

Opinion: Dangers on slopes can be manmade

By Dick Penniman

Have you ever hit a tree while skiing? It doesn't take much to imagine what it feels like. It hurts, but worse ... it can kill you. That's why most skiers and snowboarders stay on open, groomed trails.



What about hitting a lift tower, a signpost or a snowmaking gun? Is it the same as hitting a tree? The answer is "No!" These are "manmade" structures scattered along the groomed trails, and they are usually made of steel. Clearly, a 3-inch steel pipe can cause more serious injuries than a 3-inch sapling.

And what about those brightly colored mats used by most resorts. Do they offer adequate protection? Again, the answer is "No!" In California, there are no laws or regulations requiring resorts to pad or protect anything. The 3-inch to 4-inch mats most resorts use on lift towers are far too thin to offer any protection beyond collisions of just a few miles per hour. These mats look like pads but barely protect the obstacles, themselves, from getting scratched.

Why pad anything? Shouldn't we just steer clear of obstacles? We've all seen the cartoons that show a character flattened upright against a tree with arms and legs wrapped around it. They always get up and walk away. But that's in the cartoons and not the way collisions happen in real life. Nearly all collisions with fixed obstacles result from sliding into the object after a simple fall on icy snow. It's not funny and, tragically, real people often can't get up and walk away.

Kids are particularly at risk because:

- They go fast, fall more often and don't have as much control over where and how they fall. Teach your child to ski or ride slower, particularly when it's icy.
- They are not very aware of their surroundings. Teach your child to steer clear of every fixed object on the slopes, even if they look like they're padded. I've seen kids intentionally run into padded lift towers thinking it would be funny because they would just bounce off. Sadly, they learned a "hard" lesson.

In addition, check if your favorite resorts are doing anything seriously to reduce collision injuries. Review the California Mountain Resort Safety Report online. The report includes an assessment of almost every California resort and gives you information that will help you compare them and decide which resort is best for you and your family.

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