

EDUCATION

AVALANCHE

Educate yourself about the backcountry dangers

Recent openings of ski resorts, excursions into the backcountry and onset of winter require education to leave the traditional classroom and move into the world of avalanches. Both adults and kids of all ages should take advantage of opportunities to learn about avalanche hazards and how to deal with them.

The basic definition of a snow avalanche is "a mass of snow, ice, and debris; flowing and sliding rapidly down a steep slope." They typically occur in higher elevations of mountainous terrain when steep slopes accumulate heavy amounts of snow. Instability of snow pack causes a sudden release that causes a speedy downward movement in a specified avalanche track and/or over a vast area. Aside from being destructive, avalanches can reach speeds up to 200 miles an hour.

Sonic booms, shouts, machine noises, in addition to human activities, such as skiing, have the potential of triggering avalanches. The path of an avalanche is comprised of a starting zone, a track and run out zone. Slopes of an average grade of 30 to 45 degrees are the most frequent start zone, but can also occur on slopes less than 30 degrees as a result of highly unstable snow due to warming trends, unusual wind conditions and heavy snowfalls. These starting zones are just the range in which most dangerous avalanches occur, meaning slopes outside of these ranges are not necessarily free from avalanche danger. Let it be known that the entire path of an avalanche, including the track and run out zone, will happen on an average grade or slope milder than the starting zone.

By Vicki Isacowitz



ON THE CHALKBOARD

Courses spreading awareness and knowledge of avalanche safety are offered across the country. The American Institute of Avalanche Rescue and Education (AIARE) is a non-profit organization specializing in raising consciousness "to enhance public safety through high quality training." The United States lacked a recognized curriculum for avalanche education. As a result, AIARE, a group of avalanche experts, came into existence with the intent of developing and creating a standardized curriculum.

Their main goal is to "provide avalanche instructors with the tools to educate students about the knowledge and decision making skills necessary to travel in avalanche terrain." The primary objective of AIARE involves the increase in avalanche knowledge and safety through awareness and education. Within the parameters of the American Institute of Avalanche Rescue and Education, three levels of coursework are offered. Each level addresses issues of various complexities.

Level One course is most popular, focusing on the phenomenon, terrain, decision making, and rescue of avalanches. Students learn the following topics: types of avalanches, characteristics of, an

introduction to how they form and release, terrain, the planning, preparing and techniques of travel, decision making and rescue. Visit AIARE's Web site at www.avtraining.org for more information about their courses and training.

Local mountains and shops offer training and education in avalanche awareness. Starting in late December, Squaw Valley Ski Patrol offers free beacon classes every Friday night, beginning at 5:30 p.m. at the ski patrol shack. This Saturday, Dec. 10, is the 14th Annual Winter Solstice Snow Gods Ball, put on by Squaw Valley Ski Patrol to raise money for their Avalanche Education Fund. Doors open at 8 p.m. in Squaw Valley Olympic House, housing Olympic Plaza Bar and Bar One. Tickets are \$15 in advance from a Squaw Valley Ski Patroller and \$20 at the door for those who are 21 and over. Support avalanche awareness and training by attending this local event.

For more information about the beacon classes or this weekend's fundraiser, contact Squaw Valley Ski Patrol at (530) 583-6985.

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