



SnowLine

The Official Newsletter of the
TAHOE NORDIC SEARCH & RESCUE TEAM, INC.
 Lake Tahoe • Truckee • Donner Summit

There have been many high points for the Nordic Team in the last month or so, and a few not so high points. But that's the rescue business, and that's the business that engages us. Please show your support for fellow Team members, Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team as a whole, and the community at large, by attending the next meeting of the Nordic Team, Monday night, April 4, 6:30 PM at Granlibakken's venerable Ski Hut. As always, the Team has much to discuss, much to celebrate, much to plan. Do be part of it.

Avalanche

At approximately 11:00 AM on February 20, Gerilyn Ewing, from Reno, triggered an avalanche on the north slope of Anderson Peak which caught, buried, and killed her. She was ascending the steep, heavily wind-loaded northeast bowl with two others when a slab, 30 to 100 cm deep, and at least 300 m wide, fractured. One of her companions was partially buried and able to free himself. He dug out the other companion who was completely buried except for one hand. Geri (to those who knew her) was carried far into the runout zone and dragged through a very dense stand of mature timber. When the slide stopped, she was buried a meter and half deep.

Geri and her friends were staying at the nearby Benson Hut, one of the shelters of the Sierra Club's wilderness hut system. Eight others were also staying at the hut, though they seemed to be operating (at least in part) independently. Immediately after the avalanche occurred, several, if not all (it remains unclear) of the other skiers staying at the hut responded. Though everyone at the scene was equipped with functioning avalanche transceivers, the ensuing search went with some difficulty.

Eventually, one of the responding skiers called the Sugar Bowl ski patrol on his cell phone, and the patrolman talked him through the transceiver search. Geri's body was located and uncovered approximately 45 minutes after the avalanche. She was dead, evidently due to severe blunt trauma (later listed as the official cause of death).

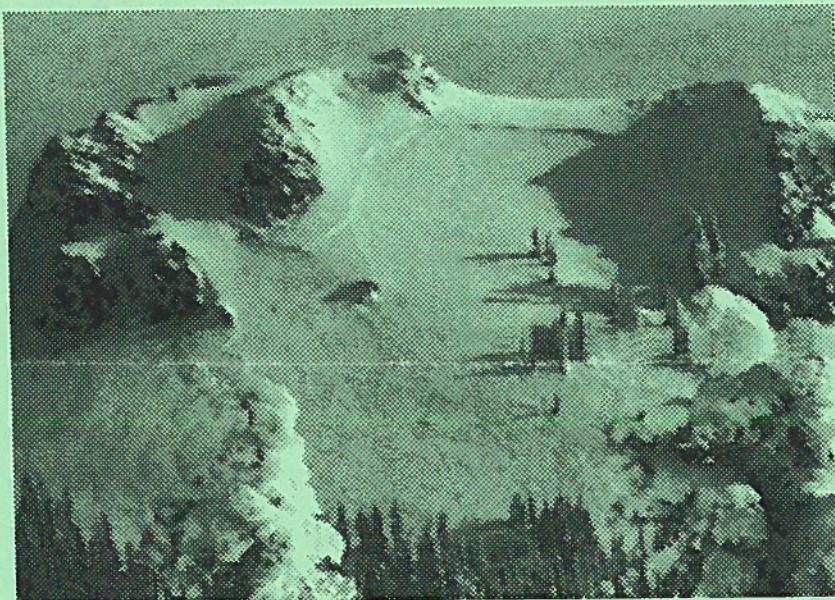
Since the late 1990s, this part of the Sierra Nevada has been averaging about one avalanche fatality per winter. As rescuers and avalanche practitioners, we feel the sadness and defeat associated with these accidents, primarily because the same mistakes are being repeated again and again and again.

From a snow stability standpoint, the morning of February 20 was special. Donner Summit had received as much as 60 cm of heavy, (densities $\geq 120 \text{ kg/m}^3$) new snow

brittle. I headed out about 8:30 that morning (leading an avalanche safety class), and skied all but 30 feet from my truck before I realized this day was unique. At least every other step would produce a meter-long shooting crack from my ski tip. Skiing through the full rage of the blizzard, I brought my class to the top of our first test slope to demonstrate ski cutting technique. I barely could get half a ski length onto the slope before a crack propagated all the way across and a 30 cm deep slab sloughed into the firs below. My class gave out a collective gasp. For the next hours it was the same drill: every large path around Mt. Judah had naturally avalanched (some more than once), and most the smaller paths too. You could not touch any loaded slope greater than about 27° without it fracturing. Several of the observed slabs were shearing on a highly volatile mix of *unrimed* needles and graupel.

That morning, from Independence Lake in the north to Tioga Pass in the south, there were at least 22 skiers involved in avalanche accidents. Several were completely buried; Gerilyn Ewing was the sole fatality. These incidents are especially frustrating because the signs of instability that morning were not subtle by any measure. They were widespread, extreme, and in-your-face. The fragile nature of the snowpack was spectacular, really. The skiers involved in accidents that day either did not possess the skills to recognize highly unstable snow, or they did recognize the signs but decided to ignore them.

That the transceiver search following the Anderson Peak slide was botched—"We blew it," as one of the party put it—most likely was not a factor in Geri's death, since it is unlikely she survived the slide. Two lessons here: 1.) You can never be



The crown face of the avalanche on the north face of Anderson Peak that killed Gerilyn Ewing on February 20. One tongue of the debris ran well into the trees (at photograph bottom center) where her body was recovered.

