

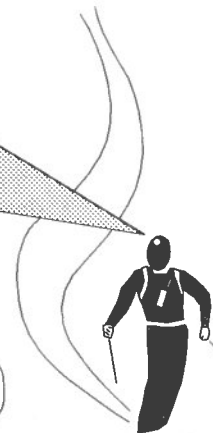
Snowline

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

OCTOBER 1998

Lake Tahoe · Truckee · Donner Summit

Next General Meeting is Monday, October 5, 1998, 6:00 p.m. at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut



The Team

This season, Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team commences its twenty-third year on the snow. The Team's old enough now to have active members that were not yet born when the Nordic Team first took root, in 1976. That shouldn't make you feel old as much as it should make you feel needed. Here we are, 23 years later, and people are still getting lost in the snowy mountains. In fact, more people will get lost this winter than ever before—that's more of a general forecast than a ruled prediction. Last winter Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team went out on 12 searches, and was called on for other assistance many more times than that. Winter 1997-1998 was among the busiest seasons the Team has ever experienced. And it's bound to continue: the trends from the past several winters suggest that any one winter is going to be more engaging for the Team than the last. So, keep your enthusiasm wound-up, and come join the opening meeting of the Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team for season 1998-1999 on October 5, at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut, 6:00 PM. Dinner will be served, and for post-business meeting entertainment, Team President Gerald Rockwell recommends everyone bringing four or five slides to drop into the projector carousel. Consider inviting an interested friend too. Fresh ideas, energy, and talent are the life-blood of any evolving organization, ours most especially. Remember, there's a niche for everyone on the Nordic Team, man or woman, skier or sloucher, young or weathered. Do be there, won't you?

The Middle Fork

The Tahoe Sierra was blessed with some especially fine, snarly weather the end of last spring. Storms—mixed rain and snow—would rage most every night, then steam-off by mid morning. Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team was called out the evening of May 14 in the midst of one of those nighttime rages.

Alec Martin, 19, of Livermore, California, was one of the last of the season to be riding at Squaw Valley. Squaw had all of the lower (and most of the upper) mountain shut down; the Granite Chief chairlift was the only operating chair that could deliver snowboarders to the ski area boundary. At about 1:00 PM on the 14th, Alec slipped under or around or through the area boundary fence and started (unknowingly) descending into the backcountry. His buddy reported him missing just after nightfall.

The Nordic Team was called, and after a quick pow-wow Bernie Mellor, John Pang, Randall Osterhuber, Doug Read, Dirk Schoonmaker, and Russ Viehman loaded into one of Squaw's utility snowcats and began lumbering up the mountain just before 10:00 PM. The Mountain Run (the main service road up the ski area)—plowed almost to the quick—was a chocolate mess of new snow, melting old snow, grotesque sculptures of harrowed snow, and tractor mud. The snowcat labored hard in the soft, steep slurry; inside we bounced around like so much worthless cargo, desperately clinging to window molding for purchase as the machine side-hilled up into the storm. At mid-mountain, out the fogged windows, we could see maintenance crews gathered around a front-end loader, arc-welders sparking blue in the snow storm. Fifteen minutes later our driver let us out into the night just below the Sierra crest. It was pretty windy.

There is a great shallow bowl a kilometer and a half across just below Granite Chief and Emigrant Peak. On the south side of this bowl is a short rise that marks the (subtle) watershed divide between the Middle Fork of the American River and Whiskey Creek. In the past, many lost skiers and boarders have glided across the big bowl, come to this short uphill, and left obvious tracks under the cover of the few trees there before schussing down the Whiskey Creek side. When searching this

area, the protected lip of the bowl is a good place to look for tracks, especially when it's windy. The six of us decided to do that very thing. We spread out across the bowl and started to ski slowly downhill, turning in big lazy arcs left and right, on the lookout for the flat mark of a gliding snowboard. In the wind, in the storm, in the dark, among the vastness of the near featureless shallow cirque, visibility was zero. Your headlamp beam illuminated only a cone of swirling snowflakes, blowing mad from every direction. Adolescents in San Jose would pay good money for the vertigo this amusement ride induced. Twice while skiing along that traverse, straining hard to see beyond my ski tips, I discovered that I was in fact not moving at all. I had just been standing in one spot—knees flexed—thinking I was skiing, while the storm blew around me. From behind my goggles it felt like I was inside a video game. Twenty minutes of skiing, and—sure as Mama's apple pie—we found the trace of a single snowboard track on the far lip of the great bowl; the young man was headed down the Whiskey Creek drainage, and now so were we.

