

Snow Line

JANUARY
1997

The Official Newsletter of the Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team, Inc.
Lake Tahoe · Truckee · Donner Summit

⚡ ⚡ **Next General Meeting is Monday, January 6, 1997, 7:00 pm at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut** ⚡ ⚡

Downed Aircraft

On December 7 (a stormy day over the Sierra Nevada) a small airplane left Novato, CA enroute to Truckee. The pilot reported (in an emergency transmission) that the plane's wings were beginning to ice as he approached the Sierra crest. Oakland Airport and Beale AFB (Sacramento) were both monitoring the flight but then lost the plane from RADAR somewhere north of French Meadows Reservoir. The pilot was the plane's only occupant. On December 13 eight Nordic Team searchers — Allyson Barnes, Andy Butcher, Bryan Devore, Jim Granger, Ray O'Brien, Scoop Remenih, Peter Sporleder, and Steve Twomey — spent the day combing sections 34 and 35 (T 16 N, R 14 E) in search of the plane. The ground searchers were assisted in the afternoon by two helicopters and a fixed-wing aircraft. On December 14 Placer County fielded no less than 60 volunteer ground searchers, continuing the effort. At approximately 11:00 am, two Placer County deputies discovered the downed aircraft north of Talbot campground. The pilot did not survive.

The Snowy Torrent

A broken ankle, a broken ski, running out of gas, frostbite, hypothermia, exhaustion, hibernating bears, verglased rockbands, swift-water crossings, getting lost, losing your car keys, losing your job — these are but a few of the real dangers that Nordic Team searchers have faced during search and rescues of the past. There is, however, a greater threat that is almost ever-present in the winter backcountry: The snow avalanche. After 20 seasons of searches in the Tahoe Sierra, the snow avalanche continues to be the biggest and baddest danger facing the skiers, snowmobilers, and snowcat drivers of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team.

The tales of skirting avalanches during our searches are many and harrowing: massive wet slabs avalanching through the deep folds of Onion Creek; a weak snow layer a square kilometer in extent collapsing on Mt. Rose; the A-1 chutes burying Highway 89; cracks propagating through the upper Whiskey Creek drainage at the speed of sound; Don Starbard "clearing the cirque" below the east face of Mt. Lincoln. All these and more have occurred at night, during heavy weather, and in near zero-zero visibility. A combination of skill, experience, impeccable timing, voodoo route finding, well-placed hand-charges, and a large dollop of luck have pulled our searchers through (mostly) unscathed. But when a field of snow decides to move, luck can be a thin sheath behind which to hide.

Snow avalanches are not just a phenomenon that rake the great ice faces of Tibet. They occur most everywhere you have snow on a steep slope. At Lake Tahoe we have lots of snow and many a steep slope.

Consider a parcel of snow two meters wide, three meters long, a half meter deep. This is a tiny piece of any mountain (that is unless you're skiing Donner Ski Ranch), but on any "average" day in January this

piece of snow will possess about 13 times the mass of you. If this patch of snow moves it can knock you down. If it can knock you down it can bury you. If it can bury you it can kill you. Simply stated: A skier is best avoiding even the smallest of avalanches.

Herein lies the trick — how to be a skier and avoid burial in the snow. The most obvious solution is to learn the techniques of identifying which snows are most likely to avalanche. Where and how do you learn this stuff? Multi-day field and classroom seminars, books, videos, discussions with local ski patrols. And most importantly: spending lots of time digging into and poking around the snowpack. The process of collecting this information is relatively straightforward. The proper interpretation of this information can be complex. Nevertheless, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the snowpack should be an ongoing exercise for every participant of any Nordic Team search or training. And this exercise should be practiced constantly, all through the winter. The snowpack is a highly dynamic medium, so investigating its stability is not something you do "once."

As the membership of the

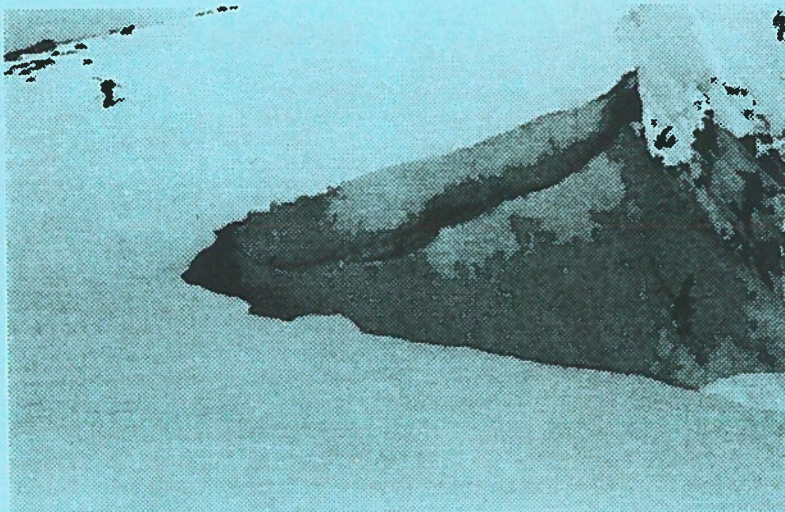
Nordic Team grows, so does the number of participants on the trainings. This means a greater exposure — in both length of time and number of people — to steep and potentially avalancheable snow. Two skiers can travel around and through avalanche terrain relatively quickly. But a party of 20 skiers — not an uncommon number of participants on the more popular Nordic Team trainings — may take 30 minutes or more to cross a suspect slope. As a group, as a Team, on trainings or searches, we have to be extra sharp out there.

