



BREAKING BAD

How arm-chair quarterbacking avalanche tragedies perpetuates the problem

“YOU CAN’T FORESEE EVERYTHING.”

So says Jerome Boulay, a 41-year-old backcountry snowboarder whose life nearly ended on April 20. The infamous Sheep Creek avalanche on Colorado’s Loveland Pass killed five men and spared one that day. Boulay, the sales manager for Venture Snowboards, was the survivor. He was buried for four hours, unable to move and barely breathing, before rescuers dug him out.

The catastrophe, caused when the group remotely triggered a deep slab from 600 feet below the start zone—the same rotten layer that had claimed a life near Vail the day before—was the deadliest avalanche in U.S. history involving skiers or snowboarders. It left the sports reeling, and shattered dozens of lives.

And, as has become the norm after fatal avalanche accidents, it spawned a barrage of public criticism. An editorial in the *Denver Post*, written by a ski-town reporter turned fire-department spokesman named Steve Lipsher, lambasted the victims eight days after the slide.

“I’m sorry,” Lipsher’s piece began, “but the avalanche that killed five people on Loveland Pass last weekend was not a tragic ‘accident.’

“It was a case of recklessness, pure and simple, as suicidal as a game of Russian roulette.”

I did not know any of the men involved, but I was appalled to read those words. I perused some of the banter on WildSnow.com and found more of

the same: blame, condescension, cold-blooded—and sometimes inaccurate—judgments (as online message boards are wont to have). “I’ll do some more potentially insulting guesswork here in the comments where it’s less noticeable to do so,” wrote site moderator Lou Dawson, a prominent ski mountaineer, “and say I’m starting to wonder if perhaps part of this situation was one fit and

accidents for a private company laid into the victims of the Tunnel Creek avalanche, which killed three men on Stevens Pass in February 2012. “How about those idiots up in Washington?” he said as we sat down for margaritas.

Unfortunately, most everyone agrees it is human nature for people to blame or criticize accident victims, especially when they don’t know

ABOVE: There’s a lot to learn from an avalanche, including that it could happen to you.

PHOTO: JEFF CRICCO

fast person led off and made an incredibly poor route choice, and due to group dynamics everyone else just followed along.”

One year prior, while I was at a hut in Colorado, a man who investigates ski



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them, when the reality is nobody knows what they would do until they are faced with a similar situation. “We all want to believe we’re so much more in control of things than we actually are,” says Bruce Tremper, in his 27th year as director of the Utah Avalanche Center. “I’ve noticed it for years. I think it needs to be talked about.”

The most vocal criticism Tremper’s office receives is from people demanding that the forecasters place blame. “Our egos need that protection,” he says.

Yet here is what gets missed in the rush to criticize avalanche victims: It doesn’t address the actual problem. Dismissing accident victims as reckless can drown out productive evaluation, ignoring real human factors that led to the tragedy.

ABOVE: It’s easy to throw harpoons from behind a computer screen. A bit more difficult when you start to understand the complexities of an avalanche.

PHOTO: JEFF CRICCO

“It’s a lot more effective to approach these things from a point of understanding. It certainly doesn’t help to attack people who are alive or dead,” says Colorado Avalanche Information Center director Ethan Greene.

Professionals encourage discussion of obvious mistakes, “but in a very gentle way,” says Greene. Barring egregious circumstances and owing to the inherent unpredictability of snow, CAIC investigators often begin their conversations with survivors by telling them, “It’s not your fault.”

“To be criticized for an accident might mean the next really useful accident report never makes it to the public,” says Greene. “That’s only gotten worse. If you look at the amount of use and the number of reports we get, it’s not going in the same direction.

There will be a full burial, and we won’t hear about it for months because people are afraid of being criticized.”

Next time you’re sitting at a desk and gathering online snow-stake data to prove a dead man “should have known better,” or judging a victim’s decision to make yourself look smart at a dinner party, consider the arrogance that signifies.

“As soon as you realize ‘that could be me,’ that’s when you’ve arrived as an avalanche expert,” says Tremper. “You see that the world is a lot more random place than you imagined.”

—DEVON O’NEIL

THE FIVE HAZARDOUS ATTITUDES

(ADAPTED FROM THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, AND ADOPTED BY SNOW SAFETY EXPERTS)

- 1. ANTI-AUTHORITY (“DON’T TELL ME...”):** Found in people who do not like others telling them what to do.
- 2. IMPULSIVITY (“DO IT QUICKLY”):** The attitude of people who frequently feel the need to do something, anything, immediately. They do not stop to think about the consequences—they do the first thing that comes to mind.
- 3. INVULNERABILITY (“IT WON’T HAPPEN TO ME”):** Many think that accidents happen to others, not them.
- 4. MACHO (“I CAN DO IT”):** Exemplified by those who are trying to prove they are better than others.
- 5. RESIGNATION (“WHAT’S THE USE?”):** People who think this way do not see themselves as able to make a difference in what happens to them.