**Survivor: Deadly avalanche a 'horror story'**

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SEATTLE (AP) - When the snow broke loose, a group of expert skiers who watched in horror as a large avalanche swept their friends down a steep slope in Washington state immediately turned on their emergency beacons and began searching for signs of life.

Powder Magazine senior editor John Stifter, who witnessed the slide that killed three of his skiing companions Sunday, said one person made it through by bear-hugging a tree and holding on as the snow barreled over him. Another skier who was caught in the slide was saved when she deployed an airbag, designed to keep her afloat.

"It's an absolute horror story," Stifter said Monday. Experts say once an avalanche has you in its grips, the chances of surviving are slim.

"The snow doesn't really care how experienced you are, it's not keeping track of experience level," said Mark Moore, an avalanche meteorologist and director of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center, whose forecasts are must-reads for backcountry enthusiasts. "Once you're in an avalanche, it has you at its mercy."

The skiers were equipped with safety devices and kept track of each other as they strayed beyond the boundaries of the popular Stevens Pass Ski resort, about 90 miles northeast of Seattle. But the precautions still didn't save some from getting trapped, highlighting the risks of backcountry activity during a season of heightened avalanche dangers in the West.

"They had all their avalanche gear on, all their safety equipment. They were doing the right practices. But apparently one of the skiers triggered the avalanche, and the people below it got swept down," said John Gifford, the ski area's general manager.

Stifter, who skied with the group, identified the victims as Jim Jack, head judge for the Freeskiing World Tour; Stevens Pass marketing director Chris Rudolph; and Johnny Brenan, a Leavenworth contractor.

"They had a passion for life, for sure, and they loved the mountains," said a friend who did not wish to be identified. "They just led the way and smiled. And you saw their smiles, and you wanted to smile like that. They were magnets for love and for people."

"It's been a tough day," he said Monday. "A lot of sorrow, a lot of shock of what's happening - disbelief - because these people were all expert backcountry skiers. They'd done this hundreds of times without any issues."

Sunday's avalanche was relatively large, said Moore. The Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center rated Sunday's avalanche danger as considerable to high. Heavy snow had fallen in the Cascades on Saturday with widespread avalanches and strong winds, all red flags, Moore said.

"Most of our avalanches here are storm-related, so we get most of our avalanche activity during or immediately after a storm," Moore said. "It's very sad to have accidents like this happen. No matter how good the snow is, you still have to be objective about risk," he said.

Statistics show that 93 percent of avalanche victims can be recovered alive if dug out within 15 minutes, but the numbers drop fast, according to the Utah Avalanche Center. After 45 minutes, only 20 to 30 percent of victims are alive. After two hours, few survive. People die because their carbon dioxide builds up in the snow around their mouth and they quickly die from carbon dioxide poisoning.

The Tunnel Creek canyon - where a snowboarder died in an avalanche last year - is not managed by the neighboring ski resort, so no avalanche control work such as bombing to release slides is not done. The lift from the ski resorts takes adventurers to that out-of-bounds area, often called sidecountry.

Stifter said he and Jack skied in the resort until about 11:15 a.m. Sunday when they met up with Rudolph. Stifter was in Washington state on an assignment, but this "was just a fun run with friends."

He said he read the avalanche report that morning, and knew avalanche dangers were considerable. He said and others talked about it and determined they could ski it safely. Jack and Rudolph had both skied the area countless times, he said.

Three of the 15 peeled off and went a different direction. Twelve others headed down, pairing up and skiing one by one, leapfrogging each other.

Each carried shovels and avalanche probes and wore avalanche beacons, a standard rescue device that allows rescuers to locate the signal of a victim if buried. The transceiver worn by the victim sends out a frequency that others can use to locate that signal.

He says once the avalanche swept one of the skiers, Jim Jack, down the mountain, he and four others who were still above it turned on their beacons and began searching for signals from their companions.

"We immediately pulled out our transceivers, designated a leader and spaced out 30 feet, zig-zagging all the way down," Stifter said. "We realized it was a massive funnel. It just flushed all the way down. We didn't get a signal until 3,000 feet down."

His beacon read: 2.1, which meant someone was buried at least six feet deep. Stifter and others immediately began digging in one area. They found Rudolph face down. Stifter performed CPR for about 30 minutes to no avail. Another group worked on digging out Brenan and Jack.

Professional skier Elyse Saugstad, who deployed an airbag, told NBC's "Today Show" she's convinced the airbag she deployed immediately - which carried in a backpack and deployed by a lever on the skier's chest - saved her life.

"It's lifting you kind of up above the avalanche," Saugstad said Monday. "It's not like you're taking an inner tube ride down some snowy field ... It feels like you're in a washing machine."

Only Saugstad had an airbag, said Stifter. Airbags range from about $600 to $1,000. They have been widely used in Europe with reports of high survival rates, but they have become popular in the U.S. only recently.An avalanche beacon, shovel and probe are among the mandatory rescue items for those heading into the backcountry, but the best way is to avoid avalanches entirely, experts say.

"There are all of these technological things that will help us, but they're not a talisman that you can wave at the snowpack. You can't wave your beacon or your airbag at the snowpack. It's not going to make you safe. It's going to help you when get in trouble. You take the stuff with you, but you don't rely on them to extend your risk," Moore said.

Experts have said the risk of additional slides in the region could remain high all season, and they attribute the dangers in part to a weak base layer of snow caused by a dry winter.

Meanwhile, increasing numbers of skiers, snowboarders, snowmobilers and snowshoers are heading into the backcountry, lured by the promise of fresh power, solitude away from crowds and better turns.

"People need to look at the avalanche forecast. When it's considerable or above, if you don't know what you're doing, don't go," said Benj Wadsworth, executive director of the Friends of the Northwest Weather and Avalanche Center, a non-profit that works with the center to promote avalanche education and safety. "If you do go, make sure you take a class. To go out there without some level of avalanche education, I think it's crazy."