Photograph by Steve Twomey

overnight with SW crest winds topping 70 mph. As was the case for the snowfall during the previous eight days, much of the new snow crystals were heavily rimed, making highly cohesive slabs that were extremely

Next General Meeting is Monday, April 4, 2005, 6:30 pm at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut

too practiced in avalanche rescue. And this doesn't just mean being able to push the buttons on your transceiver. It means being able to manage the search scene in its entirety, and 2.) Avalanche transceivers do not keep you from suffocating or being severely broken in an avalanche. In fact, *transceivers have nothing to do with snow avalanches*. If you are making route finding decisions in the backcountry based on the fact that you and your party are equipped with beacons, you ought to step back and seriously consider the consequences of being avalanched.

At least 13 members of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team participated in the body recovery of Gerilyn Ewing. She was 45.

Missing Skier

At 6:30 PM on March 10, Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was called to look for a missing skier at Squaw Valley. The missing young woman's car was in the parking lot; her skis had been found on a groomed run near the Resort at Squaw Creek. 12 Team searchers searched until late that night with no success. The next morning, the Squaw Valley ski patrol located the woman's body in a tree well not far off a groomed run. She had apparently hit a tree while skiing off piste, losing both her skis in the fall. Someone had then found the skis and left them on the run.

These were the Team's sixth and seventh responses of the season.

G.S.R. 2005

Really, there was only one thing wrong with this year's Great Ski Race: it was such an enormous, overriding success, we effectively raised the bar to great new heights, producing an act that will be very hard to follow for next year's 30th Anniversary Great Ski Race!

Every facet of the race came into sharp focus this year, and the records fell faster than Gerald Ford approaching a podium. The weather, for which in all fairness we can't take too much responsibility, but will anyway—thank you, was California stellar: clear, calm, and just warm enough for a ski race.

The beautiful days sure pull the people outside, and the race field this year was a direct reflection. 1108 people registered for the race, with 1032 completing the course. Both these numbers are records. The last skier, Karen Rabak of Grass Valley, finished after 7 hours and 20 minutes—bless her angel heart. That may very well be a record time, but Karen wasn't the only record breaker. Brooke Baughman, of Ketchum, Idaho, captured her third win of the women's field of The Great Ski Race. Brooke, all blonde and red racer suit and alien sunglasses and speed, finished 31st overall, in a time of 1:14:03, a new female record for the ski course.

The long, circuitous route was primed for records that day. The made-to-order weather and immaculate grooming resulted in a 30 km carpet that was laser smooth and lightning fast, while never icy. The old Great Ski Race course record was beat by the top 8 finishers this year, all lead by Patrick Weaver of Bend, Oregon. Patrick claimed his third Great Ski

Race victory and crushed the old course record by more than 2 minutes, crossing the finish line after only 1:07:00.

Patrick is not only The Great Ski Race's fittest, fastest skier, he's a genuinely nice guy. Approachable, humble, and easy to talk to, Patrick is an exceptional ambassador for The Great Ski Race and the sport of cross country skiing. Watching the winning times decrease substantially over the past decade, I asked Patrick if he thought The Great Ski Race could ever be skied in under an hour. He squinted his eyes doubtfully, thought for a second, and said, sincerely, "In order to do it under an hour, you'd have to ski hard *the whole way*." [!]

March 6, the date of this year's race, was also the day of the opening ceremony of the Junior Olympics. Hosted by Donner Summit's Auburn Ski Club, the JOs are a week of Nordic ski competition among the most talented teenage skiers in the U.S. The Olympic torch traveled from Squaw Valley to the JO opening ceremony in Truckee via The Great Ski Race, carried by none other than our very own Great Ski Race cheerleaders, captained once again by the indefatigable JoJo Toepfner. Before being run to the downtown Truckee ceremony, you could find Great Ski Race cheerleader Laura Read at the race finish gently cradling the Olympic torch, handling it with the respect every valuable baby deserves.

Our most distant racers, Robert Blomquist and Markus Nilsson, traveled all the way from Nykarleby, Finland. Concerned that the course's altitude would adversely affect them (they live at 75 m elevation), they finished (no pun intended) in 9th and 13th place, respectively, overall. Those boys can ski!

As proof that not all us Nordic Team members are just squinty-eyed backcountry skiers moving at the speed-of-lichen, Jonathan Laine donned the skinny skis and was the first Team member across the finish line at 1:22:23. The second Team member to finish was Paul Cushing, at 1:24:14. Just an hour 29 minutes before, five minutes before the start gun went off, the entire race field, lined up and ready to go, sang "Happy Birthday" to Paul. Paul—emergency room nurse, astronomer, botanist, geologist, and all-around good guy—celebrated his 50th with 1107 of his closest friends.

Hey, I could go on and on. The timing, the food, the party, the band—everything went just great. But this year, more than ever, it was crystal clear that we can not and could not produce this race on our own. We received *substantial* support from Tahoe Cross Country Ski Area, Northstar-at-Tahoe, Washoe Medical Center, Tahoe Forest Hospital, Alpine Meadows Ski Area, Cottonwood Restaurant at Hilltop, and JARCO Commercial Real Estate. Thank you all—and everyone that supports The Great Ski Race—very much!

Training

In what may be the last scheduled training for the ski season (check out the Team meetings or website for updates), Jim Rienstra (546-7188) will lead a tour in the Mt. Rose area on **March 26**. Meet at the Team garage

(223 Fairway Drive in Tahoe City) at 7:00 AM, North Tahoe Beach at 7:30, or up on the Mt. Rose Highway at 8:00.

Sugar Bowl is treating active Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team members, and their immediate family, to a complimentary ski day, **April 9**. Please attend the **April 4** meeting for more details.

Best,

—Randall Osterhuber

Team Officers

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FBI

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