

Avalanche Incident on Table Mountain near Mt Baker

~0930 AM, Saturday, November 05, 2005

Location of incident—Table Mountain near Mt Baker, WA; Blueberry Chutes

Number in party—3; 1 caught and totally buried. Found by beacon within ~15 minutes

Type of activity—snowboard

Elevation—4700 ft

Aspect—North

Slope angle—35+ degrees

Preliminary Avalanche classification—SS-AR-R2-D2

Other avalanche information: 12-18 inch soft slab, approximately 50 feet width and 50 ft vertical fall before reaching shallow runout.

Incident Summary:

A group of three snowboarders were riding in steep avalanche terrain in the Table Mountain area near Mt Baker ski area when they triggered a 12-18 inch soft slab. The slide caught and totally buried one of the boarders. Two skiers who had witnessed the event found the victim by beacon within about 15 minutes. The victim's head was found about 4 feet below the surface; the victim was still breathing when initially uncovered, however he was unconscious and beginning to turn blue. Apparently the victim recovered consciousness by himself within about 4 minutes of rescue with relatively minor bruises and tweaked knee reported.

The party had done some stability tests, and had triggered another slab enroute to the slope that subsequently caught the snowboarder. They had left a larger slope that they felt uncomfortable about when the incident occurred on the smaller slope. At the time of the incident, the Mt Baker Ski Area had not yet opened for the season, with opening day planned for Tuesday, November 8th. Please see the narrative by the victim below.

Reported compiled by Mark Moore, NWAC from information provided by Andy Sahlfeld, Mt Baker Pro Patrol

Victim's narrative:

[Thanks to victim and survivor Matt Bowen for this narrative]

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.”—Nelson Mandela (a quote written on one of my snowboards)

I love snowboarding. It is the single greatest passion in my life. Seeking refuge in the snow-tattooed mountains has been as much a part of my life as eating and sleeping. With a new season approaching and the largest snow base in the world, I looked to my home, Mount Baker, to break the season in with a few pow slashes. I could hardly sleep that night as I curled up close to the fire, finding myself spending restless energy playing with a young curious cat. As we enjoyed a quiet breakfast, the sun began to shine through the broken clouds. With excitement mounting, we loaded up the Cascade Cadillac (a.k.a. the subie) and headed up newly paved Mt. Baker highway. As we made our way up the windy road that is 542, I felt giddy and anxious; it was time for me to fall in love again. Little did I know the next two hours were about to change my life forever.

Let this be stated now and as clear as possible. Nothing can completely prepare you for a real life-threatening situation. No matter how much you know or how prepared you are, once your life is in the hands of any icy giant, there is no telling your reaction. I have written countless papers and given numerous presentations on avalanche survival and awareness. While I have never taken an official course I can honestly say that I am a safe and knowledgeable back country traveler. I have always wanted to go through an avalanche awareness course but the price was always a little out of reach. I found it hard to justify spending the money on something I could do on my own and in a way that best suited me. I am fortunate enough to have followed through with my own kind of training, but many other backcountry travelers aren't as motivated. I see so many people who go their local REI and purchase the transceivers, the probes and the shovels, knowing damn well they don't have the slightest bit of avalanche knowledge. Words like hore frost and knowing the past few days, snowfall are beyond them. Is it their fault? Sure, but not entirely. Not once have I seen any sort of free avalanche clinic or classes on how to properly use the equipment so many people are becoming dependent upon. I am just as guilty as the next for not providing this kind of service but that is not where I want to go with this. I have always said that the best way to survive an avalanche is to avoid it in the first place. On November 5, 2005 I fell victim to an avalanche that I tried to avoid, and my knowledge as well as my groups, was put to the ultimate test.

“And what is to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that I may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered? Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing. And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb. And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.”—Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.

These words would have been quite nice to remember during my burial but they never came to me, even though they were written on the very snowboard attached to my feet. I didn't spend a lot of time trying to fight the fact that I was buried in an avalanche. Part of me wanted to pretend it was a dream and soon Snuffuluffagus would be floating through a purple sky on ice cream clouds eating a chocolate moon, but the reality was much too serious. By pushing the snow away from my face, I made myself room to breathe and just accepted the fact that I would pass out and either wake up soon or never. I thought I might die. I knew there was a pretty good chance. It actually seemed rather fitting. I could see the look on my friends and families faces when they were told the news. I could hear their cries and taste their tears. But something told me that wasn't going to be the case. Somehow I knew I'd be found and soon I would see my friends and family again. Regardless of my unknown outcome all I could think about was an overwhelming feeling of failure. I felt as though I had let everyone down. I have always pushed my limits, taking chances and learning from both success and failure. Now here I was. Buried in my own foolishness. Where did we go wrong? What did I do to get myself here?

