



SnowLine

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

Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team has been very busy lately. Many searches, many rescues, and the 28th annual Great Ski Race just around the corner. Please attend the next meeting of the Nordic Team, Monday night, February 2, 6:30 PM at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut. Much to discuss, much to do!

Searches

On December 13, a 9-1-1 call was received from six young adults who found themselves stranded in their two mired 4WD trucks on the famed McKinney/Rubicon jeep trail. They had driven to Miller Lake (several miles) on hard packed snow and spent the night. By morning, 40 cm of new snow had fallen. Team searchers Scoop Remenih and Ray O'Brien responded in their snowcats, along with Placer County deputy Fred Carey on his snowmobile. They found and then transporting all six to safety. Attempts were made at coercing Scoop and Ray into yanking the snow-bound vehicles back to pavement, but as our two snowcat drivers assured the randy adolescents, "We are not a tow service."

The Nordic Team was next dispatched to South Lake Tahoe at 2:00 AM on December 23. A man had gone out cross-country skiing and had not returned that evening. His girlfriend reported him missing. Deputies found his car near Camp Richardson, so Team searchers began combing the Camp Richardson and Spring Creek summer cabin areas. Come early morning, lots of old tracks had been followed in the snow, but no sign of anyone wandering afar. The next day, as a vacationing family arrived at their cabin at Spring Creek and were unlocking the door, they heard a gunshot from inside. The missing cross-country skier apparently committed suicide at that moment.

Though Team searchers had been informed that the missing man was

"possibly distraught," there was no evidence that he was armed. This search, like a few others in the Team's history, crossed the gray line between backcountry rescue and police work.



Ah, the glamour of rescue work. Unbeknownst to most, the start of many rescues that originate at a ski area involve a midnight ride up into the storm on the back of a grooming machine. This usually entails sitting on an icy/wet fuel tank above meter-and-a-half-wide spinning tracks—threatening to suck the very you into the grousers—while those rotating death traps and the tillers whip up a tornado of powder snow mixed with soot-black, back-eddy diesel exhaust. That exhaust emanates from a pipe behind your left shoulder radiating enough heat to melt any snow within a 2 meter radius, thereby guaranteeing when the snowcat drops you off at the mountain top in a blizzard your clothing will immediately freeze into a sheath about as flexible as roofing plywood. And what's with all that weird and mysterious green—or is it red?—fluid being spewed about? Here, Bernie Mellor and Steve Twomey suffer the joys of a grooming cat's fuel deck at the start of the Team's January 2 search and rescue.

Photograph by Randall Osterhuber

Just as the Christmas holiday vacationers at Lake Tahoe were wishing for new snow, they got served a triple helping. Between December 24 and January 4, a very powerful series of storms hit the northern Sierra dropping more than 3 meters of new snow combined with very cold temperatures and high winds. The storms overwhelmed many visitors, and on the evening of January 2 the roads leading out of the Tahoe Basin were gridlocked with fleeing motorists. It was just then that the Nordic Team was called to look for two missing snowboarders on Donner Summit.

"I'm losing my adrenaline rush," lamented Team skier Mike Kennett as he sat hunched over the wheel of the Team truck. We were still parked in the driveway and it didn't look like we'd get out of Tahoe City anytime soon, much less all the way to Sugar Bowl, the origin of the missing boarders. It was snowing hard—still—and reports of gridlocked traffic from Tahoe City to Truckee didn't liven Mikey's spirits. But on a whim, when the callout first came in for the missing Sugar Bowl youths, Mikey had suggested we get a police escort to Donner Summit. Just as the Team's momentum was crashing on the tarmac, up pull two Placer County patrol cars to guide us through the traffic maze. As the river road was deemed impassable, we turned left onto Highway 89. Immediately the officers in front and in back of our Team truck turned on their lights and sirens and we were off. For the next hour, Mikey more than earned his Joey Chitwood Memorial Driving Badge. We slalomed through literally thousands of cars gridlocked in Tahoe City, around the North Shore, over Brockway Summit, and onto an Interstate 80 wall-to-wall with sideways, spun-out, stalled, and otherwise waiting-in-the-snowstorm motorists. Somehow we made it all the way over Donner Summit and up to Sugar Bowl. Deputy Sage, driving the lead cop car, said she'd never run Code 3 that long.

