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Keeping Your Head Above the Snow

By BONNIE TSUI

AS ski season approaches, ski resorts and other organizations across the country have begun stepping up their backcountry education and avalanche safety initiatives. For good reason: a lot more people are heading out into the backcountry on their skis, ratcheting up both the excitement and the danger factors.

In the 2002-3 season the number of avalanche fatalities in North America reached a record, 58. Half of those were backcountry skiers and snowboarders, including a group of high school students on a class trip, experienced backcountry guides, and a world champion snowboarder, according to the Forest Service National Avalanche Center. (The others killed included climbers, snowmobilers, hikers and snowshoers.) Last season, there were 32 fatalities, 10 of them involving skiers and snowboarders.

"In the last two decades, backcountry skiing and snowboarding has definitely been growing," said Craig Dostie, publisher of Couloir, a backcountry adventure magazine based in Truckee, Calif. "The sport used to have the reputation that you had to be an extreme skier to go into the backcountry, but now it's the cool thing to do, adventure-wise. There's of course the avalanche danger, which is unpredictable, and it can certainly kill you whether or not you are prepared."

Those who go out of bounds near a ski area can often be less experienced and less likely to recognize the dangers of unstable snow. Thus, the ski industry is responding with education programs designed to heighten awareness and minimize the risk.

At Kirkwood Mountain Resort near Lake Tahoe, Calif., the dramatic popularity of the resort's out-of-bounds areas led to the creation of the Expedition Kirkwood program last year. More than 100 guests signed up last season for backcountry awareness clinics, avalanche beacon training sessions, and Sno-Cat skiing tours and hikes that focus on backcountry safety.

Beacon Basin is an avalanche-training facility at Kirkwood run in partnership with Backcountry Access, which makes snow safety equipment. Participants are taught how to use avalanche beacons to locate a buried skier or rider. Eleven avalanche transmitters are permanently buried in a snowfield for beacon users to practice location skills. Training at Beacon Basin is also part of daylong backcountry awareness courses, which are offered monthly and focus on learning about snow conditions, risk assessment and safety procedures. Expedition Kirkwood's programs range from two hours to two days.

Outside a resort's boundaries, skiers and riders have to depend on their own knowledge and snow safety skills, said Tracy Miller, a Kirkwood spokeswoman. "The backcountry terrain outside Kirkwood's boundaries is very steep - Class A avalanche terrain - but unlike the resort, there is no snow safety work performed," she said. "For the most technical skier or rider, it can be treacherous. For the inexperienced, it can be deadly."

Many resorts offer avalanche and backcountry awareness sessions during the National Ski Area Association's National Safety Awareness Week, Jan. 15 to 21. The ski areas include Beaver Creek and Breckenridge, both in Colorado, and Big Mountain, Mont., which uses an avalanche-rescue-dog program called Powder Hounds

to attract younger skiers and snowboarders. "We try to teach people the basic knowledge of traveling in the backcountry, including route selection, equipment use, weather effects on the snowpack, and how to proceed in your group safely once you've decided to descend," said Addy McCord, patrol director at Beaver Creek. "Always watch your partner, always have an escape route, things like that."

On Feb. 5, Arapahoe Basin, Colo., will hold its third annual Beacon Bowl and Avalanche Awareness Day, which invites participants to test the latest avalanche gear and to attend clinics; there is also a time trial competition to find a buried avalanche beacon; all proceeds benefit the Colorado Avalanche Information Center. Other areas offering programs are Snowbird in Utah; Summit in Snoqualmie, Wash; Squaw Valley in California; and Telluride in Colorado, which in its annual three-day Telluride Avalanche School (Jan. 3 to 5 this season) gives students American Avalanche Association Level 1 certification.

"When you look at all the avalanche accidents, especially the recent accidents, you have about half knowing what they're doing, but the other half just don't know anything - they're completely uneducated and bumble into a dangerous situation," said Bruce Tremper, director of the Forest Service Utah Avalanche Center, which teaches dozens of avalanche courses each season. Last year, three young snowboarders died in an avalanche near Aspen Grove in Utah.

This month, the Utah Avalanche Center joined with the online gear retailer Backcountry.com and other partners in an avalanche safety campaign geared to school-age children and young adults, called Know Before You Go. The program includes a narrated video with extensive footage of avalanches, local avalanche professionals telling stories about close calls or accidents they have experienced, and presentations on basic avalanche signs and safety practices. The program will begin in Utah schools, but will be used as a model for mountain communities across the country.

"What's happened over the course of the last 10 years is that the gear and the technology far outpace people's avalanche skills," said Craig Gordon, an avalanche forecaster and director of the Know Before You Go program. "So they're able to get out into the conditions, but then they don't know how to handle themselves or recognize basic instabilities. That's where the danger is."

Those who venture off piste should have proper backcountry safety equipment with them and know how to use it, said Greer Terry, communications coordinator for Jackson Hole Mountain Resort. "Our backcountry is one of the primary things that the resort is known for," Ms. Terry said. "Our open-gate policy means that there are actual gates around our perimeter. There are warning sounds telling you that you are leaving the patrolled area, indicating the avalanche danger for the day, and if you choose to, you can go out of the gates and access over 3,000 acres of amazing terrain. But once you leave the resort, it's hike to and hike out, and you're on your own, so it's important that people know what they're doing."

BONNIE TSUI writes about travel for the Escapes section.