



Skiing deaths: Tragedy hits the slopes

By Bob Ehlert - behlert@sacbee.com

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On Jan. 27, a San Francisco skier was found dead at Homewood Mountain Resort on the west side of Lake Tahoe. Though the 37-year-old man's death was still being investigated at press time, it represents the third fatality in the Lake Tahoe region this ski season. Two skiers died in Southern California on Jan. 25 following an avalanche in the San Gabriel Mountains.

It's rare for any ski region to make it through a season without fatalities. Of the estimated 55 million skier visits in the United States for 2006-07, there were 22 deaths reported nationwide, according to the National Ski Areas Association, a trade group based in Lakewood, Colo. The NSAA keeps annual records of ski deaths but not ongoing ones, so there is no overall death toll. The 10-year average number of fatalities per year is 37. California's worst year in memory was 2006, when 17 were killed.

The fact is, skiers and snowboarders die: with helmets on, helmets off; within, and outside, the boundaries of resorts. They suffer blunt trauma by hitting trees and colliding with other skiers. They have heart attacks, they suffocate in avalanches (an alarming number this year). Some get lost and succumb to the elements. Others slip and fall from heights or off ski lifts. And still others, as is suspected in the case of Sunday's fatality at Homewood, suffocate in deep snow.

Despite national safety weeks and ski patrol admonishments, there are victims each year – but far fewer than from many more seemingly benign activities like bicycling (more than 1,000 deaths in 2005) and swimming (3,600 deaths that year).

There are no seat belts or airbags in skiing, but there is the "Your Responsibility Code" created several years ago and adopted by resorts across the country:

- 1. Always stay in control**, and be able to stop or avoid other people or objects.
- 2. People ahead of you** have the right of way. It is your responsibility to avoid them.
- 3. You must not stop** where you obstruct a trail or are not visible from above.
- 4. Whenever starting downhill** or merging into a trail, look uphill and yield to others.
- 5. Always use devices** to help prevent runaway equipment.
- 6. Observe all posted signs** and warnings. Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas.

7. Prior to using any lift, you must have the knowledge and ability to load, ride and unload safely.

The number of helmet-wearing skiers and snowboarders grows slightly each year, the NSAA reports. Getting kids to take lessons from certified instructors before sending them out to ride the snow could save a life – and a lifetime of heartache.

The family of a San Francisco snowboarder who died from a fall the day she was at Alpine Meadows in 2006 is attempting to bring even more scrutiny to slope safety. California Ski and Snowboard Safety launched an informational Web site (www.calskisafety.org) this month "to promote and support safety improvements in California skiing, snowboarding and recreational snow sports and serve as an independent, factual public resource regarding the safety of California ski resorts."

The independent group, though just getting under way, hopes to bring together governmental agencies, resorts and safety organizations to produce the "safest possible snow sport environment and experience."

That's a big, complicated job considering the sometimes disparate agendas of skiers and resorts. But the end result could provide a higher level of safety. And who could argue with that?