

# An avalanche on Mailbox Peak

It was Christmas Eve in 1998 when Steve, Fred, Carol, myself and my 5 month old pup Sage met to climb Mt. Catherine on Snoqualmie Pass in Washington State. After a tricky drive on icy and snowy roads, we revised our plan to Mailbox Peak (exit 34, I-90, 4800'). The weather was warming up a bit from several days of temperatures in the 20's, but it was still below freezing. Several inches of snow were at the trailhead (el. 1000') and we started off in the usual good spirits.

The steep hike went fairly well, except for a strong wind at times. At 2500' it started raining and dropping snow plops from the trees, but by 3000' there was only a very light snowfall. Much of the trail was protected from the winds. Eventually we broke out of the trees and trekked through deep powder at times, bare crust at other times. We reached the base of a boulder field near the top and the wind was howling. We tried climbing up it for a ways, but decided the snow and wind were too much and headed for a path through the trees. Eventually the trees gave way to an open slope (about 35 degree angle), which had deep wind-blown powder on it. It had been a steep and tough climb, but little Sage had been a trooper – until now. She refused to go on. Thinking she needed rest, I picked out a nearby tree to wait at while the others continued. Steve was in the lead with Fred and Carol following.

After just a few steps up the slope, I heard Steve yell AVALANCHE and looked up to see the entire wave of snow coming towards us. My first worry was Sage so I screamed at her to come to me, which thankfully she did just as we got knocked over by the flow. Because I had stopped to rest with Sage, we were in the outskirts of the avalanche yet we were still rolled 5-6 times. And then we stopped and the snow started settling over and around us. Describing my fear at that moment is beyond words. Thankfully, Sage was on top of me as we settled and she was able to dig us both out.

When we surfaced, I was in a panic to find the others and saw Fred less than 15 feet away from me. He had been stopped by a sapling and was head first in the snow frantically kicking his legs while trying to yell for help. I immediately started trying to get to him out for fear he would suffocate, but the snow had set up like concrete and I did not have a shovel. At that point I heard Steve call for help and remembered that he had a shovel, so I ran over to free him. Thankfully, it was just his pack and some snow on his legs that was keeping him stuck in the snow so I could extricate him quickly by just removing his pack. Sometime during this initial panic, Carol yelled that she was OK so we were thankful to hear that.

Now we needed to get to action to help Fred, so Steve started shoveling and I kept digging away with my hands. We could still hear Bob groaning, but he had stopped kicking his legs. After a few minutes of digging, we freed an area around his face and one hand. His body seemed bent backwards, so we weren't sure the extent of his injuries. Since he had stopped making noise, the immediate priority was to get him oxygen so I cleared the snow from his mouth and his nose. Thankfully, he revived quickly once his airways were clear, so continued digging him the rest of the way out. And finally we were able to help free Carol from her burial waist down.

We all sat and regained composure before continuing very cautiously down the slope. Fred had a terrible headache and Carol had a bum knee, but we all were very happy to be alive.

We made a huge mistake that day given the perfect conditions for an avalanche, but thankfully we had a dog that was smarter than all of us. Sage didn't stop because she was tired, she stopped because she sensed the instability of that slope and did not want to cross it. The little black dog saved 3 lives that day, and that's when I decided she was destined for search and rescue.

~ Stacie (Chandler) Burkhardt

## Mailbox Avalanche Photos

*These photos were taken a week after the event. The weather had changed to rain and much of the snow had melted. Even so, you can get a feel for the depth of the burials. Note that the snow consolidated considerably during that week, so the burial depth in these photos is less than the avalanche day.*



Here is where we dug out Carol. One arm, both legs, and most of her torso was buried. Her head was above the snow. The one free hand had the glove pulled off during the avalanche. This hand was too cold to dig herself out with. See all the trees around?! Note the ski pole which was still in her buried hand.



Here is where we dug out Fred. Only his feet stuck out of the snow. His head was buried towards the bottom left of the hole. His back was lodged against the tree in the foreground. Note how deep the wall of snow is, by comparing to the snow shovel. Both hands still grasped his poles.



A view of the avalanche slope, looking up. This is about 50 feet upslope from the above burial sites. Sliding through trees is scary! The avalanche started above the rocks you see towards the top of the hill. Within a second the entire slope slid as a slab avalanche.



Side view of the slope. Estimated angle 35 degrees.