

The Rules of the Game - safety and strategy in avalanche terrain.



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The day dawns cold and clear with a foot of fresh snow and the promise of incredible powder riding. At the trailhead, the surrounding landscape sparkles like a field of diamonds and the anticipation of a magical day in the mountains builds.

Sled covers are hastily removed and the machines are fired up - the smell of exhaust fills the air. Feeling confident about preparations, members of the group do a quick gear check and then hop on their machines, pinning their throttles towards the backcountry and a day of powder riding.

This will be a day to remember - but will it be because you made the right or the wrong decisions?

When heading into the backcountry it is easy to overlook or bypass simple procedures that could prove to be the difference between life and death. Using an avalanche safety checklist and reviewing it before every ride is an easy way to stay on top of your game - and the snow.

At the top of the list is reading the current avalanche advisory for the area you plan to ride in. Discussing this information and what is currently happening with snow and weather conditions will help you and your group make informed decisions about the day's riding agenda.

Next on the list is a simple gear check - make sure that everyone's avalanche transceiver, shovel and probe are in working order. One critical and often neglected check is the battery life of transceivers - check yours every time you turn your transceiver on. Making sure that transceivers are capable of both transmitting and receiving signals properly is also essential.

Once in avalanche terrain, each rider should follow the three basic rules of backcountry travel. Rule number one - everyone carries rescue gear. This includes a quality shovel, probe and transceiver for every rider. Rescue gear is to be carried on your person, not on your sled.

Rule number two - only introduce one rider at a time. This means multiple riders do not hill climb simultaneously. This also means that it is unwise to ride up to help a stuck companion. Unfortunately this advice is often unheeded - if all riders followed this rule it would significantly reduce the number of avalanche fatalities.

Rule number three - watch your partners from a safe location. Safe zones are not always obvious - avalanches can break wider and run farther than one might expect. A good rule of thumb is to never park in avalanche run out zones. It is not uncommon for a rider to trigger an avalanche and escape unharmed while observers in the path are injured and sometimes killed. The Big Iron Shootout on Boulder Mountain in British Columbia, where two people died and scores were injured, is a poignant example.

No matter what the conditions, the best way to avoid avalanches is to combine avalanche awareness education and good backcountry protocol. By taking an avalanche class, being knowledgeable about current conditions and following the three simple rules of backcountry travel (carrying rescue gear, one at a time, watch from a safe spot) riders can do their part to make it an enjoyable and positively memorable season.

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