

That Mark Yates was the director of the LSAFC and was on a field trip to collect snowpack and avalanche information while accompanied by friends when the avalanche occurred is the most difficult aspect of this accident. It is not uncommon for avalanche forecasters to travel in the backcountry with friends while performing snowpack and avalanche observations. Often the choice is that or traveling to avalanche-prone areas alone. Friends are usually more-than-willing to tag along for the opportunity to learn more about snow and avalanches. And some skiing can often be found along the way.

The problem arises when it comes time to make the decisions about snow stability or route selection. No matter how hard you try to involve the rest of the group, they always defer to the judgment of the "expert". I try to make the responsibility shared, but it is never equal. People place their faith, their lives, in my hands, and it is frightening. I find I only go skiing with people who participate as equals in the process, who are willing and able to see things differently than I do, and who will speak up when they feel uncomfortable.

The data was there for the party to see; the snowpack was known to be weak, there had been recent snowfall and windloading, there were signs of instability such as avalanches on similar slopes and collapsing of the snow, the party knew they were in avalanche terrain. The ultimate question is "Why were they high on the slopes of Talking Mountain cirque?"

We have the information that Mark had wanted to check the conditions there prior to the upcoming holiday weekend. This is possible, but it is not always necessary to go onto large avalanche slopes to determine the conditions. It is possible to find small test slopes that are safe and are representative of the more dangerous terrain.

I am left only with the thought that skiing was the primary motivation. The long low angle slopes at the base of Talking Mountain looked like excellent skiing and were perfectly suited to the moderate abilities of the group. It had been about a month since the skiing was good, and they had just enjoyed a fun, safe run down Goldminer's.

Nearly all of us who work in this business are skiers; the work provides us a way to get paid for doing what we love. Yet skier's eyeballs are a dangerous thing. They cause us to rationalize and reject the information that keeps us away from our pleasure. Seeing the world through avalanche eyeball's is not easy. It means putting our pleasure aside, developing respect and humility and learning to observe.

A few final questions remain. First, what was Mark's level of knowledge and experience with avalanches? Mark had been a student of avalanches several years before he started the LSAFC. He had watched the snow conditions in the La Sals for many years and seemed to know how the snowpack and the avalanches behaved. But we do not know how many avalanches Mark had observed close at hand. Seeing avalanches release at your ski tips is one of the best forms of education about the process, and for this reason working as a ski patroller and doing avalanche control work nearly a

prerequisite for working as an avalanche forecaster. Mark had not done this, and perhaps it would have been to his benefit.

It is fairly common among avalanche workers to go through various phases in their education about avalanches. After the first 5 years or so, just when you feel you know and understand avalanches, an event occurs to remind you how little you do know. For me, being part of the recovery team finally drove home the severity of working and playing around avalanches.

Finally, the last question is "Could the Utah Avalanche Forecast Center have done more to assist the LSAFC?" This is a question that bothers me quite a bit, because I knew Mark, we had helped him establish program and had given him occasional guidance over the past few years, and staff from the UAFC would visit the La Sals once or twice a year. But frankly this was all that was feasible for us given our work schedule and budget limitations. We were more than glad that someone could run a local avalanche program in Moab that did not require our constant attention. There are areas in our forecast region which we do not visit often enough as it, and we are usually taxed just to keep the program running.

We felt that Mark did an excellent job with his program. His forecasts were always accurate and full on useful information. We would rarely hear from Mark during the course of the winter, yet in some ways the LSAFC is part of our program. A report from the LSAFC appears in the annual report of the UAFC.

We are interested in being more involved in the operation of the LSAFC. We would like to make it a satellite operation of the UAFC, staffed by a person trained by the UAFC who cooperates on a regular basis with the UAFC and with avalanche workers in nearby Telluride, Colorado. We are presently working closely with the LSAFC to find a long-term solution.