

Snow Line

FEBRUARY
1997

The Official Newsletter of the Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team, Inc.

Lake Tahoe · Truckee · Donner Summit

✈ ✈ **Next General Meeting is Monday, February 3, 1997, 7:00 pm at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut** ✈ ✈

Dead-eye Dick

Radio traffic...

SCOOP: RO, this is Scoop, do you read me?

RANDALL: Go ahead Scoop.

SCOOP [*slightly excited*]: RO, I've spotted a blue jacket here. What color jacket is this guy supposed to be wearing?

RANDALL: He was reported to be wearing a turquoise jacket, Scoop.

SCOOP: RO, I've spotted a turquoise jacket here...

These radio transmissions came at the end of the search, and the start of the rescue, in what was to be the first in a long line of searches for the Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team. The following is a summary — with minimum hyperbole — of six search and rescues the Nordic Team responded to between December 22, 1996 and January 5, 1997.

Cotton Tries To Kill

John Wells, 22, of Incline Village, hiked away from the Mt. Rose Highway (at Tahoe Meadows) with overnight gear the afternoon of December 20 with the intention of pitching his tent under a tree to "contemplate life and think." The snow surface was old and hard and the walking easy. A storm started that afternoon which would drop more than six feet of new snow over the next 48 hours. John made camp in the falling snow and awoke the next morning to a collapsed tent and the blizzard running full throttle. It had snowed three feet overnight. He gathered his gear and in poor visibility started breaking trail back toward the highway. Or so he thought. He in fact began wallowing toward the SE, about 110 degrees the wrong direction. Exhausted after several hours and covering only a quarter mile, he decided to make camp but could not repitch his tent. He crawled inside it — sans poles — bivy-sac style. But before he hunkered down for his second night he had the wits about him to tie some colorful clothing to trees surrounding his bivy. (This clothing is what Team member Scoop Remenih spotted the next morning (December 22) from his snowcat.) It snowed an additional three feet that night; John became buried alive in his soggy tent canopy. When the Team found John, he was very wet and very cold. All four cotton layers of his clothing were completely soaked through. He had minor frostbite on one foot and eight fingers. His body temperature, measured orally, was 92°F. John was transported to Lake Tahoe Medical Center; he was released later that afternoon.

Cotton Kills

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was next called out at 2:00 A.M., December 23. James Augustino, 48, and his son Harley, 18, both from San Francisco, had gone for a day-ski on December 20 and had not been heard from since. Their two cars were discovered on Donner Summit buried under six feet of new snow. With little more than the cars' location as a clue, 10 Nordic Team skiers and one Team snowcat began searching the Castle Valley area. The terrain was fat with new snow. After several

hours of searching, the skiers had found no evidence of the Augustinos. It was then that Team skiers Doug Read and Steve Matson decided to peel off from the main search effort — concentrated in Castle Valley — and began skiing and searching the Lower Castle Creek drainage. As the afternoon wore on, the now three-day-old storm subsided and visibility became excellent. Two helicopters were called in to assist with the search. At 2:30 P.M., a CHP helicopter spotted Harley skiing down the Lower Castle Creek drainage about 20 minutes ahead of Doug and Steve. Harley was rescued by the helicopter and informed the medic on board that his father had died earlier that day. Doug and Steve, assisted by an Air National Guard helicopter, located and recovered the body of James from the bottom of a crude tree-well shelter. This was quite an effort in the chin-deep new snow and 60 mph rotor wash of the overhead helicopter. Doug and Steve were then winched Tilt-a-Whirl style 200 feet up through the tree tops to the helicopter and flown out.

James and Harley had intended to ski only a few hours the afternoon of December 20 but quickly became lost in the storm. Dressed poorly in cotton street clothing and with only a couple energy bars as survival gear, the two were extremely vulnerable to the fury of a major Sierran snow storm. Trouble with their rented cross-country ski equipment lent no security to their situation. They spent three stormy nights in clumsy shelters under fallen trees and logs, cold and soaked. James succumbed to hypothermia about noon, December 23.

Deep Snow Immersion

The Nordic Team was called out again at 7:00 P.M. on December 23 to help search for a missing snowboarder at Sugar Bowl ski area. Four Nordic Team searchers responded and combed the Sisters area of Sugar Bowl, the area the missing boarder was last seen, from about 9:00 P.M. to midnight. At 3:00 A.M. on December 24, Zephyr, a 3-year-old black lab (handled by Lynn Macaulay of Reno), located the frozen body of Joel Busath. Joel's body was almost three feet below the snow surface at the base of a cliff; he was 16 years old. The previous morning Joel had apparently stood atop the 30-foot cliff, and, after removing his snowboard, jumped. He was immediately buried.

Skiing Geometry

At 4:30 A.M. on December 27, Washoe County requested the Nordic Team's assistance in finding three overdue cross-country skiers thought to be in the Tahoe Meadows area. Several Nordic Team skiers and two Team snowcats joined the search effort of the Washoe County Hasty team. The missing skiers, Patricia Corner, 42, Sara

Corner, 19, and MaryAnne Doyle, 37 (all of Incline Village), were located by a Washoe County snowcat driver about 10:00 A.M.

The women became disoriented in the previous day's storm and had skied in circles trying to find the way back to their car. It became dark

More action other side...



