

Avalanche Incident on the Terrible Traverse near Mt Hood

Sunday, Jan 15, 2006.

[The Terrible Traverse is a steep side cut along the road from Bennett Pass to Boonie Butte in the northern Oregon Cascades, just southeast (~4 miles) of the Mt Hood Meadows ski area. Thanks to Doug Jones of the Mt Hood NF for bringing this incident to our attention, and to Jim Minick for sharing his experience]

Location of incident—Terrible Traverse near Mt Hood, OR

Number in party—3 caught and partially buried.

Type of activity—back country ski

Elevation—approximately 4800 ft

Aspect—North-east

Slope angle—50-60 degrees

Preliminary Avalanche classification—SS-AS-R2-D2

Other avalanche information: 10 inch soft slab, approximately 50 feet wide with 120 ft vertical fall before reaching shallow 30 degree runout with trees. The slab appeared to be wind drifted snow on the lee side of a sharp ridge.

I just wanted to report to everyone that several of us were skiing out east from Bennett Pass at Mt Hood yesterday morning (Sun. Jan. 15th). When we got about two miles from the parking lot to the Terrible Traverse, no one had broken through yet. The traverse is across a sixty degree hillside using an existing roadbed. Some folks were there looking at it. It was drifted over. Another fellow (him in the lead) and I took off to break it out and open it. I did not have a transceiver or a shovel, nor did anyone in my group of three. We made it across fine, though the snow was over our knees on the uphill side. Some more folks were coming up behind us, part of a group with Pam in the lead. Cynthia H. knew her from a local ski club. I decided to go back down and try to talk Cynthia into crossing so we could go on out to Bonnie Butte, a total of six miles out.

As I was skiing back down across the Traverse, a lady was coming up from the group. I skied to just in front of her, then asked her to step down just a little bit and make herself a stable platform. She did and I skied above her into the drifted snow. All of a sudden the snow above us let loose. It was not from the very top, but from what there was between the base of the bare rock and the Trail. That was enough to sweep us both off our feet. I fell forward, headfirst downhill and was pushed for 30 or 40 feet with my skis tangled up behind me. There was a firm snow layer that I stayed on top of, and so I was very lucky and stayed on top. The lady beside me went the whole distance of the steep pitch, about 120 feet. She stayed on top as well, was partly buried, but dug herself out fairly quickly. Another person who was coming up toward us was buried up over her knees where she remained standing.

We had not checked the avalanche report, but someone said that there was an avalanche warning out for today. I had always considered the Traverse too steep to get enough snow to pose a great danger. I guess I have been wrong

these many times I have crossed the Traverse, many times alone. I do not own a transceiver yet, but I know now that I will always carry my shovel and I will always check the avalanche forecast. If the forecast is for high hazard, I will change my plans and ski the safer areas. I am so lucky,

Narrative courtesy Jim Minick, one of those involved in the incident



Figure 1. Steep terrain and skier (Darvel Lloyd) on the "Terrible Traverse"; photo taken 1-8-06 (about 1 week prior to the incident above). During the week that followed this picture, more than 2 feet of heavy, wet snow accumulated. Then it was rained on, followed by temperatures in the 20's with high winds and drifting snow. Although the accident occurred subsequent to this picture, note evidence of either old fracture lines or glide cracks on the steep rock slope to left of skier. Obviously a site that would be easily loaded by wind transport. Photo by and courtesy of Darryl Lloyd.

Darryl Lloyd

Ancillary Information:

The following detailed avalanche forecast was issued on Sunday morning, the 15th: While an avalanche warning was not posted, the instability that the groups encountered on the steeper terrain near the Terrible Traverse was well described in the snowpack analysis, and the Mt Hood area had been specifically singled out as having a greater danger than the remainder of the forecast area.