Tools Of The Trade

Up until the day when we can predict avalanches without fault (never), we must travel the backcountry with the tools of avalanche rescue. A beacon, a probe, and a shovel are necessary for *all skiers* to carry *all the time*. Because the prediction of avalanches is not an exact science, we have to be prepared and trained in case of an accident. The rescue tools I carry are predominantly for rescuing you; your beacon, shovel, and probe are for rescuing me. This symbiotic relation has an unspoken implication. It is my responsibility to you to be as skilled in the operation of beacon, probe, and shovel as possible. And I, in turn, expect the same of my ski partners.

Be careful not to let a fancy new avalanche transceiver beeping happily away on your chest make you cocky. Transceivers, shovels, and probes have nothing to do with snow avalanches. If we have to use these for a rescue a terrible mistake has already been made. You should practice with your beacon until you're fast and confident in its

Over, please...



On his way to The Cedars via Granite Chief, Thunder Mountain, Needle Peak, Three Coyotes, and Lyon Peak, Team member Steve Matson skis a large cornice above National Geographic Bowl.

photo r.osterhuber

operation. Keep practicing to maintain/improve that speed. I will do the same.

It's Been A Year? No Way!

Way. The last of the monthly Gar Woods wine tastings benefiting Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was held December 12. The tastings, held once per month starting January 25, 1996, raised precious funds for the Team. Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team would like to thank all the staff at Gar Woods Grill and Pier for their hard work and generosity. Thanks everyone!

Selected Equipment Short Stories

The new Nordic Team truck has its new utility bed attached and a fresh coat of paint; it looks mighty proud and bigger than ever. All the search equipment from the Toyota has been transferred to the big gray Ford with room to spare.

During the last couple of months, Tom Poole, the radio technician for Placer County, has donated a lot of time and effort to Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. Tom has reprogrammed all the Nordic Team's old and new hand-held radios, as well as installed dash-mounted radios in two of the snowcats and the new Nordic Team truck. What's more, he's been bringing back to life all the mountain-top radio repeaters in the area, several of which had fallen into disrepair. The Team's radio communication has never been better, thanks in a large part to Tom's efforts. Your work is much appreciated, Tom. Thank you!

Never afraid to accessorize, Snowcat Committee chair Scoop Remenih has been busy bolting a new search appliance to his snowcat. Scoop will soon have the ability to perforate the jet stream with a 2500 watt, 300,000,000 (no, that's not a typo) candlepower light source. This new light will be a subtle complement to his snowcat's diesel-locomotive air horn and military-grade parachute flares.

Education Committee Needs You

The Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team Education Committee will begin its education programs on January 7. The Education Committee, headed by Mona Treat, leads interactive lectures/demonstrations on all aspects of winter awareness for North Lake Tahoe and Truckee elementary school students. These programs are a lot of fun to do and require just a little effort from a lot of people. Please give Mona a call and schedule yourself to help out with this highly rewarding Team activity. Mona will also be signing up recruits at the January 6 Nordic Team general meeting. But if you can, please get a hold of her before then.

TNSAR Team Home Page

While you're veggin' out in front of your monitor, you might as well "visit our Web site" (it's become such a cliché to say that!), at <http://www.iwn.com/pcso/htmnordic>.

Nordic Team Trainings

Here's the training schedule for January. Things can always change, though. Changes to the training schedule will be announced at the general membership meeting. If you call Dirk or Peter they'll be able to give you more info on training particulars. For those of you who don't want to talk to anyone, Peter will e-mail you changes to the training schedule. Let him know your e-mail address. The Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team garage is located at 223 Fairway Drive, Tahoe City (behind the Tahoe City Chevron).

January 5: Terrain familiarization around Squaw Valley. Meet 8:00 am at the Nordic Team garage or 8:30 in front of the tram building in Squaw Valley.

January 11: Snow safety and avalanche rescue training. Meet 8:00 am at the Nordic Team garage.

January 19: A joint skier/snowmobiler training. Meet 9:00 am at the garage.

Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team Officers

President	Gerald Rockwell	588-5876
Vice President	Joe Pace	588-1806
Treasurer	Scott Schroepfer	546-2809
Secretary	Jackie Thomas	546-8592
Board Members	Dirk Schoonmaker	588-2929
	Steve Twomey	525-7280
	Medora Weiser	525-9248
	Chris Worcester	582-4648

Committee Chairs

Cuisine	Debra Schroepfer	546-2809
Dispatch	Medora Weiser	525-9248
Education	Mona Treat	581-5759
The Great Ski Race™	Douglas Read	588-6881
Newsletter	Randall Osterhuber	587-3082
Snowcats	Tony Remenih	588-1684
Snowmobiles	Ray O'Brien	581-4858
Training	Dirk Schoonmaker	588-2929
	Peter Sporleder	546-0588
Truck/Equipment	Jean Wernette	546-2238
Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team garage		581-4088
All phone numbers area code (916).		

Photograph scanned courtesy of Compass Art, Tahoe Vista, CA.

THE GREAT SKI RACE™, MARCH 2, 1997, 9:00 AM, SHARP!

Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team, Inc.

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