

Being Prepared

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Being prepared to play in the backcountry includes prepping your gear, your mind, and your partner. All are important and each requires separate actions. Many accidents result from a cascading failure stemming from a lack of preparation.

I have looked at avalanche accidents for over 25 years and one principle stands true: *preparation changes outcome*. With preparation we can derail small failures. In complicated systems, small failures easily become bigger ones leading to a catastrophic event, death in this case. Traveling in avalanche terrain is a complicated system requiring many decisions, communication and knowledge. Checklists are powerful tools to help us remember, as are the individual rituals we adhere to every day, like buckling a seatbelt. Being prepared takes effort and there are no shortcuts. A person is either prepared or not.

Avalanche gear is easy to prepare. Fiddling with gear is fun and tangible and we see the results of our efforts immediately. An avalanche transceiver needs strong batteries to work effectively and as soon as beacon power drops below 70% I replace mine. Batteries drain quickly from cold temperatures, multiple burial scenarios, and being on "search". Being prepared means having a beacon that works perfectly every time. With a shovel it's crucial to make sure the handle slides easily into the blade. Probe pole sections need to snap together fluidly and not have frayed wires. If either shovel or probe are sticky give them a shot of silicone. If you carry an airbag make sure the air canister is full and connected properly along with the pull-handle attachment. The device must be armed. A 2012 study found that airbags had a 21% failure rate with half of that number from human error that could have been avoided with proper preparation.

Having gear in working shape is half the preparation. The other half-- knowing how to use it-- is simple but not easy. We have to practice in order to perform well under pressure. Ski patrols practice regularly at locating and digging up beacons. They time themselves to get faster. Fumbling with a probe pole or not being able to quickly get a shovel out of their pack are rookie moves that are embarrassing. In real life someone may die. Our avalanche transceiver is the most complicated and advanced piece of safety gear we own. It requires practice to intimately know how it works. It will flash lights, make sounds and have buttons that need to be pressed. In skilled hands this tool will find someone or multiple people quickly. It will save lives. In unskilled hands it can be a disaster.

Before I head into the backcountry I run through a checklist: beacon, shovel and probe. I say it out loud at the trailhead and make sure my partner has done the same. Beacons need to be turned on and attached to our bodies, and the other gear needs to be on our backs. We check each other to make sure beacons are transmitting properly. Gear is important because of one simple fact: a person completely buried in an avalanche has an 80% chance of survival if they are dug up in 10 minutes, and the only way to do a quick rescue is to have the gear and know how to use it. Two minutes later, at 12 minutes, the survival rate drops to 40% and in 30 minutes they fall to a dismal 20%. Finding and digging someone out in 10 minutes takes a commitment to train and be prepared.

Besides gear, we have to mentally prepare ourselves for backcountry travel. The first step is to read the avalanche advisory, a foundation of making good decisions. It covers current weather, snowpack and

avalanche activity and outlines travel advice and avalanche danger for an entire mountain range, not a specific slope. In order to decide if a slope is safe to ski or ride a person has a bit of field work to do, most notably paying attention to obvious signs of instability (cracking, collapsing, and recent avalanches) which are red flags that warn us slopes are dangerous. In the absence of these signs, there's one last step before skiing in avalanche terrain: putting your shovel in the snow and doing a stability test. Tests may warn us of instability. Once warned, we must heed it. Taking an avalanche class is the easiest way to learn the basics about stability tests. It's also the best way to learn about how avalanches occur. Venturing into the backcountry is serious business and taking an avalanche class with a field component is necessary preparation.

Being mentally prepared also means showing up with a clear mind. In order to be safe we need to make good decisions. Problems at work, at home, with a spouse, with the kids, with yourself, all cloud our thinking and set us up for failure. An easy tour in low-angled terrain may be the right choice for someone whose mental state is not focused on the avalanche danger. This is where a good partner comes in. At a minimum, two heads are better than one at avoiding problems. We all make mistakes and a solid partner will yank us back on track.

A good partner is fully prepared and practiced. They have food, water, all their gear, are mentally and physically ready for the day, and are dutifully there to watch your back and you theirs. You both have a job to do and take this responsibility seriously. No person is a liability, along for a free ride, or cutting corners. A good partner will save your life and not choke under pressure. A worthy partner is avalanche educated, has studied today's avalanche potential and thought through worst case scenarios. They are prepared and they know their hard work will affect the outcome of the day.