



Safety— On the Slopes

Contributed by Gene Fulkerson

The information that follows bears repeating. This year has already seen record amounts of snow and colder temperatures with avalanches and tree well accidents.

⇒ Objective Hazards

There are hazards you cannot control, that are inherent in Alpine skiing and boarding. Avalanches, sudden weather changes, falling rocks, tree wells, seracs and crevasses are all examples of objective hazards.

You cannot eliminate an objective danger, but you can take steps to minimize the risk they pose to you. For example, the avalanche report can tell you what faces to avoid and the weather report can tell you whether or not it is a good day to attempt the peak you are hoping to ski from.

⇒ Subjective Hazards

These are the dangers you can control and that we bring with us when we hit the slopes—on or off piste. These include the skill level of the group, physical condition of the group

and peer pressure. Though certain avalanche accidents seem to happen out of nowhere, most of the time there are warning signs. It is the skier's responsibility to recognize these signs and to exercise good judgment.

You are much safer when you're armed with the proper knowledge of snow safety, weather, orientation and first aid.

⇒ Knowledge & Experience

This subjective danger is directly associated with knowledge and experience. It is important to realistically assess your ability and comfort levels, and to choose terrain and conditions that are appropriate to those levels.

Maybe you are comfortable on a steep face with fresh snow, but will you be able to navigate it if the weather changes and you lose visibility (which you may have known would happen if you had checked the weather report).

Will you feel comfortable in the tight crux of a couloir (which you would have seen if you had looked at a map or researched your run ahead of time)?



Often seen at ski resorts is a trail of skiers and borders walking to higher terrain or to venture out of bounds to get untracked powder.

Be honest with the group, and with yourself, because you not only endanger yourself, but everyone with you.

⇒ Fitness

Skiing off-piste often takes a greater level of fitness than you need to ride the established ski runs. The snow conditions may be variable and require more energy, and you may need to hike or traverse to get back to the ski area, or to a village or road.

If you are not adequately fit, you put yourself in danger of injury, and could also put your group at risk by keeping them in terrain exposed to objective hazards longer than expected. ■

Avalanche Program

Snow avalanches are such a prominent hazard in the mountain environment that the national ski patrol has developed a separate curriculum for avalanche safety and rescue. The rule is simple: An avalanche rescue must occur within minutes. The probability of a live rescue drops to less than half after the victim has been buried for 30 minutes.

Know your snow
Strong layers on top of weak layers is the perfect recipe for slab avalanches.

The Danger Zone
35° - 45°

30 Minutes to Save a Life
The risk of dying in an avalanche increases double within the first 30 minutes.

Tree Well Danger

Beacon
Shovel
Probe