As they both had work obligations, Dirk and John decided to head back to the ski area as soon as we found Alec's track. Meanwhile, the four of us started to ski faster, following Alec. He had a nine hour head start on us. Tracking wasn't too difficult; as Alec descended into the trees his imprint in the snow was mostly preserved from the wind. But at about midnight, we lost him. He had ridden out onto an open plateau where the wind erased his track completely. Russ and I decided to search skier's left, Doug and Bernie to the right. Within 20 minutes, I found myself—and had led Russ—into a dangerous labyrinth of steep cliffs above, below, and in front; visibility was still near zero-zero. And no sign of Alec. Funny, I thought, I had never run into these cliff bands in the Whiskey Creek area before. Hmm. It took Russ and I a good hour-plus to untangle ourselves, eventually backtracking through the steep stuff. In the interim, Doug and Bernie had picked up on Alec's track once again, tracking him out onto the top of a 10 meter-high cliff where the snow had avalanched from under him. Expecting to find a crumpled Alec at the bottom, instead they found a crater in the snow and a tentative snowboard track leading away from it. About an hour later, after at least five hairy creek crossings (Doug, radioing us from up ahead: "You guys are gonna love this one!"), a couple tree root rappels, and numerous inventive maneuvers on ski, Russ and I caught up with Doug and Bernie. The four of us continued tracking Alec for hours, over hill and under dale. We leap-frogged each other, the lead man finding the track, the followers circling around into the lead from behind. Alec showed no sign of slowing down; he had abandoned his snowboard and now traveled on foot. As we tracked him down Whiskey Creek and Five

Lakes Creek our radio contact with the Comm Van back at the Squaw Valley Fire Station became more and more broken. We were right under Ward Peak, but its mountain-top radio repeater seemed to be malfunctioning. Team snowcat driver Scoop Remenih volunteered to drive his machine to the top of Ward Peak and act as radio relay for us. Sounded like a good idea.

At 3:30 AM we stopped to take a water break. Radio contact was worse than ever. We were afraid of losing communication completely. For the last hour or so, the cops back at the Comm Van had been bugging us to stop and try to ascertain our exact location. Russ complied, digging out his new GPS receiver. Twice previous that night Russ had made some mumblings under his breath about the fact that the two hundred dollars he spent on his GPS unit had become a point of contention between he and his new wife, Terri. And now, dang it, he

Okay then...



was going to use this thing. We had been tracking Alec down along Five Lakes Creek for several hours. Five Lakes Creek runs almost due south for many miles; to establish our location, all we needed was a latitude fix or an elevation (z-axis fix) to cross reference with the stream channel. Russ began reading the UTM's (Universal Transverse Mercator) from his GPS while I stood by to record our position on the map. When he called out the latitude readings, our apparent location was puzzling. We were too far north. Maybe we hadn't skied as far down the creek as we thought, or, I reasoned, the GPS is giving us joker data. Should have bought the \$400 model, Russ. Then Russ read out the longitude UTM. Looking at the top of the topo sheet, I ran my finger along the reference marks. My finger moved west, then west some more. "Russ, read me those numbers again," I said cautiously as Doug and Bernie started looking over my shoulder. He repeated. Our longitude was so far west we were just about off the Granite Chief quadrangle. We were in fact nowhere near Five Lakes Creek!

