

Avy Bulletin: Part 1

Contributed by James Dillon

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The Season in Review

The 2011-12 winter season was record breaking and not in a good way. Across the United States, a record 20 skiers and snowboarders fell victim to avalanches, topping the 2007-08 winter when 14 skiers and riders died. What was most unusual about this deadly season, however, was the snow pack—or the lack of snow pack in many regions. States like Colorado and Utah had close to record-low snow years, leading to unstable, unusual and unpredictable snow packs. Even still, the threat of moving snow was ever prevalent.

In a three-part series, we discuss the season, snow pack, hazards and education with avalanche ambassadors from across the country. Here, we speak with Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center (UAC). Tremper has 35 years of experience in the field, and is the author of the book, *Staying Alive in Avalanche Terrain*. He served as Director of Avalanche Control at Big Sky Resort, Mont., and has been the director of the UAC since 1986.

Stay tuned for parts two and three of Avy Bulletin, where we'll talk with Spencer Logan of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center and Benj Wadsworth of the Friends of the Northwest Avalanche Center

Backcountry: Tell me about the winter in your region in terms of snow pack, avalanche events, and accidents.

Bruce Tremper: This year we had a very thin, very weak, persistently unstable snow pack. It was like moving from Washington to Colorado between this season and last season as far as the snow pack goes, and it took a lot of people by surprise. We had five deaths this year. Our average is four, and last year we had three.

BCM: Is there a specific reason why this season was so deadly?

BT: It was just a bad year as far as snow goes. Anytime you get a thin snow pack it means weak snow because of radiant amorphism. It's just the opposite of what most people think because the snow just rots away and every time you do get a storm it's very unstable and it's persistently unstable, and that weak layer lasted throughout the season.

BCM: Avalanche fatalities were covered repeatedly in the national news this year. How will this coverage affect the way people think about the backcountry?

BT: In Utah we had lots of media coverage and almost every night the weather forecast included the avalanche danger rating on all local TV channels. That was a great help for us because it really got the word out that things were dangerous, they continued to be dangerous, and they were not going to get better quickly.

BCM: How will the media coverage affect preparedness and awareness?

BT: The media coverage really works well in reaching the kind of people that are part of the audience; the low-end and

the intermediate users. About two thirds of avalanche victims don't know anything or only know a little bit about avalanches. Those are the kind of people we're trying to get to start checking the advisory regularly.

BCM: How can the backcountry community heighten its awareness of avalanche risk and avoid having a season like this past one?

BT: We are doing a lot of Twitter and Facebook updates and we've had very good luck with those. We put out Twitter feeds when anything occurs that people really need to know about and we're also monitoring the replies and mentions to those feeds, so we're getting feedback from the field on a real-time basis. We've found that to be extremely effective. We also use YouTube and Vimeo channels extensively and I think of all the things that we do, that's probably the most effective method, maybe more so than the avalanche advisory. When the pack was very unstable, we would just show what the snow pits were like, where it would just jump out of the snow-pit wall just by tapping on it really lightly like it was a spring-loaded cash register drawer and people would really get it and go, "Wow! Look at that, that's really dangerous."

BCM: It is a hard thing to regulate who goes into the backcountry, but could we ever see limited backcountry access when danger is high?

BT: We can access public lands whenever we want to but the flipside of that is that there are lions and tigers and bears and avalanches out there and we have to know how to behave. Unfortunately, not everyone uses public lands responsibly.

BCM: How can avalanche education be improved?

BT: The studies that have been done on avalanche education show that it is working. It doesn't work quite as well as we would like it to, but they are working. The flipside of this coin, though, is that we have to think about it this way: What is the purpose of avalanche education? Is it to save lives? Or is it to give people tools to enjoy more powder and have more fun? I think that avalanche education does both of those things and that's just a classic economic utility curve. In other words, when you improve safety, you may or may not save lives or decrease accidents but a lot of times you do increase utility. This is to say, if you add seatbelts and airbags to cars, people are able to drive faster. So for the same amount of risk they're getting use out of it because they can drive their car faster and get there quicker.

There have been a lot of studies that have shown that the accident rate is a little bit higher for the people that have higher avalanche education. Part of that reason is just that they're getting out there more, they're getting more powder runs, they're getting more utility out of those classes. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? I don't know. That's a philosophical question that we have to ask ourselves.

BCM: How can the numbers of avalanche accidents decrease?

BT: If I could answer that I would be fabulously wealthy. We approach it in a variety of different angles and one is by giving people information through avalanche advisories and by giving people information through social media and video and so on and I think that works. Stay tuned for parts two and three of Avy Bulletin, where we'll talk with Spencer Logan of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center and Benj Wadsworth of the Friends of the Northwest Avalanche Center

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