Several hours earlier, one of the thousands of waiting drivers on I-80 east of Truckee had been monitoring his

Next General Meeting is Monday, February 2, 2004, 6:30 pm at the Granlibakken Resort's Ski Hut

family walky-talky and heard a "May Day" call from the lost snowboarders. When he finally crested Donner Pass, the motorist handed over his radio to the Sugar Bowl ski patrol then continued on his way home to Manteca. Now almost 9:00 PM, the patrol handed over the radio to us, and up into the storm we went.

As Russ Viehmann and his team skied around the north side of Mt. Judah, he whipped out the toy radio and transmitted "Hey Nick, you out there?"

Nick came right back at him, "Yeah, we're here."

Nick Panofsky, 20, and Josie McKee, 17, both from Santa Cruz County, had ducked the rope at Sugar Bowl's boundary that afternoon and had descended skier's left. They were very lucky not to have been buried as they traversed—unknowingly—through some of Donner Summit's largest and most notorious avalanche paths. The snow was extremely unstable that night. Russ et al zeroed in on Nick and Josie in short order, finding them in a slight hollow against a rock with their snowboards acting as a door to the crude shelter. Cold and scared, they were guided back over Mt. Judah and down to the bottom of the ski area. All were back in the patrol room by 12:30 AM (January 3).

We had just made it back to the Team garage in Tahoe City at 2:15 AM (no police escort this time) when the pagers went off again: Four snowboarders missing from Alpine Meadows. We all threw our wet storm gear into the dryer for 5 minutes, and headed to Alpine.

We searched. At the very first hint of light, Team skiers Doug Read and Fish (Dave Fulton) spotted and began following multiple snowboard tracks low in the Big Springs drainage. The CHP helicopter was called in and it also began following the tracks.

Earlier the previous afternoon, the four missing boarders—all from Reno, all twenty-something—had stepped through an opening in the massive new snow fence at the top of Alpine's Summit chairlift and immediately left the ski area. They descended all the way to Whiskey Creek, and ran into the old Whiskey Creek hunter's camp where they spent the night in one of the tiny, rough cabins with no windows or doors. It was one of the two coldest nights of the winter so far. Once they hit low angle terrain, the boarders could only move through the deep snow by crawling, literally crawling, just like infants. When we caught up with them, to watch them move toward the helicopter landing zone was both entertaining and a little pathetic. All four crawled in perfect

synchronization, leaving a sizable trough through the powder snow. Trail breaking for us on skis was ankle-deep.

All lost guys and searchers were airlifted back to Alpine Meadows.

On the morning of January 1, two backcountry skiers, Joseph "Drew" Gashler, 37, from Pacific Grove, and his buddy Doug, from San Jose, were attempting to ski back to the road from the Peter Grubb Hut on Donner Summit. When they were less than 30 m vertical from the Castle Peak/Castle Pass ridge crest (about 500 m NE of Castle Pass) an avalanche released burying them both. Doug was buried up to his chest but was able to dig himself out. Doug searched the debris field for Drew, first visually, then with a transceiver, then by random probing with a ski and a tree branch. He could not locate Drew. In the teeth of a honking storm, Doug, who lost one of his skis in the slide, skied back to the Grubb Hut on his one ski and one of Drew's that he'd found. Doug spent the next two nights at the Grubb Hut waiting for the weather to lessen. Surprisingly, the Grubb Hut was vacant during this time.

On the morning of January 3, Doug began making his way up the north side of Castle Pass when he ran into a skier headed for the Grubb Hut. With this other skier's cell phone they called for help.

During the rest of the day and most of the next, searchers from Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team, Placer County, Nevada County, and various local ski patrols searched the avalanche path. Search dogs uncovered a glove and a climbing skin, both presumed to belong to Drew, but no Drew.

