

The human factor of avalanches

By Kate Siber, High Country News

All morning, I'd heard the roar of sloughs rocketing down cliffs as I skied up a mountain in Prince William Sound, Alaska. Now, standing at the summit with my six friends and our two guides, I gazed over treeless sheets of white plunging to the inky ocean. A virgin slope beckoned to us. I felt uneasy – the snow was clearly unstable – but said nothing.

I was there as a travel writer and photographer, so the group agreed that I would go first to set up my camera, accompanied by Dan, the lead guide. I shook off my nervousness and skied off, arcing turns down a mellow powder field and stopping before a knoll. Dan whizzed past me and disappeared over the bump, flanked by steeper slopes. Suddenly, a line tore across the snow, releasing a massive avalanche that crashed 700 feet down the slope, engulfing Dan in car-sized panes of broken snow that settled, slowly, into a terrifying stillness.

With the help of his inflatable airbags, Dan kept afloat and survived, unhurt. He took a few moments to collect himself, and then put his skins back on. I stood there in awe and terror, my heart racing, glad to be alive.

I don't know whether some misjudgment or breach of professional protocol contributed to this accident. It's exceedingly rare for a slope shy of 30 degrees to slide so dramatically. But for years, I have relived the incident, questioning my own assumptions about safety in avalanche terrain. Was it a wild fluke, a simple miscalculation, or a serious mistake made possible by complicated psychological factors? In other words, how dumb were we?

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