BACKCOUNTRY AVALANCHE FORECAST FOR THE OLYMPICS WASHINGTON
CASCADES AND MT HOOD AREA
NORTHWEST WEATHER AND AVALANCHE CENTER SEATTLE WASHINGTON
900 AM PST SUN JAN 15 2006

NWAC Program administered by:
USDA-Forest Service
with cooperative funding and support from:
Washington State Department of Transportation
National Weather Service
National Park Service
Washington State Parks and Recreation Commission
Pacific Northwest Ski Area Association
Friends of the Avalanche Center
and other private organizations.

This forecast applies to back country avalanche terrain below
7000 feet and does not apply to highways or operating ski areas.

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ZONE AVALANCHE FORECASTS

OLYMPICS-WASHINGTON CASCADES NEAR AND WEST OF THE CREST-

Moderate avalanche danger below 7000 feet Sunday and Sunday night. Gradually increasing danger early Monday. Significantly increasing danger Monday afternoon becoming considerable below 7000 feet. Further increasing danger Monday night becoming high below 7000 feet.

MT HOOD AREA-

Considerable avalanche danger above 6000 feet and moderate below early Sunday. Decreasing danger becoming moderate below 7000 feet Sunday afternoon through Sunday night. Significantly increasing danger Monday becoming considerable below 7000 feet. Further increasing danger Monday afternoon and night becoming high below 7000 feet.

EAST SLOPES WASHINGTON CASCADES-

Moderate avalanche danger above 5000 feet and low below Sunday and Sunday night. Gradually increasing danger early Monday. Significantly increasing danger Monday afternoon and night becoming considerable below 7000 feet.

SNOWPACK ANALYSIS-

Generally light amounts of 2 to 6 inches of new snow fell at cooling temperatures in showers over the past 24 hours. Similar amounts were received Friday. In general the significant amounts of snow that have accumulated over the past week, 5 to 9 feet or more along the west slopes, continues to gradually consolidate and settle. The most recent snow over the past two days has been accompanied by light to moderate west to northwest crest level winds building some soft slab layers near ridges, especially on Mt Hood where winds have been strongest. Backcountry travelers should continue to use caution in steep terrain and avoid slopes showing signs of recent wind transport. In wind protected areas, the upper snowpack is generally stable low density snow and providing some nice backcountry conditions at present.

Field reports from Saturday in the Crystal Mountain backcountry continue to show moderate compression, shovel shear and Rutschblock scores about 40 cm below the surface on a low density layer. However, the upper snowpack remains relatively cohesion-less and lacking the energy to propagate fractures. Near Blewett Pass about 30 cm of fist to 4 finger snow was very well bonded to a strong crust with no shears found and stable conditions about 5000 feet. Control results Sunday morning in the Crystal Mountain North BC produced isolated slab releases mainly near ridges and with large explosives. There was a ski triggered 1 foot soft slab on an east facing slope near 6000 feet that is cause for concern. Buried surface hoar continues to be seen in some pits at Crystal, likely formed Wednesday night and buried by subsequent new snow. So the isolated pocket remains possible.

SUNDAY-

Occasional light snow showers ending later Sunday with partial clearing. Continued cool with light winds. This should cause a further gradual decrease in danger as recent unstable layers settle. Near ridges at higher elevations isolated shallow soft slabs should cause concern on steeper lee slopes, mainly northeast through southeast facing.

MONDAY-

Increasing light snow early Monday and gradually increasing winds should begin to build new unstable layers. Rain or snow becoming moderate to heavy with very strong winds and rising freezing levels through Monday afternoon and night should cause a significant increase in avalanche danger. Dense snow or wind slab should load existing weak layers and cause natural or triggered slab avalanches by late Monday. Backcountry travel in avalanche terrain is not recommended late Monday.

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Backcountry travelers should be aware that elevation and geographic distinctions are approximate and that a transition zone between dangers exists. Remember there are avalanche safe areas in the mountains during all levels of avalanche danger. Contact local authorities in your area of interest for further information.

NWAC weather data and forecasts are also available by calling 206-526-6677 for Washington, 503-808-2400 for the Mt Hood area, or by visiting our Web site at www.nwac.us.

Kramer/Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center