Suddenly there were four headlamp beams focused on the map. Russ read out the GPS data three more times—we had to make sure we weren't screwing up. The elevation, latitude, and longitude data all now made sense. The cliff bands at the high end of the watershed now made sense. The poor radio reception now made sense. So far, we had tracked Alec almost 13 kilometers down along the Middle Fork of the American River. In the history of Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team, we had never had a search down the Middle Fork. We had talked and joked about it many times, but all the lost guys kept getting suckered into Whiskey and Five Lakes Creeks. Now that we were here, we didn't even realize it. When you're tracking, you really don't have much of a choice of where to go: you go where the lost guy goes. And Alec was still going. We sheepishly radioed our position to the Comm Van, then set off with new conviction.

After several more hours we caught up with Alec. He was still moving and had just about reached French Meadows Reservoir. It was 7:00 AM. Alec was tired and hungry and a little cold, but mostly healthy. Just before we found Alec, we skied past a sign along a snowed-over dirt road. It announced Foresthill, 43 miles.

The Placer County Sheriff's helicopter, Eagle One, flew in and landed. We strapped Alec into the back seat, Russ climbed aboard too, then... the helicopter wouldn't start. It sat there for over an hour. The tiny helo looked out of its element squatting dead on the snow; the thick coat of government-green paint covering its surplused frame was not a confidence builder. "This helicopter is way too lightweight for mountain rescue," we whispered among ourselves. The alternative? Foresthill, 43. The pilots eventually got the machine started, and took off for Squaw Valley. They flew back a few minutes later headed for Auburn—the weather was too heavy over the Sierra crest. Alec and Russ landed safely in Auburn twenty minutes later. The pilots radioed to us that they did not want to land at that same location again, asking us to find another landing zone. We whined (just a little), packed up, and continued skiing our weary asses westward. Ten minutes down the trail and suddenly WHOP! WHOP! WHOP! there was a deafening roar overhead. Through the tree tops another helicopter appeared: a big, powerful, military Blackhawk. They spotted us below and radioed down asking what the heck we were doing. We told them we were trying to find a landing zone. There was no response. The helicopter circled like a menacing insect. A crisp military voice broke over the radio: "Secure your gear and get out of the way." We secured our gear and got out of the way. Blowing everything to kingdom-come, the Blackhawk set down and we dove on board. In minutes we were up the Middle Fork, over the divide, through the Royal Gorge, and up the North Fork, flying between cloud and breaking storm. With one big leap over Chief Creek and the crest of the Sierra, we found ourselves hovering more than a kilometer directly above the Squaw Valley parking lot. The view was dazzling. An ear-popping spiral descent put us on the pavement.

Bill Healy of Placer County's Communication Reserve provided outstanding radio support from the Comm Van. Team member Scoop Remenih provided critical radio communication from the summit of Ward Peak. And Nordic Team member Kevin Lockwood managed the Nordic Team truck throughout the night.

This was the Nordic Team's 12th search of the season.

October Trainings

Team training chair Paul Honeywell announces these upcoming instructions:

September 30 (starts): A nine-week Outdoor Emergency Care class. Call Ron Lucia (702) 832-8354 for more info.

October 8: Familiarization with, and whipping into shape, the Nordic Team truck and equipment. Meet at the Team garage (223 Fairway Drive, Tahoe City, behind the Tahoe City Chevron), 7:00 PM.

October 11: Navigation class and practice: map, compass, GPS. Meet 8:00 AM at the Team garage.

October 24: A hike from Barker Pass to Five Lakes. Meet at the garage at 7:30 AM.

Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team Officers

President	Gerald Rockwell	583-5376
Vice President	Joe Pace	583-1806
Treasurer	Scott Schroepfer	546-2809
Secretary	Jackie Thomas	587-2687
Board Members	Steve Matson	546-7968
	Dirk Schoonmaker	583-2929
	Steve Twomey	525-7280
	Medora Weiser (702)	832-6954

Committee Chairs

Cuisine	Debra Schroepfer	546-2809
Dispatch	Jackie Thomas	587-2687
Education	Whitney Foehl	583-8611
	Karen Honeywell	546-8609
	Douglas Read	583-6381
	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
	Randall Osterhuber	587-3092
	Tony Remenih	583-1684
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	Paul Honeywell	546-8609
	Russ Viehman	582-1695
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