

Avy Bulletin: Part 2

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'll discuss the season, snow pack, hazards and education with avalanche ambassadors from across the country. Here, we speak with Spencer Logan, an avalanche forecaster with the Colorado Avalanche Information Center (CAIC). He deals with backcountry access across Colorado and regularly skis many areas in the state. He is a well-traveled backcountry skier and tackles challenging avalanche conditions in order to keep Colorado skiers and riders informed and safe.

[Click here](#) for part one of Avy Bulletin, where we spoke with Benj Wadsworth of Friends of the Northwest Avalanche Center. Stay tuned for part three in the series, where we'll connect with Bruce Tremper of the Utah Avalanche Center.

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

Spencer Logan: It was certainly an interesting season for us. It was one of the lowest snow years on record and certainly the lowest snow amount in the last twenty if not thirty years. We had a pretty narrow window of avalanche activity and avalanche accidents compared to a normal winter. We had eight fatalities in Colorado, which is more than our five-year average of six.

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

SL: I think, exacerbating the problem, it was such a poor start to the season that once the snow started falling, people were really excited to get out and ski decent snow. Many had let their guard down or let their enthusiasm get in the way of avalanche judgment.

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

SL: Anytime an accident gets covered, it makes people more aware of the problem and helps them learn to make better decisions. High profile accidents can be really good as well, if they make people more aware of the danger and how to deal with it.

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

SL: It's hard to think about how people will act in the aggregate versus the individual. You hope that somebody sees the coverage of these accidents and it makes them think a little bit more. You hope they don't just go buy another piece of equipment that makes them feel safe but they learn a little bit more about avalanches and how to make better decisions.

BCM: How will this coverage affect the perception of skiers and snowboarders in the eyes of non-skiers?

SL: Some of the accidents we saw certainly were easier to portray as extreme risk-taking events. What we didn't see were the hundred of people who went into the backcountry and enjoyed the snow and came home and never had a close call. That never makes the news.

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

SL: Anecdotally during the winter we saw people changing their behavior and being more conservative and certainly got that feedback from a lot of people. I hope that kind of awareness continues to expand and propagate through the backcountry community.

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?

SL: I hope that never ever happens. One of the reasons I like going into the backcountry is because I am responsible for my partners and myself and have to make those decisions. I hope that awareness and people's decision making does become a common reality; that somebody can look at the avalanche forecast and take an avalanche bulletin and say, "I don't have the skills for the conditions today. I'm going to stay inbounds."

BCM: How can avalanche education be improved?

SL: By providing not just more information but better information to people in a way that they can use it. That's something that all the avalanche centers are trying to do. The community needs to learn how to use that information to make better decisions for itself and I think that's a combination of education, peer pressure, peer sharing and general awareness.

BCM: How can the numbers of avalanche accidents decrease?

SL: Certainly some of the tools that are available are helping people have close calls and non-fatal incidents rather than fatal accidents...you know, faster beacon searches and recovery airbags, more powerful snow machines. Those all seem to help people mitigate the consequences when something does go wrong but they don't completely remove the consequences. Taking risks in the backcountry becomes more and more celebrated and acceptable and we're going to see more and more cases where those tools don't mitigate the risk all the way.

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