The 30th Anniversary of The Great Ski Race is upon us. And now all we need is snow! It’s February, it’s the Sierra Nevada, snow is more a certainty than an option. Right? Right. So it will snow. That’s my prediction, that’s my prophecy, that’s my guess. Hold me accountable, lay any and all blame on me, chase me down and flush me out. It will snow. Again and again and again. I’m confident. I’m wise. I’m responsible. I will deliver. Snow.

Monday night, February 27, 6:30 pm, at Granlibakken. That’s the when and the where of the next meeting of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. It’s our annual Great Ski Race organization meeting, and we need to, ahem, meet and organize. More than ever your help is needed, so please attend. I’ll see you there (unless it doesn’t snow).

Search? Rescue?

Escape! On the evening of January 25, Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was paged to look for five local backcountry skiers attempting to ski from Squaw Valley to Sugar Bowl.

Well after dark, the skiers had called the Placer County Sheriff’s office requesting help; they didn’t know where they were and were inadequately equipped for the trek. Riding a tired cell phone battery, they reported they were somewhere near Tinker Knob.

Under moderate weather and snow conditions, the route they were attempting is pretty much an all-day deal. It involves lots of ascending and descending, route-finding through and around corned avalanche terrain, and the most the route is on the crest ridge; you’re in the wind blasting the west side of your face for hours at a time. The five had left Squaw Valley at 1:00 pm under increasing wind and snow, and light precipitation.

The Team responded. As the Team snowed (carrying half a dozen Team skis) labored up the Cabin Creek drainage toward the crest, a phone call came in from the five lost folks. They had located the Sierra Club’s Benne Hut and were staying the night. No assistance needed. Our Team was called off; the snowcast spun a 180 and everyone went home to bed.

January 26 dawned windy, cold, and snowing, especially up high. Ring ring. Another call. Yes, it’s them again. With low visibility and stiff winds on the crest, the five are not confident they can find their way to Sugar Bowl, and once again request help.

This time, five Nordic Team skiers make their way to Sugar Bowl, get a lift up Mt. Lincoln, and start skiing south toward the Benson Hut in full conditions. They got that wind on the west side of their face all the way there, then guided the stranded five back to civilization—with the wind beating the other side of their face. All arrived back at Sugar Bowl by 4:00 pm.

This was the Team’s third response of the season.

FrankenLung II

In the last issue of SnowLine, I left you with a question about comparing avalanche transceivers to the Avalung. There are, of course, differences—but similarities too.

As I’ve preached here and abroad ad nauseam, an avalanche transceiver has nothing to do with snow avalanches, nor does an Avalung. They tell you nothing about the terrain you’re creeping into, about how the weather has been or is (and) affecting the snowpack, or how the snow is responding to that terrain and weather. John Dittli, a veteran climbing ranger and a guy I work with, always considered a transceiver a vehicle that makes “the body recovery easier.” That statement, I’m afraid, is a mordant mix of cynicism and hard truth.

I like numbers so here’s a couple: Of the past 100 people worldwide that have been completely buried in a snow avalanche while wearing a functioning transceiver, 50 have died. Considering that statistic has always been heavily skewed toward survival (by ski patrol personnel; they’re more likely to be buried, and always have functioning transceivers with trained rescuers at the ready), a 50 percent success rate may be the best bet going. Dittli’s statement gains some traction.

At rescue practices, and at ski area training sessions within hard-wired “beacon basins,” impressive 3 or sub 3 minute find-times are routinely recorded. But in the real world of avalanche rescue, the average burial time for someone wearing a beacon still hovers on the far side of 20 minutes. The size and complexity of avalanche terrain, the frenzy of an accident, and the time needed to dig deep holes in the snow with the toy shovels we carry, all contribute to relatively long burial times. Very few buried skiers are recovered in 3 minutes.

People die in avalanches because of severe trauma, suffocation, or both. A transceiver protects you from these by decreasing search time. An Avalung protects you from these by buying time. Transceivers provide no physical barrier, this is where the Avalung differs. In just the right circumstance, it can provide a physical barrier against suffocation—at least for a short time. How short—or long—that time is is unknown. The number of avalanchers using Avalungs is so small that there is not yet a mathematically sound statistic. But whatever the survival number is, it’s greater than zero. And for me, that’s the trump card.