At about 10:30 AM on January 5—the third day of the search—Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Team member Duncan Davis was spot probing on the uphill side of a tree and got a positive hit. This was in a part of the slide path that had yet to be fine-probed. The body of Drew was uncovered shortly thereafter. He was pinned against the tree about a meter below snow surface facing uphill. He was wearing an avalanche transceiver but it had never been turned on.

Heavy precipitation had occurred throughout most of the New Year's holiday, but the most sustained and intense snowfall was on January 1 between 2:00 AM and noon—during the time of the avalanche. At the nearby Central Sierra Snow Lab, a fairly steady precip intensity of 4.7 mm/hr (liquid water equivalent) was recorded during this 10 hour period (2 mm/hr is considered high precipitation intensity). Though the avalanche path that caught the skiers was quite small, it is extremely steep at the top, often capped with an overhanging cornice. Most importantly, the slope is an incredibly productive deposition zone. The high precip rates, very high winds, and heavy snow loading all contributed to

extreme instability. All that was needed was a trigger.

Doug was quite distressed at the death of his friend, so solid information from him was somewhat difficult to come by. From his description, it sounds like the slab fractured at least a meter deep, thoroughly engulfing both of them. The post-avalanche snowfall had completely obliterated any sign of the crown or debris.

Another avalanche fatality (Lake Tahoe/Donner Summit is now averaging about one per winter) is a strong reminder to backcountry travelers—both local residents and visitors alike—to attend a multi-day avalanche safety field course, learn to recognize and avoid avalanche terrain, and to carry and be practiced with the tools of avalanche rescue.

At 5:50 PM on January 18, the Nordic Team was dispatched to look for an overdue snowshoer on Martis Peak. The Team's skiers, snowcats, and snowmobiles responded, locating the missing guy's last seen point and began tracking him. Meanwhile, the lost guy, separated from his party earlier that afternoon, ended up "shoeing" all the way down the west flank of Martis Peak to Highway 267. He hitchhiked from there to the airport and the Truckee Town police station.

These were the Nordic Team's third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth searches of the season.

Team Trainings

Please have your OES card, and call each organizer to let them know your interest. The Team garage is located at 223 Fairway Drive, Tahoe City.

January 24: Ray O'Brien (581-4358) is formulating a training for both Team snow machines and skiers. Meet at the garage at 7:30 AM.

January 25: Beginner telemark skier practice day at Northstar. Peter Sporleder (546-0588) is organizing. Meet at the Northstar Village at 8:15 AM.

February 8: Dirk Schoonmaker (583-2929) is leading a mock avalanche rescue near Grouse Rock. Meet at the Team garage at 7:30 AM.

February 12: Steve Twomey (525-7280) is leading a night-time ski of Silver Peak. Meet at the garage at 5:30 PM.

February 22: Terrain familiarization around Alpine Meadows. Meet at the garage at 7:30 AM, or the bottom of Alpine at 8:15. Sarah Barrett (583-2994) is the contact.

February 28/29: Tony Bochen (426-3619) will lead an overnight outing to Martis Peak, or you can ski in for the day. Meet at the Team garage at 7:30 AM (Feb 28) or the bottom of the Martis Peak road (north side of Brockway summit) at 8:15.

February is the month for tickling your mate's soft, white underbelly!

—Randall Osterhuber

Team Officers

President	Steve Twomey	525-7280
Vice President	Russ Viehmann	525-6978
Treasurer	Scott Schroeffer	546-2809
Secretary	Terri Viehmann	525-6978
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	Ray O'Brien	581-4358
	Dirk Schoonmaker	583-2929
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	Doug Read	583-6381
	Gerald Rockwell	583-5376

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Cuisine	Debra Schroeffer	546-2809
Dispatch	Jackie Thomas	587-2687
Education	Karen Honeywell	546-8609
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Great Ski Race™	Doug Read	583-6381
	Randall Osterhuber	546-4491
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