

Rescue Party account of
Hatcher Pass Avalanche on Bald Mountain Ridge
19 March 2011

Avalanche Summary for Hatcher Pass: Saturday March 19th, 2011. I am not an avalanche expert but believe it to be a slab avalanche AS D3 R5 G (in low points). My group of 3 witnessed the event from just about start to finish. The slide occurred on the southeast aspect of Bald Mountain Ridge (otherwise known as Hatch Peak). We were making our last run of the day and planned to ski down and out on the northern aspect. Our continued hike up the ridge put us in a position to see the slide. It was the end of the day and although the Ridge started out with at least three other parties in the area, none were visible at the time of the slide and we were clearly the only ones in a position to respond.

I was the first to see the avalanche. In a calm matter I just noted it. Avalanche. Not unlike so many others I had seen before. I knew we were beyond any possible reach of the slide. It moved like a wet slab but I am not sure if there was that much moisture. Then you could see them. One skier trapped in the slide and headed down towards the gully. He was moving very quickly and went out of site as soon as he entered the gully. Immediately after we saw the second skier trapped in the slide and rolling along a mostly scoured slope, behind most of the snow. From my vantage point, this second skier stopped right before the transition between the visible terrain and the area obscured by rollovers and other terrain changes. After he came to a stop, he crawled/slid several hundred feet down slope in search of his partner and stopped at the transition between the open slope and the entrance to a terrain trap. We all knew that this second skier must be injured because he didn't get up and start responding. My friend called out the time: 4:15pm. We took a minute to review our options and determine the safest way to reach the victims. The fastest route was to ski straight across from our location on the ridge over to the accident. However, this meant we would ski

several hundred feet of open terrain on the same angle and aspect with gullies below; and we were not comfortable with this. The ridge would take precious time, but would allow us to ski down the bed surface of the avalanche path. We choose to continue up the ridge to get a better view of the terrain. Once there, we again choose to continue up the ridge, but decided that one member should return back down the ridge for help. As a group we decided that Eric and I should go on the rescue because he is the strongest at shoveling and I have medical training and the most recent avalanche rescue training. Before leaving, Lori gave us her extra clothing and we checked our radios. It took us a half hour plus to get from our initial location to the first victim, safely. Finding a safe route was the hardest part of the process.

From the start of the incident we could hear the cries for help, but never knew if the injured party heard us and understood we knew he was there. Once on top, we chose to go down an obvious ridge to skiers right and cut left onto the slope face. This is a very commonly skied route and we were familiar with the immediate terrain. We knew at some point we were going to have to ski on the same aspect as the slide. Once descending this new ridge, it was clear that the party we were on our way to help had also taken this path. We skied next to their tracks and then exited the ridge and dropped onto the face where they skied. To drop onto the main slope there was a fair sized rollover to cross, which the skiers had skied over, and then the crown. At the base of this rollover you turned right to ski down the face. At this point we were slightly below what we believe was their line. From our perspective, this terrain change looked to be the trigger point. The slide propagated way up the slope behind the skiers. My partner noticed a ski and pole were visible slightly above us on the other side of the slope. The crown looked to be 3-4 feet, but as we were headed down we didn't get close enough to measure. However, it was apparent that parts of the crown lower down contained two very obvious layers. We reached the injured party and I stayed behind to help stabilize him and transfer clothing, radios and

liquids. He indicated a broken leg and dislocated knee, but would not permit any examination. He was very concerned about his ski partner at that point and although we wanted to help him, he really wanted us to find his friend. I left my radio with him so that we had contact throughout the rest of the rescue.

My partner immediately started a beacon search down the gully and I joined him after stabilizing the injured skier and felt comfortable leaving him alone. When I met up with my ski partner he had gotten a detection on the transceiver from the buried skier and was doing a fine search. I confirmed I too had my lowest reads in the teens. Probing yielded nothing and we chose to dig down several feet and try again. Our reads got lower, but still no probe strikes. We continued this cycle until we had what we thought was a probe strike. We choose to leave the probe in and continue digging as its end eventually came to eye level. My friend accidentally impaled his eye with the probe but suffered only minor injury. In the end, we dug 15 feet down and got our lowest beacon read of 2.5. Before we reached the victim the rescue coordinators had reached the site by helicopter and chose to evacuate us from the scene so that we would not be caught in additional avalanche activity that might be caused by the arrival of the pave hawk helicopter, brought in to hoist the injured victim to safety.

The third member of our party, Lori, quickly reached the parking lot and learned several people immediately called for help. Using our radios, she was able to communicate with us throughout the incident and relay relevant information to the authorities and rescue teams. It is important to note that it took about 4 hours for the injured party to be evacuated from the mountain. Even though we were close to civilization and emergency units were almost immediately activated, it takes time for coordinators to assess a scene and decide how to get an injured party off the mountain. Our small hand held radios helped a great deal.

Observations from the day: It was a clear warm spring day. We had our tee-shirts on when traveling up hill. On the way up from our first run we saw several brand new skier triggered very small avalanches that occurred on a similar aspect to the incident. At this point in the day the upper layer (4-5 inches) was easily sliding on the lower layer. We performed on-the-fly ski cut tests, but didn't have pit data. We did note an earlier party dug one that morning and didn't fill it in. _

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