

Avy Bulletin: Part 3

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, snowpack, hazards and education with avalanche ambassadors from across the country. Here, we speak with Benj Wadsworth, section director of Friends of the Northwest Avalanche Center, a non-profit organization that supports the Northwest Avalanche Center (NWAC). Wadsworth is an experienced backcountry skier, works on the Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol, and teaches public avalanche courses.

In Part 1 of Avy Bulletin we spoke with Bruce Tremper, director of the Utah Avalanche Center. In Part 2, we spoke with Spencer Logan of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center.

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

Benj Wadsworth: We had a great winter compared to the rest of the country. From an avalanche standpoint however, there were three deaths at Steven's Pass, which got a lot of press, and then that same day there was a fatality at Alpental.

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

BW: I think the shallow snow pack and cold temps early in the season led to the development of some faceted snow down low and then some surface hoar layers as well contributed to a dicey snow pack in the Rockies. Then when you take that snow, it doesn't take much to trigger it. New snow sitting on that sketchy layer was all it took.

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

BW: Out here following the [Steven's Pass] accident, we really tried to get the message out that people need to get educated before going into the backcountry. Hopefully that sinks in, but we've definitely seen a lot of interest in avalanche education out here in the past couple years so I think people are realizing that you can't just go storming out into the backcountry without learning something first.

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

BW: Hopefully it makes people more aware. People tend to remember an avalanche event for a few weeks but when the media stops it tends to slide into the back of our minds.

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

BW: I think there is a perception that backcountry skiers are crazy risk-takers. Looking at a lot of the comments following the Seattle Times article about the Steven's Pass avalanche, it's a little bit discouraging to hear people saying "That's what you get for getting off the couch." I'm sure that the coverage is not going to help and might perpetuate that sentiment.

Hyperlink to "Seattle Times Article" above:

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/localnews/2017551390_avalanche20m.html

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

BW: Just getting the mainstream press to get the word out that people need to learn their stuff before going to the backcountry. One of the big problems now is the whole inbounds backcountry, sidecountry, or whatever you want to call it, and a lot of marketing to that. I think the sentiment that it's not full backcountry, that it's safer for some reason. Both the Steven's and the Alpentel accidents are perfect examples of why it's not.

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?

BW: They can't stop somebody from going onto public land. I think the answer is more education and not regulation. It's important to make people really aware that if they go out there, they're in avalanche terrain.

BCM: How can avalanche education be improved?

BW: Doing awareness classes at ski areas or requiring people to get season's passes by sitting through an awareness class would be one way. Jackson Hole produced a really good video, but making sure people watch it is another concern. Before you give someone a season's pass you could sit them down for 20 minutes and have them watch a video on backcountry.

BCM: How can the numbers of avalanche accidents decrease?

BW: If nobody goes in the backcountry [laughs]. I don't think they are going to decrease. I think as long as more and more people are heading into the backcountry, we're going to see more accidents. I think public outreach is really making people aware that they need to get some education. We've got a real push out here just to let people know that the NWAC forecast exists because there are a lot of snowshoers and alpine skiers that don't even know it's out there and that's just the first step in education. Just check the forecast before you go and if it's considerable or high, think twice. If you don't know your shit, don't go. And if you're going to go, make sure you take a class first and buy your beacon, shovel, probe, and learn how to use them.

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