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## **Slide death offers another warning on judgment**

**Forecasters: Daily avalanche hazard rating is general.**

*By Angus M. Thuermer Jr.*

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A fatal avalanche Saturday when dangers were characterized as low has specialists warning about the difficulty of predicting some slides and cautioning about the general nature of avalanche forecasts.

The avalanche in the South Fork of Darby Canyon on the west slope of the Tetons killed Paul Maniaci, a Steamboat, Colo., teacher. He was visiting his brother, Pete, manager of Peaked Sports in Driggs, Idaho.

Paul Maniaci, who would have turned 25 Sunday, died of suffocation and a broken neck, Teton County Coroner Bob Campbell said.

The slide broke at approximately 5 p.m. in a northwest-facing bowl just below the summit of peak 10,028 on the ridge north of Fossil Mountain, according to maps and a report compiled by Don Sharaf, an Idaho avalanche consultant, and others. With a crown as deep as 3 feet, 3 inches, the avalanche raked the Swan Slide path for 2,340 vertical feet, running eight tenths of a linear mile. The starting zone was approximately 37 degrees steep.

Bridger-Teton National Forest avalanche forecasters that day characterized the danger as low, meaning "mostly stable snow exists – avalanches are unlikely except in isolated pockets." The forecast carried a caveat, however, for upper elevations where the avalanche occurred.

"Pockets of older, wind-drifted hard slab also exist in cliff areas," forecasters warned Saturday morning. "These slabs could be triggered by people who venture into extreme terrain."

Forecaster Jim Springer said the "low" rating needs to be viewed in a broad context. Repeating the oft-recited phrase "low danger doesn't mean no danger," he cautioned against applying what's officially known as the "general avalanche hazard" to every nook and cranny.

"We try to get this point out," he said. "Our hazard rating is very general. It doesn't apply to every where and every thing."

The rating should not be the sole decision-making criteria for any slope, Springer said.

To reach their objective, the Maniacis had to ski about four miles up Darby Canyon, then turn up the South Fork below the west face of Peak 10,028. That summit was the general objective.

Teton County Search and Rescue member Ray Shriver said his interviews with members of the party revealed that Paul's wife, Jessica, turned back in the South Fork during the day. The brothers continued with Paul's dog, Mica.

Shriver said he believes the brothers crossed beneath the slide path while ascending the creek bed of South Darby. Once up the drainage, the two likely doubled back, he

said.

The intent was to ski a treed slope north of Swan Slide, Shriver said. That meant crossing the slide path. One way to do that would have been to ascend to the summit of Peak 10,028 and follow its north ridge over Swan Slide.

The two were within 20 yards of the summit of the peak when they climbed onto the fateful slope. Shriver said Paul, on telemark skis, was ahead and below his brother, who was climbing on a split snowboard.

Pete Maniaci felt the slope collapse and the avalanche broke about 10 yards above him, according to a report by Kelly Wells of the Teton County Sheriff's office. His brother was about 20 yards below him, Wells reported.

The slide swept Pete Maniaci about 200 vertical feet, according to Sharaf's report. Paul went approximately 1,700 vertical feet and was buried 2 to 3 feet deep, Sharaf wrote.

Pete Maniaci was able to free himself from the snow when the avalanche stopped. He immediately went down to more debris and began searching for his brother using an avalanche transceiver.

A cell phone call from his girlfriend interrupted the search but enabled Pete Maniaci to relay word of the avalanche. Teton County Sheriff's Office received a call at 5:01 p.m.

Pete located his brother at approximately 5:10 p.m, according to Wells's report. He dug Paul free, finding him without breath or pulse. He performed cardiopulmonary resuscitation until rescuers arrived. Paul Maniaci never responded, and CPR ceased at 6:05 p.m.

While the general hazard was low, the specifics of Saturday's forecast were borne out by the slide. It occurred in extreme terrain, near and across cliff bands and was triggered by people – two were on the slope at the time. Older slabs of hard snow were involved, likely running on buried weaknesses in a shallow snowpack.

In his report, Sharaf, who visited the site Monday and dug several pits in the snow, found weak layers at various depths. Among the problematic layers were facets, likely fragile surface hoar formed during cold periods without snow and then covered up. He and his party also found depth hoar, formed by old snow whose bonds deteriorate over time in shallow snowpacks.

Solar heating from clearing skies could have played a role in the slide, Sharaf and the avalanche center said. The nearest weather station, nine miles north of the slide, recorded a peak temperature of 38 degrees at approximately 3 p.m. It cooled to 31 degrees at the time of the accident.

Sharaf and his group said there were several clues to the lurking danger. One was the nature of the Swan Slide path, which is well defined as an avalanche route. Another was terrain traps on the slope – trees and benches – that could snare or slow an avalanche victim and compound the effects of a burial.

Finally, he observed on Monday a natural avalanche across the South Fork of Darby Canyon on a slope facing the same way as the one that slid. Whether that slide had occurred before the Maniacis made their climb or whether it could have been seen through dissipating clouds on Saturday is uncertain.

"This was a difficult avalanche to predict using simple decision-making frameworks," Sharaf wrote of the Swan Slide avalanche. Three clues "wouldn't have been a significant red flag without considering other factors," he wrote.

While the consultant cautioned against putting too much faith in snow pits dug to analyze slope stability, he said the use of one in this instance "might have been one of the only indications that there was significant instability.

"A final lesson from this tragic accident is that there needs to be an inherent mistrust of snowpacks on low snow years," Sharaf wrote. "Given the low snowfall this season, many areas that have been stable in recent years should be held suspect this year."

County rescuers recovered Paul Maniaci's body on Sunday, although they got to the scene by helicopter the day of his death. Fading light forced the delay.

Mica, the dog, spent the night at the avalanche site and followed two Search and Rescue members out of the canyon Sunday.

Springer urged skiers and snowboarders to use all the tools in their avalanche-awareness kit, including rules that recommend only one skier on a potential avalanche slope at a time. Springer said, for example, that he sticks to well-treed slopes in the backcountry until spring weather stabilizes the snowpack.

"I don't ski much in the open in the winter," he said.

Paul Maniaci, was a teacher with the Yampa Valley High School, the county's alternative school, and the Steamboat Springs School District, according to the Steamboat Pilot.

In addition to Sharaf, Sarah and Don Carpenter, John Fitzgerald and Lynne Wolfe contributed to the avalanche report.

To obtain the twice-daily avalanche advisory, visit [jhalavalanche.org](http://jhalavalanche.org) or call 733-2664.

[www.jhnewsandguide.com](http://www.jhnewsandguide.com)

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