



Avalanche, Hypothermia – Fatigue, Exceeding Abilities, Failure to Follow Route

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Ypsilon Mountain

David Laurienti (43) and Lisa Foster (45) were caught in an avalanche on the evening of March 17 while descending from Ypsilon Mountain (13,514 feet). The pair had departed from the Lawn Lakes trailhead at 3:15 a.m. on the morning of March 16 with the intent of climbing Ypsilon via the Blitzen Ridge route and descending Donner Ridge to the south. Blitzen Ridge is a technical mountaineering route (Grade II, 5.4 to 5.7) with numerous sections of fifth-class climbing.

The party arrived at the start of the crux technical section (the Four Aces) at approximately 9:45 a.m. They spent the rest of the day on the 16th negotiating this technical section in winter conditions, and finished the Fourth Ace around 7 p.m. Given that they were moving slower than anticipated, and with darkness imminent, they discussed descending a northeast-facing couloir just west of the Fourth Ace into the Fay Lakes drainage. They elected not to descend here due to concerns about avalanche conditions and wind loading in the couloir, and instead opted to continue toward the summit and less technical terrain.

They continued their ascent at 7:30 p.m. and climbed through the night of March 16, getting off route due to darkness. They veered into more technical terrain to the north of Blitzen Ridge, which further slowed their progress. By dawn of March 17, they were still making their way toward the summit. They crossed the Northeast Couloir, north of Blitzen Ridge, below the upper wind-loaded slopes, and climbed to a notch in the ridge about 200 vertical feet below the summit of Ypsilon Mountain around 5 p.m. on the 17th.

At their high point (13,300 feet), David was exhibiting obvious signs of fatigue and mild hypothermia. They discussed the hazardous avalanche conditions, but their predicament led them to conclude that descending the Northeast Couloir was the best option at the time. They began their retreat via that route. Because they had a 60-meter rope and a light alpine rack, they couldn't rappel all of the rocky technical terrain. The climbers stayed roped together, using their entire length of rope. They simul-climbed down the right side of the couloir, with Lisa in the lead and placing rock protection into the adjacent rock face.

The pair was approximately halfway down the narrow portion of the couloir when a soft wind slab released above David. It is unclear whether he triggered the slide from below or if it released naturally from wind-loading, but given the start zone and the position of the climbers at the time of the avalanche, wind-loading was suspected. There were two pieces of protection in place (a nut and 0.75 Camalot) at this time. Both climbers took a violent fall of approximately 100 feet, hitting rocks and ice on the way down. The Camalot arrested their fall, with David coming to rest about 30 feet above Lisa. (The nut pulled loose and was dangling from the rope after the avalanche.) The majority of the avalanche debris ran by the climbers and cemented the rope into place, rendering it irretrievable. David indicated that he was not injured, but the coroner's report later indicated he had minor injuries. Lisa sustained broken ribs, a torn MCL, a broken coccyx, and damage to her wrist ligaments.

The two descended the lower portion of the couloir, with David walking in crampons and Lisa walking in crampons until she changed into snowshoes on the lower snow ramp. By this time darkness had fallen again. They walked approximately 1/4 mile from the bottom of the couloir. Lisa changed back to crampons to descend two small ice steps. They walked most of the way down a snow slope before

David was no longer able to travel. His level of consciousness had begun to deteriorate rapidly during this quarter-mile walk. Lisa positioned David in as sheltered and as comfortable position as possible, and then both of them spent the night on the snow slope. Lisa reported that David became unresponsive around 8:30 p.m.

Lisa departed the scene at dawn on the morning of March 18, and after walking a couple of miles she encountered National Park Service search and rescue members just above and northeast of Ypsilon Lake. Search and rescue provided emergency medical care and facilitated her transport back to the trailhead. NPS search and rescue members and a Colorado Avalanche Information Center forecaster went in to locate David on the morning of March 19, and found him on the snow slope beneath the ice steps. The official cause of death as determined by the coroner was hypothermia. Lisa's survival is impressive and improbable given the length of time exposed to brutal weather conditions and the extent of her injuries. (Source: Colorado Avalanche Information Center.)

Analysis

It seems that the biggest contributor to this fatality was not the avalanche per se, but the climbers' inability to traverse the technical portions of the ridge quickly enough. Blitzen Ridge is long even in ideal summer conditions, and in winter conditions it can be very committing. It would have been more prudent to descend, given the length of time it took the climbers to pass the Four Aces. Alternatively, if they were determined to summit, they should have carried bivy gear and a stove so that they could refuel, recharge, and summit and descend safely. (Source: Joe Forrester.)

Images



Ypsilon Mountain, with Northeast Couloir marked. The Four Aces are the rock spires at left.



A close up view of the Northeast Couloir. Northeast facing slopes are particularly prone to wind loading.

Article Details

Author	Colorado Avalanche Information Center
Publication	ANAM
Volume	10
Issue	67
Page	53
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Accident reports