrack with both men on a few occasions. It is to say we shared a common bond, because we have literally taken the same paths in life, and that has value to me.

Their memorial at the Jackson Hole Mountain Resort gathered a large crowd in the hundreds demonstrating a solidarity that communities have for individuals who color and shape the landscape of mountain life. Even their harshest critics would concede that Chris and Steve were, if nothing else, genuine, dedicated, and sincere about their passion for adventuring in the mountains. Those same critics were seen among the many faces in the crowd.

In his tribute, Steve's former boss, Phil Leeds of Skinny Skis gear store, got it right. "Steve didn't die doing what he loved," he said, "he lived doing what he loved."

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