

SIDECOUNTRY SAFETY MYTHS

Riders, parents should never underestimate the danger lurking beyond the ropeline

By Doug Chabot

Sidecountry is defined as out-of-bounds, backcountry terrain that is accessed from a ski area. The ski lifts make getting to the backcountry easier for everybody and more accessible to the uninitiated, but does not provide any more safety since there is no avalanche control or ski patrol services in the out-of-bounds.

Moonlight Basin, Big Sky and Bridger Bowl all have gates that enter the sidecountry. The dangers are the same regardless of the jumping off point, but Saddle Peak outside Bridger Bowl has the most sidecountry traffic because of easy access and long, beautiful runs in full view of the lift. On clear, beautiful powder days, we have to careful not to tie our emotions to fresh snow.

Avalanches are all about timing. Some days are safer than others in avalanche terrain. The key is to know the difference. The Avalanche Center can help you make intelligent, informed decisions through our daily avalanche advisories, but in the end it's up to you. Although we give general advice and data for mountain ranges, individual slopes require individual scrutiny. The advisory only provides a framework for reaching good decisions, but reaching them is, as mentioned, up to you.

To even contemplate going out of bounds, the minimum essentials are a solid, practiced partner to watch your back and rescue gear of a beacon, probe and shovel. Besides having a friend and some gear, it's worth knowing how avalanches work. Instead of learning this through trial and error, take an avalanche class. Check our website for offerings (www.mtavalanche.com).

Don't base decisions about skiing the sidecountry on what's happening inside the ski area. Ski areas are made safe through constant upkeep by the ski patrols. Cornices get shoveled, wind drifts blown up, rocks marked and warning signs posted. The sidecountry is different, even if on the surface it may look the same. Here are some common misconceptions:

Ski tracks on a slope means it's safe and won't avalanche.

Although it seems like this would be true, it's not. An avalanche needs four things: a steep slope, a trigger, a slab of snow and a weak layer underlying the slab. It's erroneous to think that if a slope gets enough tracks the weak layer gets chewed up and loses its uniformity and ability to avalanche. Weak layers can form at the surface and get buried deeply, thereby being preserved and unaffected by future ski tracks. At times a supportable hard slab will allow carving steep lines without consequence, but a thinner spot, usually found around rock outcrops, trees or near the flanks of slopes, will give away and propagate a fracture pulling out all previous tracks. That's why tracks are an unreliable indicator of stability. Many people have been fooled by this, including experienced avalanche pros. There are many ways to determine whether or not a slope is safe, but tracks on a slope is not one of them. Experienced skiers examine the weather and snowpack very carefully and do not blindly follow what others are doing.

The patrol wouldn't keep the boundaries open if it was dangerous.

The gates are a de-facto trailhead and they are *always* open to all ages and all abilities. The ski patrol is concerned with conditions inside the boundaries, not outside. It's always more dangerous in the backcountry because it's uncontrolled and unpatrolled. The decision to cross through the gate into the

unpatrolled backcountry is yours alone, as it should be. You're free to make your own decisions and to face your own consequences.

The ski patrols do avalanche control out there.

This is an urban myth. It is untrue that someone knows someone who talked to someone who's buddy is on ski patrol who told them they control the sidecountry. This is false. It is ALWAYS false. Ski patrols do not do any avalanche control outside their permitted boundaries. Ever. Period.

"I carry my own gear, I'm safe, I won't get into trouble."

This carries weight if it's just you and your partner skiing safely all alone. But sidecountry skiing has unique problems typically never encountered in the backcountry—namely other skiers. Skiers dropping in above others put elevated risk on those below. No one ever plans on triggering an avalanche, but releasing a slide carries extra consequences for those down slope. It's one thing to personally pay the price for your mistake, quite another to have someone else pay it. Skiing above others is a hazard mostly unique to sidecountry.

Adults are (usually, in theory, by definition) equipped to make informed decisions regarding their lives and safety. They can drink, go to war, vote and basically do whatever they want (provided it's legal). Young adults are not so equipped. Parents sign release forms, chaperone, have curfews and set rules outside of the legal system to provide guard rails on their children's roads. Death and serious injury should not be part of the young adult learning curve, yet skiing the sidecountry is seriousness business. That's why parents need to make informed decisions regarding the complexities of sidecountry skiing. The Avalanche Center and Bridger Bowl made a 10 minute video last year titled Stay Alive. If you're unfamiliar with the sidecountry it's a good place to start. If your kid has a beacon and shovel to ski the Ridge, do not assume they will stay within the ski areas. Outline your expectations clearly. Traveling in the backcountry carries great risk and personal responsibility. Every year adults die in avalanches. We do not want to see teenagers die in them as well.