Team member Doug Read lives the dream on Jake's Peak.

photo r.osterhuber

and they took shelter under some trees, huddling together throughout the night. They tried, but couldn't kindle a fire. Little did they know they were only 200 yards from the Mt. Rose Highway. All three were dressed in fairly good mountain clothing and had food and water but no map or compass. "We were foolish to go out in such bad weather," Patricia said.

Tahoe Meadows — Encore

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was called back to the Mt. Rose area the evening of December 30 to look for Dennis McGelligan, 30, of New York, New York. Dennis had inadvertently strayed from the boundary of Mt. Rose ski area about 11:30 that morning. He was reported missing when he'd not shown up at day's end. 10 Nordic Team skiers and one Team snowcat concentrated their search effort down the Ophir Creek drainage. It was snowing and blowing hard; sideways at times. About an hour into the search, assisted by the Washoe County Hasty team, the Nordic Team lead skiers picked up a set of downhill ski tracks heading into the eroded depths of the lower Ophir Creek drainage. This area, the eastern escarpment of the Carson Range, is renowned for its unstable soils and has been the site of numerous large debris flows. The Nordic Team skiers tracked Dennis down to snow line (6000') where they found his rented skis. He had thrown them into the sagebrush. It was now 11:00 P.M. and pouring rain. The Team continued to track Dennis, and found him, muddy, wet, and scared at about 11:30. He'd lost his gloves somewhere above and was soaked through by the storm.

The Nordic Team skiers surveyed their position. It was precarious; the conditions horrific. Rain poured in sheets upon a maze of eroding earth tilted to the maximum angle of repose. "It was really hairy down there," explained Nordic Team member Jeff Rieger. "The mud was knee-deep and rockfall rained down from the dark above. At one point we heard this big rock crashing toward us. It was every man for himself." The Team members turned on their route-finding mojo and rescued one-and-all down to the Maranatha turnoff of the Franktown Road.

Opéra Bouffe

The Nordic Team was next called out January 5, and spent many hours searching for three snowmobilers missing since the day before. They had been last seen riding on Martis Peak and Mt. Baldy.

As it turned out, two of the snowmobilers had crashed into each other (January 4) effectively disarming their machines. Trying to figure out what to do next, the three North Tahoe snowmobilers decided to abandon the third (perfectly fine) snowmobile and walk "only three hours" down to Glenshire for help. Well, they walked and walked, missing Glenshire by a little less than a parsec. Instead, they ended up descending Gray Creek, reaching Interstate 80 the next afternoon.

Education — Better Than A Refrigerator Magnet

The January 5 callout was the ninth incident Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team has responded to this season. It is also the one hundred eleventh search and rescue to which the Team has ever responded. Though all the Team's searches have been highly unique, there exist at least a few fibers common to each. The misfortunes that befall the subjects of our searches almost all start with a small but significant error, a wilderness miscalculation, a backcountry *faux pas*. Dressing poorly; the inability to assess direction; underestimating mountain weather; these are the most common mistakes made, and once made, the consequences of these errors compound faster than tweaked plutonium.

I recently had a conversation with a retired surgeon, a man of considerable talent and experience. We talked about one of the Team's recent searches and I commented on how sacrificed the lost guy had become because he wore cotton clothes. My surgeon friend looked puzzled, then asked, "What's wrong with cotton clothes?"

You and I take for granted dressing in polypropylene, knowing the local magnetic declination, and having a rudimentary knowledge of winter weather. But these eruditions are not necessarily public wisdom. Not even local wisdom. This apparent vacuum enforces how essential — and perhaps even urgent — the Team's self-appointed task of educating the public continues to be. So get out there and do it, locally and regionally. Spread the gospel truth of stylish Capilene®, the romance of orienteering, the power of being "Winter Aware."

Training Calendar

Please give Training Committee chairs Dirk or Peter a call if you want more information on training specifics. I've been told they take calls 24 hours a day. The Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team garage is located at 223 Fairway Drive in Tahoe City (behind the Tahoe City Chevron). Here's the pulp:

February 2: Familiarization of the terrain surrounding Squaw Valley. Meet at the Nordic Team garage at 8:00 A.M. or in front of the Squaw tram building at 8:30.

February 8: Terrain familiarization of the Castle Peak area. Big Dog tour. Meet at the Team garage at 8:00 A.M. or the Interstate 80 underpass (Boreal exit) at 8:45.

February 23: Familiarization of the terrain surrounding Sugar Bowl ski area. Meet 7:30 A.M. at — you guessed it — the Nordic Team garage, or be hanging out near the Jerome chairlift (Sugar Bowl) at 8:30.

THE GREAT SKI RACE

MARCH 2, 1997

9:00 AM, SHARP!

Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team Officers

President	Gerald Rockwell	583-5376
Vice President	Joe Pace	583-1806
Treasurer	Scott Schroeffer	546-2809
Secretary	Jackie Thomas	546-3592
Board Members	Dirk Schoonmaker	583-2929
	Steve Twomey	525-7280
	Medora Weiser	525-9248
	Chris Worchester	582-4648

Committee Chairs

Cuisine	Debra Schroeffer	546-2809
Dispatch	Medora Weiser	525-9248
Education	Mona Treat	581-5759
The Great Ski Race™	Douglas Read	583-6381
Newaletter	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
Snowcats	Tony Remenih	583-1684
Snowmobiles	Ray O'Brien	581-4358
Training	Dirk Schoonmaker	583-2929
	Peter Sporleder	546-0588
Truck/Equipment	Jean Wernette	546-2238
Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team garage		581-4088
All phone numbers area code (916).		

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