

# Respect for Mother Nature helps ensure safe snow experience

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

Snow – so beautiful, so tempting, so dangerous.

Drawn by its sparkling presence, thousands of outdoor enthusiasts will trek to the Sierra Nevada this season to experience snow's magic.

But with more than 16 feet of snow at many resorts so far, this season already has had tragic reminders that the mountains must be respected at all times.

An experienced snowboarder at Donner Ski Ranch and a ski patrol member at Alpine Meadows were killed in separate Christmas Eve avalanches. Earlier in December, a stranded motorist died in deep snow near Burnside Lake while trying to reach help.

“Mother Nature always calls the shots,” said Lel Tone, a longtime ski patrol member at Squaw Valley. “We do our very, very best and work hard to keep people safe, but there can be really hazardous conditions.”

The death of Bill Foster, a 53-year-old ski patrol veteran, hit home for many working in the industry. He was caught up in an intentional avalanche – triggered by explosives as a safety measure – that started higher and wider than expected.

According to reports, Foster had proper safety equipment. Rescuers found him just one minute after the avalanche and pulled him free in under eight minutes, but he did not survive massive injuries from the crushing snow.

“It’s so incredibly sad to lose a fellow ski patrol member,” Tone said. “It’s such a painful thing.”

Recently, Tone led a women’s avalanche clinic at Squaw Valley to help prepare fellow skiers for such dangers. Such safety education has become as important a part of snow sports as gloves and sunscreen. Several ski areas will host events this month as part of National Safety Week. Squaw Valley and other resorts also host free avalanche workshops. So do guide and gear companies. Some schools – such as Sierra College in Rocklin – offer snow-related safety courses, too.

“Safety – it’s something you can’t just say once,” said Troy Hawks, spokesman for the National Ski Areas Association. “You need to repeat the message in every form and fashion.”

Constant safety reminders nudge snow lovers to think before they swoosh.

“The No. 1 rule of our code of responsibility is ‘Always stay in control,’” Hawks said. “That means stay focused. That’s why there are safety reminders everywhere.”

Marking its 50th anniversary this winter, the NSAA has focused on basic safety initiatives such as helmets. Efforts have paid off. Two-thirds of all skiers wear helmets, Hawks said. Among children age 9 and under, 91 percent wear helmets while skiing or boarding.

Awareness of changing conditions can also play a role in staying safe. Roads can quickly become icy. Cars can become stuck or buried in snow.

“You’ve got to be really respectful of the weather at all times,” said Mary Bennington, executive director of the Tahoe Rim Trail Association. “It can change in a hurry.”

On Jan. 12, the Tahoe Rim Trail Association will host National Winter Trails Day at Tahoe Meadows with several safety

clinics. Demonstrations include survival equipment and techniques such as avalanche beacons and building of a snow shelter. Geared for the whole family, the event also will have guided snowshoe hikes.

“We want people to be safe,” Bennington said. “People come up – not for skiing, but just to play in the snow. We see so many people come up here for a snow day totally unprepared.”

If your vehicle does become stranded, Bennington suggests that you stay put.

“Rescuers will spot your car before they see you,” said Bennington, who carries emergency supplies in her car including warm clothes, food, water and a blanket.

Timing is everything; that includes snow safety. Sunny, windy days after heavy snowstorms can unleash an avalanche.

“When you have those conditions, layers develop in the snow and it can set up for avalanches,” Bennington said. “It’s like little ball bearings between the layers. It can come down in a hurry.”

Avalanches killed 34 people in the United States last winter. About 90 percent of victims triggered the avalanche. Three out of four avalanche victims suffocate. The other 25 percent are crushed to death by snow.

“Fresh snow can look light and airy, but when it compacts, it’s very heavy,” Bennington said. “After an avalanche, it solidifies.”

Every second counts in snow survival. According to a recent study, the survival rate for individuals completely buried in an avalanche is about 40 percent after 15 minutes. Those survival odds drop to 25 percent after 30 minutes.

Those same survival figures can be applied to snow-immersion accidents such as slipping into a “tree well,” an area of

loose snow around the trunk of a tree that's otherwise enveloped in deep snow. Branches keep snow from accumulating close to the trunk, but create a treacherous hole.

Depending on the surrounding snowpack, tree wells can be 20 feet deep. Their victims often fall into these icy traps head first. According to another study, 90 percent of skiers or snowboarders who fall into tree wells can't free themselves.

"Tree wells can be particularly treacherous for snowboarders," Hawks said. "They can't release their equipment and they're upside down."

Since 1990, 15 people have died in California from tree well accidents at ski areas, more than any other state. Most of these accidents happen in late morning as skiers and boarders – looking for fresh snow – edge closer to the trees. And experts warn not to count on a cellphone to call for help if you're in trouble; coverage is spotty at best in most mountain areas. And that phone may be in a pocket you can't reach.

Instead, make sure to always stay in visual contact with a partner – never lose sight.

"It's the old buddy system," Bennington said. "Always have a partner."