

John Norris

Keeping the mountain's

laws empty



Henry: 'Most times a slope that should avalanche won't avalanche'

'Before you know it, you're in a situation where you're begging God to get you out of it'

PICK ANY BAR in any ski resort. If it has a TV screen, you're pretty much guaranteed that at any time of day it's showing videos of skiers and snowboarders bursting through fluffy, exploding piles of untouched fresh powder. The images are enticing enough to make you want to drop your glühwein and dash out to do the same. What the films don't show, of course, is the hidden danger that such great terrain holds: *avalanche!* For the past 19 years, Henry Schniewind (a wonderfully evocative name for an avalanche expert), has been on a mission to redress the balance, and give skiers and boarders the safety knowledge they need.

As the new season approaches, **Daniel Elkan** asks the avalanche safety campaigner **Henry Schniewind** for some essential advice about staying safe off-piste

Ski+board: In recent years, the percentage of off-piste skiers and boarders getting avalanched has increased – especially in areas relatively close to the pistes. Why is this?

Henry: *It's a combination of factors. The evolution of equipment is an important one: wider, wider skies make it easier in deeper snow, and snowboards obviously do; so more people are able to go off piste - and more quickly. It used to take at least 20 weeks to develop a technique; now with wider skis you can be off-piste within a couple of weeks - on a snowboard within days. But by learning so quickly, people miss out on resort experience and the 'informal education' that builds awareness of the danger of avalanches. The result is that people's off-piste skiing ability far outweighs their mountain awareness, especially of avalanches.*

Is marketing part of the problem?

There are so many videos, adverts and magazine photos of people charging through beautiful, deep, white snow. You can call it 'powder-adventure marketing'. It comes through the resort tourist offices, and through equipment manufacturers. But the images don't just attract people to the sport and the resort; they encourage

them to venture off piste. Don't get me wrong - riding off piste is one of the best things you can ever do! But the industry also has a responsibility to give people the knowledge of how to have fun safely.

Is that happening?

A number of the tour operators are beginning to educate their staff. Ski World, Crystal, Inghams, YSE and Le Ski have been consistent in taking it seriously, allocating a small budget for this as part of their staff training. The typical employee of a tour operator wouldn't have much knowledge of what is happening off-piste, and they are a prime risk. Some ski areas are making an effort, but the real budgets are going to other things - the industry needs to do a lot more. Avalanche awareness shouldn't be an afterthought.

Do people really listen to advice they're given?

Generally I think they do. But even if people have the knowledge, they can get caught out by peer pressure. 'Powder frenzy' is a significant factor. When it has just dumped overnight, people look out of their windows the next morning and think: "If we don't get there right now, we won't get first tracks." And that's when the basic principles go out of the window.

What are the classic mistakes that even experienced skiers and boarders make that put them in unnecessary danger?

Trying to impress other people and ignoring danger signs. We've all done it. Before you know it, you're in a situation where you're begging God to get you out of it.

Does having safety equipment actually tempt people to take more risks?

Very probably, even if it is a subconscious process. You are much more likely to survive an accident with this equipment, so you do need to take it with you, especially the transceiver-shovel-probe combo. But you have to be aware of how it could influence your judgement; if you take more risks just because you have safety equipment, the benefits are erased.

If you do get caught in an avalanche, how does carrying a transceiver, shovel and probe improve your chances of survival?

If you're still alive when the avalanche settles down, you have 15 minutes to live. If your friends have this equipment and know how to use it, they can find you in less than 15 minutes if you're not buried too deep, and this improves your chance of survival by 50 per cent. But it's no guarantee. At least one fifth of all people caught in an avalanche are killed outright by the movement of snow. You can get smashed into trees, into rocks, taken over a cliff, into a gully or a lake, and your equipment won't help you. If you think you can ride out an avalanche, you're playing Russian Roulette.

What are these little RECCO avalanche things on some equipment, and how does RECCO help in avalanche accidents?

The little RECCO 'things' are reflectors that are part of an avalanche rescue system - the detector is in the hands

of most ski patrollers. It's used to pinpoint a person's precise location using radar. The transceiver is the best tool for your friends to find you quickly; however, when you need more help than your friends can give, the RECCO system helps organized rescue teams to help you.

Whether a slope will avalanche depends on so many delicate factors. A little learning can be a dangerous thing. Is it really worth trying to educate people?

Absolutely. People will always go off piste, and go off-piste without a guide, and they should feel free to do this; it's what's great about Europe compared with North America. Ignorance is far more dangerous than basic knowledge. If you understand the basics then at least you know what you don't know, and you can manage your risks successfully.

What can people achieve from attending your presentations and courses?

Three quarters of all avalanche accidents happen within view of the piste or a lift, and most of those accidents could have been avoided with adherence to some very basic knowledge. The talks make it clear that off-piste isn't a danger zone unless you're ignorant - if you keep basic safety in mind while you're off piste, the overwhelming odds are that you will have a great time and nothing bad will happen to you. So we just try to get people to think - and we do it in an entertaining way. On the courses, we want to enable people to assess slope-safety without having to stop every two minutes and dig a snow pit. The courses involve lots of riding, and lots of slope-angle judgement, which is one of the most important skills. We want to give people the ability to enjoy the powder more. Our motto is: 'Safety is Freedom'.

There's a trend toward more experienced people being killed in avalanches. What's behind that?

It's partly the human factors such as peer pressure. But I think there is something else too: even in unstable conditions, most of the time a slope that should avalanche won't avalanche. On an unstable day, you could probably ski on 95 out of 100 really dangerous slopes and nothing would happen. Of the five avalanches you would set off, maybe one could kill you. But that means you can get away with it a lot. And people who ride a lot of dangerous slopes don't consider themselves to be lucky - they think they are skilled, that they are getting good at judging the slopes and that people like me are alarmist. But two years ago in France we had the biggest number of deaths - 57 - in recorded history. Many of those were very experienced people. The previous eight or nine years before that, the conditions had been very stable, but suddenly there was a very unstable layer with lots of snow on top of it. People were going back to these same places without realising that they had become far more dangerous. □



For more information
skioffpiste.co.uk
 Henry's DVD (with
 Matt Chilton of the
 BBC and Eurosport):
 Off Piste & Avalanche
 Awareness. See
avalancheawareness.co.uk
 14.95+P&P

And Henry's Blog
henry.skioffpiste.co.uk
 Henry's Avalanche Talk,
 'Ride Hard! Ride Safe
 2009' in the UK this
 Autumn: for updates
 on the UK tour, see the
 schedule on
skioffpiste.co.uk or on
skiclub.co.uk

Henry's Avalanche Talk
 will be in Val d'Isère,
 Tignes and Chamonix
 regularly this winter, and
 other places in Europe for
 'one-off' talks. For two-day
 Off-piste and Avalanche
 Awareness courses (£195
 per person) skioffpiste.co.uk
 or call +44 20
 8144 5202.



Ski Freshtracks runs off-piste
 holidays in Val d'Isère. There
 are four 'Off Piste Progression'
 holidays in January, February and
 March, and one 'Mountaincraft
 Course' holiday (between 14 -
 21 December) which all offer
 tips on avalanche awareness.
 Call 020 8410 2022 or go to
skifreshtracks.co.uk for details.
 Ski Club members get a 40%
 discount off the price of
 Henry's Avalanche Talks.
 Call 020 8410 2022 or go to
skifreshtracks.co.uk for details.