I have taken this line roughly twenty times before but today the conditions were a little suspect. We dug a shear pit and performed a sort of RBT (rutschblock test) by weighting the uphill slopes and found a Q1 (quality one) shear about 18-20 in down. It was obvious that the face we were planning on riding was unstable and going to slide so we made the decision to take a lower angle descent. Going one at a time to a designated meeting area we traversed a ridge to our safe spot. I was the third to go, my line was the lowest on the face and I released about a 120 ft wide slide on the suspect slope. Calming our nerves we all met up and picked the safest line down. I was the first to go and as soon as I was out of my group's sight I released another slide that began to take me when a tree caught my board and pulled me under. With the little time that I had, I did what I was taught: I took one giant swim stroke to try and stay along the top then got my hands to my face and before I knew it, the snow had settled and I was stuck five feet below the snow surface. Drooling to make sure I knew which way was up, I began clearing the snow from my face for

room to breathe, and then the reality of my situation began to set in. Making it a point to slow by breathing, I calmed down and focused on the task at hand...survival. After about 2-3 minutes of picking away at the snow (which managed to fall conveniently onto my face) and wiping it away from my nose and mouth, I passed out. My body began to shut down. I went into a sort of hibernation. This enabled my more vital organs to function in the most minimal way, shortening my heartbeats and slowing down my breathing.

With me out of sight and a nervous tone in their voice, my group called out to me. One group member Ken, whom we picked up to join us because he was by himself, skied to the bottom to see if I was down there. Two other guys Reese Bradburn (my roommate) and John Stanek (a good friend of mine from the mountain) were left to wonder what had happened. They called for me several more times when they heard a voice which they thought was mine. By this time their transceivers were out and switched to search but when they called my name and got an answer they switched back to transmit. John went first and found himself forty yards down what seemed to be avalanche debris so he stopped. He and Reese realized that it was Ken who had responded to their calls and that I was still nowhere to be found. Then two men from above whom we had conversed with earlier while digging our pit called down to Reese and John telling them their man never came out. Reese billy-goated his way on top of the avalanche and broke off what hang-fire he could. By this time the two men came down to assist in the search. Transceivers out they located me and with one stab of the probe (to all of you who might have been wondering...Yes I got probed) they found me. First they uncovered my board about four feet below the debris. Making their way up my body, it was Reese who uncovered my face. At first he recalls finding my hands and grabbing hold, hoping for a squeeze from my seeming lifeless body. Nothing. Moving on to my head he wiped away the snow only to find my face pale and lips blue, but to everyone's relief I was breathing. I have been buried for roughly fifteen minutes; my group, my friends, my saviors, had found me just in time.

Cyanotic with a weak pulse and slow respirations were not what they wanted, but happy nonetheless that I was alive. It took me a few minutes to come to. At first I was unable to move, due to my body shutting itself down. Although shaking uncontrollably, I slowly regained sensation and function of my arms and legs and soon was standing. I hobbled away from a near death experience with a busted up knee and a new view on life. I want to do what I love, and I learned that life is too short to waste it doing things that don't make us happy. I am not going to let this experience slow me down. It's actually going to be quiet the opposite. I will make it a point to go out and do more of the things I love, but at what cost?

If this incident taught me anything at all, it's that you can't be too careful. Not to say you should always retreat in the face of danger but you need learn when to hold back and when to "Shramp the Gnar". It is a fine line, knowing when to go for it and when to withdraw, you can perform all the tests, take all the precautions, but nothing can predict every outcome of every decision. I thought we did everything right, so why was I buried under the snow unable to feed my body the oxygen it needed? Much of my time these past few days has been spent dissecting that. We dug a pit. We assessed the situation. We didn't run from danger but we reduced the odds by finding a better route down. Our greatest downfall was our communication. I made the mistake of pointing out my line earlier and not reiterating my direction of descent. With the snow as deep as it was and this being my first run of the year, I found it hard to stop and make more assessments. Instead I elected to move quickly through the trees and towards the bottom. What we should have done was make our way to the horizon drop and ski cut the top of it. While we may not have cut a slide loose, my group would have been right there to see me go down making the rescue twice as fast. So would I do it all again? Of course, I would just go about it with more caution. You can't let one

unfortunate event keep you from bliss. Is it not better to try, fail, and learn to do it right the next time; than to try, fail and never give the next time a chance?

The other day I sat down with the hopes of writing a quote that would best sum the thoughts, feelings and emotions of my recent experience. It made me realize countless quotes on life; ranging from how to deal with it, to how it's like a package of solidified mild, sugar and cocoa. So how do you write a quote that will forever influence someone's life? You don't. You can't. How can one man or woman's experiences in life be applicable enough to change that of another, when all lives are as individualistic and unique as ...oh say a snowflake? Too many people look to words for help or answers. Not all are for therapeutic reasons; some are just flat out laziness. They think that the words of someone else will lift them from the depths of sorrow and into the heavens of joy. I am not saying that quotes are useless; as a matter of fact I fill my life with them constantly. But what most people don't realize is the hundreds and thousands of "quotes" we experience every day. They are the feeling of elation we get from watching our children play. They are the feeling of mourning we have when a loved one passes on. And they are the feeling of tranquility we experience when we limp away from a near-death encounter. While some may try and even come close to finding the words, none will ever compare to that moment of an individual's life. So I challenge you to fill as much of your days with these wordless quotes cause soon you may find they are the very makeup of our short existence in this world.