Unlike an Avalung, avalanche transceivers are a symbiotic rescue link between you and your partner(s). My transceiver is a tool that could save myself and my ski partner. The Avalung is much more of a purely selfish device. There’ll be no buddy-blowing underneath the snowpack on this dive.

I’m under no illusions (well, actually, I’m under plenty of other illusions) about the limitations of the Avalung. There are many more reasons why they won’t make a difference than why they will. And I am hyper-aware about not making route finding decisions in the backcountry based on the fact that myself or my partners are wearing active—or passive—rescue devices.

The odds are small, but still, why would anyone ski without an Avalung? Weight? Cost? The FrankenLung’s (see the Feb 2006 issue of SnowLine) curb weight is 187 grams and it costs $125. 187 grams is 187 grams. Until gravitational acceleration changes, that won’t. And 125 dollars? It seems suspiciously conspiratorial that as backcountry skiers everything we carry costs 125 dollars (free-heel...
bindings, shovels + probes, fleece jackets, climbing skins, backpack, Gore-tex pants, GPSs, etc.). Hey, it’s only money (gulp!), right?

Avalanche science, awareness, and rescue have come a long way in the past 50 years. The ultimate question however, Specifically when and where will an avalanche occur? remains unanswered. So until we shape that solution, we’ll have to ski around with all this stuff that costs 125 dollars. Pay attention to those ephemeral snows, my friend, ‘cause you’re worth gold.

**The Schedg**

Following is a calendar of events upcoming for Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. Before attending a training (the Nordic Team garage is located at 223 Fairway Drive in Tahoe City, behind the Chevron station), make sure you have a current OES card and remember to call the training organizer to let them know to expect you.

You don’t need an OES card to help with the Great Ski Race, of course. Just volunteer! Even with our sizable pool of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team members and community volunteers, we came up short-handed for a couple of the race events last year. Don’t assume that the race jobs are handled. Most every facet of the race needs more people. You! Please come out and support the Team by helping make the 30th Great Ski Race the best ever.

**February 18.** If snow and weather conditions permit, Joe Pace (583-1806) will be leading a ski of Dick’s Peak in Desolation Wilderness today. Meet at the Team garage at 7:30 AM.

**February 26.** Sarah Lagano (775-745-7037) is coordinating an inbounds/out of bounds tour of the Mt. Rose ski area. We haven’t conducted a search from this ski area for a while now, all the more reason to show up and get reacquainted with the terrain on the far side of the ski area boundary. We’re meeting at the garage at 7:30 AM or in the ski area parking lot at 8:15.

**February 27.** The next meeting of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team — which is the Great Ski Race organization meeting — 6:30 PM at Granlibakken. There are a lot of last minute details to hammer into shape before race weekend, so please attend this meeting and volunteer your time. If you can’t make the meeting, make sure to contact someone on the race organizing committee to find out how you can help.

**March 2.** The Great Ski Race racer bag stuffin’, 5:00 PM at Tahoe Cross Country Ski Area. We need a small army of people to stuff the racer goodie bags and fold and organize 1200 T-shirts. With lots of help all this will take about an hour and a half. Please be there! Bring duct tape, sharpie pens, and box cutters.

**March 5.** The 30th Anniversary of The Great Ski Race, 9:00 AM — SHARP! at Tahoe XC. Everyone working the race this morning (bag trucks, parking, start line setup, registration, etc) should be at Tahoe XC — early!

Here’s to the Year of the Dog.
— Randall Osterhuber

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- **President:** Russ Viehmann 525-6978
- **Vice President:** Brian York 581-4038
- **Treasurer:** Scott Schroeper 546-2809
- **Secretary:** Sue Dunsen 412-3836
- **Board Members:**
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  - Sarah Lagano 775-745-7037
  - Bernie Mellor 546-2238
  - Dirk Schoonmaker 583-2929

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- **Joe Pace:** 583-1806
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- **Dispatch:** Jackie Thomas 587-2687
- **Education:** Jim Coffey 583-1276
- **Equipment:** Brian York 581-4038
- **Great Ski Race:** Doug Read 583-6381
- **Newsletter:** Randall Osterhuber 546-4491
- **Snowcats:** Scoop Remenh 583-1806
- **Snowmobiles:** Ray O'Brien 581-4358
- **Technology:** Gerald Rockwell 583-5376
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- **Truck:** Mike Kennedy 581-2101
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![Image of The Village at Sugar Bowl]

*It was inevitable.*

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**MARK JOHNSON**

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**Please keep us informed of your correct address!**