

Reflections on a near-miss avalanche in Alaska
Friday, March 4th

Me and three friends went sled skiing up Nick's Happy Valley all day. Had an amazing day, we skied a line off the Berlin Wall, everything was great. The snow was perfect, light Chugach Powder. I played around a bunch on my snowmachine; slope testing, high marking, and side hilling multiple aspects and elevations: got no movement or any signs of instability. At the end of the day we did three laps on the big open face to the lookers left of Nicks. I brought my snow machine down it 6 or 7 times. I was making big open "S" turns the entire way down. The snow was very soft with very light wind affect. I was getting face shots on my machine.

Saturday, March 5th

Me and the same three friends went back around 3PM with the intention to go up Gully 1 instead of Nicks, an adjacent, but similar gully. I went up Gully 1 by myself real quick to see what it was like, and just check it out as they waiting in the parking lot for me. I got really freaked out by a couple large crevasses that were not open there last spring, so I decided to go back to the parking lot and we went for plan B that was to go back to Nicks. There was a bunch of people out that day, and a couple riders in the parking lot approached me and started bragging about how they were killing it that day and how the snow is great and stable. I took what they said with a grain of salt because I knew they were not from the area. Also the clouds were in and out making the light sub par, which also turned me off about being out in the mountains. I had friends in from Anchorage who really wanted to keep going so I felt pressured to continue on. We doubled to the bottom of Nicks and I was with my girlfriend and I didn't want to tell my friends from Anchorage but I told her these exact words, "If it were up to me, I'd call it right now" I didn't like the light, I didn't like the big crevasse I just saw in Gully 1, I didn't like the bragging snowmachiners in the parking lot, and I was pretty tired from the day before. We decided to do one run and re-evaluate after that. We got up to the top of the lookers left face, the exact same face we were riding the previous day. I noticed there was about 2" of fresh snow, which kind of surprised me, but I didn't think it was enough to dramatically change the conditions. I told my friends to wait there and I'd take my machine down before they skied, not even thinking to have one of them spot me. I dropped in towards the face, and the fresh snow started getting a little deeper from wind transport. I was like, "Wow, this is actually really good." I was following my sled track from the day before, and as I came over the first big roll over, my old track disappeared and there was probably a foot of fresh wind transported snow. I made about 7 or 8 big "S" turns, face shots and all, it was amazing. As I came over the second roll over about half way down the slope I thought my sluff was catching up to me or something cause everything was moving. I got a freaked out and jumped off my sled cause I didn't want to wreck and hurt myself. That moment I realized it was more than a sluff and I was in a decent sized avalanche. I went to pull my trigger, which I thought was sort of unnecessary at the moment. I hadn't even pulled my trigger out of my pack, so I couldn't deploy it. I tried digging my feet and hands into

the snow to stop myself but I was overpowered. I tumbled probably 7 or 8 times, and smacked my head really hard as I was tumbling, and broke the visor on my helmet. I started getting sucked under the snow and thought that I was going to get fully buried and even the thought of death crossed my mind. I was getting fully ragdolled and tossed around with no idea which way was up or down. It surprised me how fast I was moving. As I could feel the snow start to slow down I got oriented somehow and kicked swam and fought my way to the top. It literally felt like being in a river. I somehow ended up on top about half way buried, and some other friends on machines near by, not in our party heard and saw/heard the whole thing happen. One of them blasted over to me and helped me get out. I gave him a big hug and said I'm so happy to be alive and okay. My machine was buried up to the handle bars, oriented down hill, it didn't even flip or anything according to the witnesses. I got it sorta unburied and got it out of there, rushing back up to my friends to tell them we are calling it a day.

Looking back - I didn't listen to the red flags because they weren't obvious ones, but they were present and I just didn't feel good about the day because of them.

Red Flags:

1. I really scared myself and lost confidence seeing those big crevasses up Gully 1.
2. The guys in the parking lot bragging to me about how they were killing it - it was a super busy day on the Pass.
3. The light was sub par.
4. We all were very tired from a great day Friday.

Although they are not normal red flags you see in the mountains, it was just one thing after another leading me to want to go home. I even told my girlfriend, "If it were up to me, I'd call it right now." And literally less than 10 minutes later, my life was flashing before my eyes as I was in the biggest avalanche I've ever been caught in. Very surreal and humbling experience. Listen to your gut and practice with your avy gear, I never thought it would be me!



Photo taken less than two hours after.



Photo taken the day after.