

Why Avalanches Should Be Reported

By Eric Knoff

The winter of 2009/10 was the busiest season the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center has had in its twenty years of operation - 87 avalanche incidents were reported in southwest Montana. The incidents reported included 21 people caught, 9 partial burials, 3 full burials and 3 fatalities, but this is, unfortunately, not the full picture. Inherently, many avalanche events were never reported to the forecast center.

The fact that many avalanche events go unreported is flat-out scary to avalanche professionals. In a survey performed by the West Central Avalanche Center in Missoula, one question asked was "Have you ever been caught in an avalanche or been part of a group when someone was caught in an avalanche?" Roughly 26% of those polled answered yes. In a follow up question, the center asked, "Did you report the avalanche (to ski patrol, sheriff's department, avalanche center, other)?" Close to half of those polled answered no.

Why then is reporting an avalanche incident, even if no physical harm has been done, so important?

Many times it takes an unfortunate event such as an injury, fatality or close call to spur individuals to report an avalanche incident. Even if an avalanche incident did not involve a person being caught, the information about the occurrence is valuable. A key reason for this is that the information helps avalanche professionals, educators and the public understand what is happening in the backcountry.

Gathering facts from a specific avalanche incident - including factors such as avalanche size, weather, snowpack, aspect, elevation, group size, burial or non-burial, rescue gear used and rescue time - helps paint a picture that can be analyzed, helping to shed light on both how and why an incident occurred.

From an avalanche forecasting standpoint, recent avalanche activity allows avalanche forecasters to make a more accurate avalanche forecast. Without first

hand reports of avalanche activity by backcountry riders, the cumulative information that avalanche centers have available to disseminate to the public becomes more limited, and thus provides less input for accurate forecasting.

It is important that all backcountry users groups know what the current avalanche conditions are when venturing into the backcountry. It is regrettable that individuals could become caught, be injured or even die in an avalanche because participants in a recent avalanche incident decided that reporting their experience was either embarrassing or of low priority. Sharing of avalanche incident information can greatly help other riders, from beginner to expert, to better assess current conditions and make decisions that could help to avoid such unfortunate scenarios.

The more avalanches that get reported the more informed backcountry users become. Avalanche education is the best tool available for saving lives if an incident does occur. Contacting your local avalanche center in the wake of an avalanche event is a key step in the distribution of this valuable information.

