

“SERIOUS ABOUT SAFETY”

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An Australian skier killed in an avalanche near Methven last week has highlighted the risks faced by those venturing into New Zealand's back country. In a timely coincidence, Queenstown reporter MARK HOTTON began an avalanche awareness course the same day.

Sometimes a little knowledge can be scary particularly when you're learning about avalanches.

Halfway through a Mountain Safety Council avalanche awareness course it was discovered a snowboarder in the back country near the Remarkables skifield had triggered an avalanche rated at 3.5 out of 5.

During a three-hour theory session the previous night it was explained a grade three avalanche was big enough to bury a car or van, while a grade four could take out several train carriages, houses or a large section of forest.

It was clear this was a big one. Search teams with dogs were being mobilised, helicopters were on standby, and there was genuine concern that four people later to be found safe but without essential back-country safety equipment had been nearly caught in a massive avalanche that roared down the mountain and punched through Lake Alta's ice.

Thankfully the rescuers were stood down once it was determined all were accounted for.

That incident and the previous day's deadly avalanche that killed a 60-year-old Australian heliskier near Methven drilled home the serious nature of the course.

Avalanches kill people in a horrible way.

About 95 per cent of those who die in an avalanche trigger it themselves. Air is forced from the snow as it tumbles and rumbles down, setting like concrete when it finally comes to a stop. If you're caught in a wall of snow thundering down a mountain, your chances of survival depend heavily on whether you have a transceiver, if your companions know how to use their safety equipment, and whether you can create an air pocket big enough to provide enough oxygen until, hopefully, your friends dig you out.

Because help from trained alpine search teams could take more than two hours to arrive at the scene.

Last week's heavy snowfalls provided the perfect learning environment for the 18 skiers, boarders and trampers on the safety council course that aims to increase awareness of the risks posed by avalanches in unpatrolled ski areas and New Zealand's back country, provide information on how to determine the risks, and how to use a transceiver, probes and shovels. It also has the added effect of scaring you.

Course instructor Mark Austin-Cheval makes it clear the course is not designed to teach everything about avalanches, with other more in-depth courses available.

Ad Feedback It was split into two parts a three-hour theory session on the Friday evening that included slides, videos and discussions followed on the Saturday by a day-long practical course in the Remarkables.

The theory session outlined how to plan a trip, where to get information from about the risks, how weather affects the risk, how to travel safely on a mountain, and how to rescue companions.

The second day included sessions on how to read terrain on mountains and how to identify areas of risk and safety routes. There were also practical exercises with a transceiver to find buried equipment, how to use probes and how to dig someone out safely and quickly.

Companion rescue is an important part of the course, for obvious reasons. About 92 per cent of people are still alive 18 minutes after being caught, but that drops away to 27 per cent within 40 minutes, and just 3 per cent in two hours.

The safety council takes avalanches seriously and has a back-country avalanche advisory system available

in detail at avalanche.net.nz and in less detail on skifields. Various observations including weather, wind, snow levels, temperatures, and snowpack assessments are used to identify risk levels through a five-stage coloured chart.

It's not just a matter of checking a website though. Those venturing into the back country need to look at what has happened to the mountain over recent days the snowfall, the temperatures, the wind levels and direction and how that has affected the terrain, Mr Austin-Cheval explained.

There's a wider issue of the need for a higher level of personal responsibility highlighted by those boarders who triggered Saturday's avalanche. They had no safety equipment and are not thought to have made any condition checks or spoken to field patrollers.

Safety council programme manager Steve Schreiber said one of the most important things the organisation was pushing was pre-planning and trying to encourage people to take the courses.

"People need to keep learning, plan ahead, pick good friends, and when you get to a position where you're not too sure, turn back.

"It's not easy to make that choice to pull back. It's a very difficult thing to recognise that trouble is coming but if you think about it ahead of time, it's a little bit easier.

"That's why we provide the website's services, that's why the signs are up, that's why the courses are there.

"Just to begin to help people understand the risks, not to scare them away and to stop them going out there. To understand it's OK to go out there, as long as you're making an informed decision.

"There's also another day, another run, a lifetime of enjoyment if you back off."

SAFETY COURSES

Mountain Safety Council's Wakatipu branch runs various courses designed to keep people safe in the outdoors.

Avalanche awareness courses will be run on August 7-8, August 21-22, and September 11-12.

A more intensive Back Country Avalanche Course is available in August that covers characteristics of avalanche phenomenon, snowpack factors, observation techniques, human factors, group travel in avalanche terrain, and small group search and rescue.

For details visit mountainsafety.org.nz or email wakatipu@mountainsafety.org.nz.

ENDS

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