

# Avalanche prep key to surviving the elements



Sierra Avalanche President Todd Offenbacher shows off avalanche beacons on Oct. 15. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

**By Jessie Marchesseau**

“You can know everything there is to know about snow, but if you don’t make good decisions, that doesn’t do you any good,” said Mike Ferrari, patrol director for Mt. Rose and board member of the American Avalanche Association.

Making good decisions was a predominant theme throughout the California Avalanche Workshop at Lake Tahoe Community College this month. Now in its third year, the annual workshop is a one-day event designed to educate snow industry professionals

as well as backcountry enthusiasts about avalanche safety. It also serves as a networking opportunity for people who love snow.

Sierra Avalanche Center Director Todd Offenbacher called the CAW invaluable, and said it's the best service available to the local snow and winter sports community.

Presentations from professional skiers opened and closed the day with South Shore local Hazel Birnbaum kicking off the event by sharing her personal experience being caught in an avalanche at last year's Freeride World Tour competition in Fieberbrunn, Austria. Her story emphasized that just because you are at a resort, or someone else tells you an area is safe, doesn't necessarily mean it is.

As the day progressed, Steve Reynaud from the Sierra Avalanche Center gave a recap of last year's snow and avalanche season. Nate Greenberg, president of the Eastern Sierra Avalanche Center in Mammoth, shared his own backcountry experiences and hindsight lessons before offering a preview of an upcoming backcountry app designed to help users apply avalanche forecasts to make better decisions about ski terrain.

SAC forecasters Brandon Schwartz & Andy Anderson recapped the most significant lessons of the recent weeklong International Snow Science Workshop in Colorado. And Alex Taran, founder of the South American Beacon Project, talked about the need for more avalanche education in the mountains of South America.



Abe Greenspan of TahoeLab talked gear with skiers and snowboarders at the California Avalanche Workshop. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

To wrap up the afternoon, professional big mountain skier Cody Townsend introduced the crowd to the concept of the “normalization of deviance” and how it applies to snow safety. What it comes down to is this: when we do something dangerous without catastrophic results, the behavior begins to seem normal, even though the danger has not dissipated. This can lead to a habit of bad decision making or pushing limits too far. The end result is often disastrous. Luckily, Townsend recognized and corrected these habits in his own skiing before a disaster happened, and he encouraged listeners to do the same.

This was an eye-opening idea for Jason Champion, a mountain guide from Truckee, attending the workshop for the first time. Like many others, he felt the overall emphasis of the day was on good decision making while in the mountains. He was glad to hear the presenters voicing the importance of this and of communication within groups. In the end, Champion said he hopes it will result in fewer fatalities in the mountains.

But backcountry skiing almost always involves an inherent amount of risk. After his presentation, Townsend was asked how he balances good decision making with conquering new and difficult terrain, he responded: "It's all about timing. There's a time and a place for everything in the mountains, you just have to wait for it."

The workshop featured eight speakers divided up into four sessions. Short breaks in between allowed attendees a chance to converse, make new contacts and check out tables featuring info, representatives and gear from Sierra Avalanche Center, TahoeLab boards, Mammut and the American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education.

Workshop organizer David Reichel, who is also the wilderness education coordinator at LTCC, said the personal connections people make in between presentations are equally as important as the information offered by the speakers. These are relationships attendees will follow up on later, when ski season is here, and they're headed out into the backcountry.