



AAC Publications

Large Group Caught in Slide

Washington, Silver Basin (Crystal Mountain)

On the morning of Saturday, December 11, the first major winter storm of the season was impacting the Cascades. Until this point, thin snow cover had limited back-country recreation opportunities. A group of six ski tourers decided to travel in the Silver Basin area of Crystal Mountain ski resort due to its generally good early season coverage and easy access. Weather stations at the ski area recorded 11 inches of new snow on Friday night, with an additional five inches falling on Saturday. Wind speeds averaged 40–50 mph, with a gust up to 90 mph recorded during the storm. The Silver Basin area of the resort was not yet open, and ski patrol had not conducted any avalanche mitigation work for the season. As a result, the basin contained a “backcountry” snowpack.

The group left the parking lot and ascended the approved uphill travel route through a section of the open ski resort. As they neared Silver Basin, the group broke trail, staying within the ski area boundary. Members of the team noted the stormy weather, including continued snowfall and blowing snow. While the group may have noticed these possible signs of unstable snow, they did not discuss them during a short break near the bottom of the basin. Instead, they decided to continue ascending toward a prominent low point in the ridgeline called Silver Saddle.

The party traveled close together as they continued to break trail across a long ascending traverse. About 250 feet shy of the saddle, members of the team reported seeing cracking and felt “the snow change.” They immediately switchbacked, hoping to find a location near some rocks to transition for the ski down. It was at this moment that the slope released. All members of the group were immediately caught in the moving torrent of snow. The avalanche failed about 200 feet above their heads, was nearly 600 feet wide, and ran 650 vertical feet.

Three members of the team were carried 250 feet downhill and deposited close together. Skiers 1 and 3 were only partially buried and able to quickly free themselves. Skier 3 immediately called 911 and was patched through to Crystal Mountain ski patrol. Skier 2 was located, fully buried, and was found not breathing but with a pulse. After the other skiers cleared his airway and rolled Skier 2 on his side, he began to breathe.

The other three members of the team were carried further down the slope, past a small treed knoll, and deposited in a scattered group. Even though he traveled to near the toe of the debris, Skier 6 was mostly on the surface and was able to begin searching for his teammates. He rapidly located and uncovered Skier 5. A nearby party that witnessed the event also responded. Witness 1 quickly located Skier 4 with his beacon and probe. Skier 4 had been carried through a stand of small trees, over a short cliff, and was buried under about a foot of debris. Witness 1 immediately noticed obvious signs of trauma. After clearing the airway, he began performing CPR. Unfortunately, Skier 4 did not respond to any of these interventions. Eventually all members of the party decided to retreat to a safer location due to the ongoing storm. Ski patrol and other rescuers responded to the scene and assisted the remainder of party back to the trailhead.

ANALYSIS

Accidents like this provide several learning outcomes. Much of this information was collected through post-accident interviews between involved parties and the Northwest Avalanche Center. We appreciate these individuals sharing their story so others can learn from this tragedy.

While all members of the party reportedly checked the avalanche forecast for Saturday, the selection of Silver Basin was based on coverage and early season ski quality instead of potential avalanche conditions. This factor may have been compounded by lack of familiarity with the terrain. Many members of the team had been to the area, but only once or twice. Only one individual had significant experience traveling in Silver Basin. This resulted in that person becoming the de facto leader. While not their intent, having only one member of the group familiar with the terrain significantly changed the team's decision-making process. As mentioned above, several individuals noticed the ongoing storm and possible signs of unstable snow, but they continued onward despite these concerns.

While ascending toward the saddle, and well within the start zone of the avalanche path, the group was traveling very close together. This travel technique may have better enabled communication among the large team, especially in the stormy weather, but it also exposed all members to the hazard simultaneously. As a result, all six teammates were caught and carried in the avalanche. It is only by a matter of luck that at least some of the group remained on the surface, uninjured and able to assist in the rescue.

One bright spot in these events was the quick and effective rescue of two fully buried teammates. This emphasizes the potential for well-practiced and executed avalanche rescue to save lives. The team and responding witnesses should be commended for these quick actions. It also highlights the impact of terrain traps on fatal outcomes. While all members of the group were caught and carried, the sole fatality was a result of traumatic injuries inflicted by traveling through trees and over rocks.

(Source: Northwest Avalanche Center.)

Download the avalanche center report.

Images



Silver Basin on the day of a slide that caught six skiers and killed one of them. The avalanche broke widely near the rim of the basin and ran 650 vertical feet.

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