

A party of skiers reported that they had been through the lower Meadows area on Friday and had not seen any notable avalanche debris. In an interview with a local skier, he reported that as he was skiing through the lower Meadows on Monday morning, he observed a very large amount of avalanche deposition near the base of the North Face of Nez Perce. These observations would put the avalanche having occurred between Friday afternoon and Sunday night. Statements from the four skiers camped below the Platforms indicate they had heard several large avalanches on Saturday night.

Though evidence of the avalanche was buried less than 30 inches of new snowfall, there was a faint crown observed in a large bowl on the north side of Nez Perce Peak, approximately 1,200 feet above the campsite. If this slide initiated during Saturday night, it would have spilled over a 200 hundred-foot cliff and triggered another slide directly above the camp. These avalanches most likely swept down in waves, one right after the other.

The tent in which the two were sleeping had every indication that the avalanche that buried it did not sweep in but rather fell directly onto it. It was crushed from above. Based on their positions, both men were instantly buried under three-plus meters of snow, entombed inside their tent, unable to move. Most likely the sheer weight of the snow squeezed the breath from them and certainly did not allow them to take a breath in. They most likely blacked out quickly prior to suffocation.

Our sympathy goes out to the family and friends of these two adventurers as the local skiing and mountaineering community is left with another solemn reminder of the unwavering power of these mountains. (Source: Ranger Chris Harder – Incident Commander)

FALL ON SNOW/ICE

Wyoming, Grand Teton National Park, Teewinot

On June 4 about 0830, Jesse Stover (39) slipped and fell about 2,000 feet on the East Face route of Teewinot. He was ascending the peak with two other partners with the intent of skiing the East Face. He was at the crux of the East Face, the Narrows, around 11,600 feet when he slipped and fell, tumbling and cartwheeling until he came to rest at the level of the Apex (9,600 feet). He sustained severe injuries to his lower extremities, along with generalized trauma to the rest of his body. Another climber witnessed the fall and called Grand Teton National Park (GRTE) dispatch, which notified the rescue coordinator. GRTE SAR rangers were summoned along with Teton County Search and Rescue (TCSAR) volunteers. With two rangers on scene, and with the assistance of the TCSAR helicopter, J. Stover was short-hauled from the accident scene around 1145 to the Rescue Cache at Lupine Meadows and then transported to the hospital via GRTE ambulance.

Analysis

At 0400 J. Stover and partners (A. Japel and D. Stal) left the Lupine Meadows parking area to ascend and ski descend the East Face route

of Teewinot Mountain. Conditions were ideal. Snow was firm with some boot penetration, which was great for ascending but too firm for skiing. Stover stated that he felt his crampon was balled-up with snow as he stepped into the six to eight-foot deep steep snow runnel. This may have provoked his fall. He was using an ice ax and snow whippet (ski pole with ice ax head) and both were firmly placed in the snow when he fell. However, the snow was unconsolidated below the placements and the force of his fall caused the tools to slip through the snow with no purchase whatsoever. When his feet hit the bottom of the runnel, the snow was rock-hard, and the sudden crampon purchase caused him to tumble, head over heels. Stover sustained severe injuries to his lower extremities, especially his left lower leg (open fracture, significant deformity, and uncontrollable bleeding), along with generalized trauma to the rest of his body. He was wearing a helmet. He was quoted as saying, "If I hadn't had a helmet on, I'd be dead."

All members of the Stover's party were very experienced, local skiers, each with more than 15 years of ski mountaineering. All had beacons, shovels, probes, and at least one ice ax. They all had skied on Teewinot Mountain before, but not from that high an elevation. They were undertaking an adventure that was well within their capabilities.

Teewinot is often underestimated by both novices and experienced mountaineers. During early season, the Narrows can present various (often unexpected) conditions. In this case, substantial steepness with hidden, unconsolidated snow on the sides of the runnel, with solid snow/ice conditions in the bottom of the runnel, proved disastrous. Crampons balling with snow as the day warmed augmented the possibility of a slip on snow, and the conditions of the runnel made self-arrest near impossible.

It is hard to fault the Stover party for the accident. They were well prepared and well within their capabilities. A rope could have made a difference, providing that it was well anchored and members were on belay. But anchoring the rope in their location could have been challenging and time-consuming. Had the rope not been well anchored, all members of the party conceivably could have fallen. Finally, most climbers/skiers with their agenda would be more concerned with moving through the mountains expeditiously and being off the mountains before avalanches commenced late morning/ early afternoon.

Stover stated that his party was having an incredibly enjoyable experience, and the slip and resulting tumble was completely unexpected. A beautiful day became a disaster in a split second. In my opinion, an unfortunate set of circumstances provoked this disaster. (Source: Ranger George Montopoli –Incident Commander)