

Tahoe woman survives avalanche, 3 others die

By Mike Dunham, Anchorage Daily News

Elyse Saugstad of Squaw Valley was taking a break with several fellow skiers Sunday in the Washington state backcountry when the shouting began. "Elyse! Avalanche!"

The 33-year-old turned to see tons of snow boiling toward her.

"I pulled the trigger," she said, inflating two air bags attached to her backpack. The device is meant to keep skiers and adventurers from disappearing beneath waves of snow in an avalanche.

It likely saved her life, said Saugstad, who was hurled half a mile down the slope.

"(It was) like being in a washing machine," she said.

Saugstad came to a stop buried in densely packed snow. Only her face and hands were free.

"The snow was like cement," said Saugstad, who worried a second avalanche might follow. Only later did she learn that the body of one her companions was buried a few away.

In all, the avalanche had swallowed three other skiers. Saugstad, a professional downhill skier who grew up in Girdwood, was the only one of the four wearing the air bag backpack – and the only one to emerge alive.

On Monday, the Dimond High graduate and prize-winning freestyle skier told the Daily News that she was in a group of eight experienced skiers who opted to descend through a backcountry section near the boundary of the Stevens Pass ski area northeast of Seattle. Another group of five followed

them.

“We weren’t being idiots,” she said. “We understood the dangers and followed all the safety protocols. We went one at a time, moving section to section, ping-ponging our way down the hill.

“Several of us had stopped in a safety zone among some old growth trees,” she said.

Hundred-year-old trees are usually a good indicator that the area is avalanche-free.

“Unfortunately, the freak accident happened,” she said. “One of the skiers (above me) set off the avalanche.”

Saugstad managed to pull the lever to deploy the air bags as the snow hit. The ABS TwinBag backpack, made by a German company and available in Europe for the past 15 years, has two bags on either side connected to canisters of compressed nitrogen. In an emergency, the gas fills the pillow-shaped bags, which act somewhat like water wings.

“The idea is that it’s keeping you up on the top of the avalanche,” Saugstad said.

She didn’t feel the bags inflate as the avalanche caught her, she said. “I wasn’t even sure they were deployed.”

She estimated that it was a Class 3 avalanche, which the Avalanche Center website says can destroy a small building and snap trees. Saugstad called it “huge.”

She came to a stop an estimated 2,000 feet or more from where she was first caught in the slide. Her face and her hands, wrapped in pink mittens, poked above the packed snow. The air bags formed a “cocoon” around her head and neck. Her feet were about five feet below the surface and she was unable to move.

“It’s very frightening,” she said. “I was trying to remain

calm, but after a while I thought: 'Hmm. Maybe I should scream for help.'"

Ten minutes after being swept away in the snow, the first rescuer reached her. At that point Saugstad wasn't worried, except for the fear that a secondary avalanche – or even a third – might follow.

As the rescue continued, she realized how close she was to death. Literally.

"One victim was buried three feet to my left," she said. "Another was 30 feet above me."

The *Seattle Times* identified the dead skiers as Stevens Pass marketing director Chris Rudolph, Jim Jack, head judge for the Freeskiing World Tour, and John Brenan, a Leavenworth contractor.