

Young skiers draw closer after death of friends in avalanche

By Pat Graham, AP

Erik Arvidsson and four of his ski team buddies crammed onto the tiny podium in Sochi, Russia. He was the newly crowned world junior downhill champion, yet they all celebrated as if they earned a piece of the gold medal.

They laughed. They held up their index fingers to announce, "We're No. 1." They posed for picture after picture.

Only something was painfully missing from the scene: Bryce Astle and Ronnie Berlack, two skiing prospects who were killed in an avalanche in Soelden, Austria, in January 2015.

Arvidsson also was caught in the slide that day and escaped. So did Drew Duffy and Addison Dvoracek.

Why them? It's a question they're making peace with through the support of Astle's and Berlack's parents. Their coaches and teammates, too.

A tragedy has bonded this young squad – the next generation of American racers – even tighter together.

"Every day, when I look at a course or the hill, I find something that I know one of those two guys would be psyched about," said Arvidsson, 19, who won the world junior downhill title last week on the same venue as the 2014 Sochi Games. "We've been through something traumatic together. We lean on each other. We hold each other up."

It remains difficult for Arvidsson to talk about the avalanche. For a harrowing moment, he was stuck in the path of

the rushing snow. Somehow, he was able to make it off to the side.

All the support has helped.

“It’s definitely still a struggle,” said Arvidsson, who’s from the San Francisco area and grew up skiing in Squaw Valley and Bear Valley. “But their parents were like, ‘Guys, I know this is hard and this feels hard, but I definitely promise you that to live out their legacy is to keep going every day.’”

“I think about them in every moment. I think about them when I’m skiing. I think about them when I’m hanging out with my friends. I think about them when I’m (racing). That makes me happy and hopefully that makes Bryce and Ronnie happy.”

This is how much Astle and Berlack mean to this team: They were named to the squad this season. During a ceremony in November, family and friends gathered in Copper Mountain, Colorado, to remember the talented duo. Berlack’s ashes were spread along the course at Copper’s speed center.

They told stories – lots of stories. Some were skiing related (“Ronnie was sure of what he wanted and he wasn’t afraid of talking about it,” Arvidsson said), but most were a stroll down memory lane (Olympic and slalom world champion Mikaela Shiffrin recalled Berlack giving her a rainbow-colored hair tie as a Secret Santa gift).

To honor his friend, Dvoracek wears a necklace with a pendant containing some of Astle’s ashes. Arvidsson has stickers with the initials “BA” and “RB” plastered on his ski helmet (“Every single time I put on my helmet, I look at that,” he said).

And Duffy had a teammate paint the initials on the front of his helmet, along with the slogan “Fly On.” The back of the helmet features the tongue and lips logo of the Rolling Stones, Berlack’s favorite band. Next to it is Astle’s favorite mantra: “Good vibes only.”

Duffy was given a jacket by Berlack's father that Berlack used to wear featuring the Rolling Stones logo. Duffy wore it on the podium when he won the super-G at the U.S. Alpine championships last spring.

"Two summers ago, we were all really close – just a good group to hang out with," said Duffy, 20, of Warren, Vermont. "We were friends in training, friends just hanging out. After January of last year, it was tough for all of us. But it brought us together."

The tight-knit crew also includes Sam Morse and Patrick Kenney, along with Kipling Weisel and newcomer Florian Szwebel. They do quite a bit together, from dinners to mountain biking to pickup basketball games to playing hockey.

Recently, the group was in Lake Placid, New York, for a NorAm race and checked out the rink where Team USA memorably upset the Soviet Union on its way to a gold medal at the 1980 Winter Olympics.

The closeness of Mike Eruzione & Co. inspired them. The racers carried that sort of camaraderie with them to Sochi for the junior world ski championships. For inspiration going into the downhill race, they played an audio clip of coach Herb Brooks' speech before the "Miracle on Ice" game.

Arvidsson went out and captured downhill gold. It was part of a banner day for the Americans, who placed four in the top 10 – the first time that's happened for the U.S. at world juniors.

"Since the passing of Ronnie and Bryce, I've spent a lot of time with this group," U.S. men's coach Sasha Rearick said. "They push each other. They joke around. They challenge each other. It's one of the coolest groups I've ever had a chance to be around.

"I'm very encouraged with their ability to bounce back from

such a tragedy.”

Whether it's in the starting gate or just enjoying a day on the slopes, Arvidsson constantly thinks about Astle and Berlack. Same with Duffy.

“I know that those guys would want us all to keep doing what we're doing – go fast every day,” Duffy said. “That's what they would've done. That's what they would've wanted us to do.”