

February 7, 1996

Abundance Of Snowfall, And Daring, Proves Deadly

By JAMES BROOKE

Buried under four feet of snow, Michael Merick clung to life for three hours until a search dog found him, just as daylight faded from a Rocky Mountain slope west of here.

Pulled from his icy tomb with a faint pulse, the 23-year-old snowboarder died on the way to a hospital on Sunday afternoon, becoming the fifth outdoorsman in five weeks to die in Colorado avalanches.

Normally, avalanches kill five people during an entire winter in Colorado, a state that regularly records the nation's highest avalanche toll. But this winter is producing a deadly combination: record snows and a new vogue for skiing, snowboarding and snowmobiling in the Rockies' remote back country.

Typically, 2,000 avalanches are reported each winter in Colorado's mountains. But with unusually deep snow blanketing the Rockies in January, 1,800 avalanches had been reported by Sunday, the midwinter mark.

"Ten years ago, we saw very little ski traffic in the back country," said Knox Williams, the director of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. "Since then, not only has the design of ski equipment and clothing improved, but we have the invention of the snowboard. People can board down slopes that would be very difficult to ski."

Roaming beyond ski area boundaries, young adventurers push into wilderness areas, seeking the freedom of uncut powder. As a result, however, since New Year's Eve, snowslides outside defined ski areas in Colorado have killed two snowboarders, a snowmobiler, a cross-country skier and a downhill skier.

"The average victim is 26 years old," Mr. Knox said referring to his center's study of people caught in Colorado avalanches. "He's a young athletic guy, who thinks, 'I'm immortal, I'm a great athlete, I'll just ride it out.'"

Skiers at resorts and motorists are rarely killed in avalanches in the Rockies. To reduce risk to highways or ski areas, slides are triggered with small explosive charges, lobbed by howitzers or dropped from helicopters. Although avalanches routinely block mountain passes here, there has not been an avalanche-related fatality among motorists in Colorado in recent memory.

But an average of eight feet of snow fell on Colorado's high country in January, producing some surprises. Slides twice cut Interstate 70, Main Street for ski areas, once near Vail and once in Glenwood Canyon.

"This has been an extraordinary January for us," said Dan Hopkins, a spokesman for the State Transportation Department. "We have done the kind of avalanche control we would typically be doing in February and March."

The dry powder snow that lures skiers to Colorado is also partly responsible for the high avalanche risk. Avalanche experts say that because it contains less moisture snow in Colorado does not bond as quickly as that in Utah or Wyoming.

Compounding the danger, high winds routinely whistle through the Colorado Rockies. Many steep slopes are bare of natural anchors, like trees or boulders.

The avalanche risk is high throughout the Rocky Mountains, an expanse 10 times as large as the Alps.

In New Mexico on Sunday, a skier from Taos was killed when an avalanche roared down the side of a mountain in the Wheeler Peak Wilderness Area. In Wyoming, the Jackson Hole Ski Area keeps four search dogs on alert at the summit of its main mountain. The dogs, female Labradors, see most action outside ski areas.

"In the past two winters, there has been an explosion in back-country use," said Jim H. Kanzler, an avalanche forecaster for Bridger-Teton National Forest who has lived in Jackson for 18 years. "The kids are parking their cars on Teton Pass, and skiing big avalanche paths."

Increasingly, mountain communities are trying to reduce avalanche risks, either through enforcement or education.

Colorado police are stepping up enforcement of laws against entering entering closed zones in ski areas. Last week, an Australian skier was fined \$100 for leaving Snowmass and skiing in a closed area. Closer to Denver, a snowboarder was fined \$300 last week for straying outside the boundaries of Eldora Mountain Resort.

On the education side, workshops are regularly held to teach winter athletes how to use inclinometers, card-shaped devices for measuring slope angles, and to carry avalanche beacons, battery-powered devices that transmit locations.

"We want to educate people so that their avalanche skills catch up with their athletic skills," said Mr. Williams of Colorado's Avalanche Information Center. "But this is a good time to ski at a ski area -- that's where the safety is."