

Increase in backcountry skiing leads to more avalanches, deaths

By Denis Cuff, Contra Costa Times

Christopher Rudolph was skiing his mountain turf with other expert skiers. It was a route he knew well on an ungroomed slope near the Washington ski resort where he worked.

They had avalanche rescue gear, avalanche safety training, and their group included a professional ski racer, a former ski patrol member and a judge for two international extreme skiing organizations.

Their preparation for last month's outing fell tragically short, though, when their skis broke loose a 3-foot-thick slab of snow, killing Rudolph, a 30-year-old former Lafayette resident, and two others in the nation's deadliest avalanche of the winter.

It was a tragic reminder of America's struggle with avalanches, killers of an average of 25 people per winter over the past decade – about triple the total of the 1960s – as more people ski backcountry areas away from the safety of groomed resort slopes.

This year's odd snow patterns may have increased avalanche dangers, experts say; and more snow is expected across the West this week.

Already, 27 people have been killed in avalanches this season.

Improvements in ski and snowmobile equipment have made it easier for skiers to climb higher and descend more sharply in their quest for untouched snow.

“The new equipment is opening up more access to the backcountry to more people,” said Andy Anderson, an avalanche forecaster at Sierra Avalanche Center in Truckee. “You have some very good skiers being able

to operate in more challenging terrains, but I’m concerned the ability to evaluate the risk is not keeping up with people’s ability to go to these places.”

Many novices haven’t had avalanche safety training to help them recognize warning signs of unstable snow, such as changes in temperature and wind, experts said.

“Snow conditions can change rapidly,” said Randall Osterhuber, an avalanche safety instructor and hydrology researcher at UC Berkeley’s Central Sierra snow laboratory. “And every day the snow is different.”

Neither Osterhuber nor Anderson investigated last month’s triple tragedy in Washington. Anderson, however, noted research suggests even experienced skiers can become complacent about risks.

“Avalanches don’t care who you are or how much training you have,” he said. “They strike with awesome force.”

Avalanche rescue gear has improved, but it’s aimed at finding buried victims faster – not preventing them from being caught in a slide.

Rudolph had talked with his dad about the risk of backcountry skiing about two weeks before the Feb. 19 tragedy near the Stevens Pass Ski Area, where Rudolph worked as marketing director.

Rudolph had learned to ski before he was 3 and was known for his love of the outdoors and loyalty to friends. He became an Eagle Scout with Troop 204 in Lafayette.

A year ago, he was shaken by the avalanche death of a close

friend and skiing companion.

“We talked about his friend’s death,” his father, Bill Rudolph, said in a recent phone interview from his South Lake Tahoe home. “Chris felt he had it under control. He told me, ‘Dad, that will never happen to me.’ ”

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