I hope everyone who reads this can learn from it one way or another. While many people would want me to end it by saying something like...in the adventures of your lifetime, take caution, for existence alone it what allows us to truly live. Well, I apologize. That is not what is in my heart. I say Dream Bigger and Play Smarter. Fill your days with passion and excitement; just make certain you do it at a level that is just beyond your comfort zone, because when you're not learning to fall, you're failing to learn.

Peace, Love and Happiness

Matt Bowen

Photos of incident—all photos courtesy of and © Phuong Le, Seattle PI reporter

[Phuong is also a snowboarder who came upon the incident after it occurred]



Figure 1. Crown face viewed from burial site. Victim triggered slide at the point where the crown face intersects the right edge of photo. Crown face to the left was likely triggered by rescuers accessing the burial site.



Figure 2. Crown face to the right of the point of release - viewed from burial site.



Figure 3. Victim in red with Baker Ski Patrol. Crown face from point of release shown in top right portion of photo.



Figure 4. Breaking trail from accident site to snowcat



Figure 5. Transporting victim to snowcat



Figure 6. Assisting victim into snowcat.

Ancillary snowpack and weather information:

At the time of the incident, the Mt Baker Ski Area had not yet opened for the season and the group had hiked to reach the accident site (Mt Baker opened for the season a few days after the incident). The Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center had already issued two special statements (on 11/3/05 and

11/4/05) regarding generally increasing danger, especially above 5 to 6000 feet. The statement issued on the morning of the incident follows:

MOUNTAIN WEATHER FORECAST FOR THE OLYMPICS WASHINGTON CASCADES
AND MT HOOD AREA
NORTHWEST WEATHER AND AVALANCHE CENTER SEATTLE WASHINGTON
0930 AM PST Saturday, November 05, 2005

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

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SPECIAL AVALANCHE STATEMENT

During the past week generally from 2 to over 5 feet of new snow has fallen in many higher elevation locations of the Washington Cascades near and west of the crest, in the Olympics and in the Mt Hood area, with most areas receiving an additional 8 to 12 inches during the past 24 hours. Fortunately, much of the new snowfall has accumulated during a period of lowering freezing levels and this has helped to minimize the avalanche danger associated with the rapidly developing early season snowpack, with the lightest and lowest density snow near the snow surface and heavier higher density snow near the ground. Overall, this has resulted in a good stability profile early Saturday with recent avalanche control producing limited results. However, intermittently increased winds during recent fronts have produced some weak layers during periods of lighter wind speeds and some resultant soft slab formation near higher ridges, mostly above about 5 to 6000 feet where locally considerable danger may exist on steeper north through east exposures, especially those slopes having relatively smooth underlying ground surfaces. At lower elevations and along the Cascade east slopes, less wind, generally lower snowdepths and more terrain anchoring are helping to limit the danger increase. However, a moderate danger exists with generally smaller human triggered slabs possible on steep terrain having a smooth ground surface.

In all areas the next significant storm in the current series should spread over the region on Saturday, with light to moderate snow Saturday morning expected to increase and become moderate to heavy Saturday afternoon and evening along with generally increasing winds and a slight rise in freezing levels. This should result in generally increasing avalanche danger with expanding areas of considerable danger on north through east exposures above 5 to 6000 feet and an increasing moderate avalanche danger on other exposures and at lower elevations where further

human triggered soft slabs are possible in steep smooth terrain. As a result back country travelers should exercise increasing caution in steeper avalanche terrain on Saturday, use safe travel techniques, assess route selections wisely and perform stability tests often.

Moderate to heavy snowfall should slowly decrease later Saturday night and Sunday morning, with light to moderate showers, low freezing levels and decreasing winds expected Sunday afternoon into early Monday. While this weather should allow recent wind slabs to slowly settle and begin to stabilize, expected low temperatures and continued shower activity should make this a relatively slow process, with unstable wind slabs likely to persist in steep lee terrain, especially north through east exposures above 5 to 6000 feet. Hence travelers are urged to be avalanche aware, and objectively apply snowpack, terrain and weather factors to decisions about where, what and how to ski or ride the slope ahead.

This statement will be updated over the weekend as necessary. Regular daily forecasts are scheduled to begin Monday, November 7th 2005.

Have a safe and enjoyable fall and winter!

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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.

Moore/Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center