

# Wasatch Backcountry Rescue

The Importance of Avalanche Rescue Canines in  
US Avalanche Rescue Operations

South Tyrol, Italy - ICAR 2023



Wasatch Backcountry Rescue is an organization of Ski Patrolman from all across the big Class A avalanche terrain ski resorts here in Utah. We have over 500 professional rescue members, and approximately 40 canine rescue teams. On any given day, our members provide dozens, if not hundreds of In-bounds rescues all across the Wasatch Front. We are all members of separate ski patrols groups that all focus hard on mitigating our home resort slopes to make sure even our children can ski on these slopes, but as with working with Mother Nature, accidents can happen. And when they do we are prepared to respond quickly and with the highest level of efficiency and professionalism. Our goal is to be able to launch into the Utah Backcountry as a highly skilled, high alpine terrain professional team within minutes of a 911 call. Acting on behalf of our respective county law enforcement agencies. Our members are already in their ski boots and have not only a forecast for the day, but have been paying attention to the conditions as they transpire throughout the winter, and understand what it takes to negotiate dangerous avalanche terrain. After all, we do that for a living. Working in conjunction with many rescue professionals here in the state of Utah; Police, Fire, SAR, the Utah Avalanche Center, and the Utah Dept of Transportation, we have one goal: To bring folks home at the end of the day.

Most of what we do is injured user extraction, with a total of 35 backcountry rescues for the year, responding in many different ways utilizing air, ground, and snow machines to get the job done safely. 19 of those were avalanche related extractions.

Quoted from Ski Utah Magazine in 2018. "Utah has 15 alpine ski resorts, with 10 resorts within an hour of the airport with 156 ski lifts, 1,389 named runs, serving nearly 32,000 skiable acres." We also now have a new private resort which adds another 3000 acres.

We are seeing a new trend within our Skiing Community with the education level and overall, more “safety conscious” dynamic of the local ski touring parties increasing in our Backcountry users, leading to less local Avalanche Burials even in Extreme Snow years such as the one we just experienced.

On the other hand, and in an over 900 inch, 21 meter snow year, In-Bounds avalanches were on the rise across the Wasatch Front and Back. With a total of 11 inbounds avalanche responses. Having canines rested and readily available at each of the big 10 resorts across the valley means that a canine could potentially be on the site of the accident within minutes. Our general skiing public here in the United States does not subscribe to wearing beacons or carrying avalanche gear within the resort boundaries. They MIGHT have RECCO imbedded in their gear, but most likely have no clue what it is or understand its purpose. We call this the “Disneyland factor”. People expect the ride to loop around and come right back to where it started, and every thing to be completely safe and in control.

It seems while our Backcountry Users are becoming more and more savvy for when to venture out and when not to, our general skiing public has become less understanding, and much more insistent that resort terrain must be open and accessible at all times, even in the worst and most dangerous conditions. Which to a ski patrolman, seemingly translates to a much less intelligent clientele. This prompts us to believe that potentially the ski resorts and State Entities may be pushing the limits of what is safe or acceptable to operate in, making canines all the more necessary.

# Snowbird

April 6th

## Backcountry Avalanche into Snowbird Ski Resort

It had snowed solidly for days... During a rather large Avalanche Mitigation effort 2 days prior, we had dozens of avalanches come down and cross the state highway, closing the road, some unexpectedly creating a very dangerous situation for our state and resort personnel in the canyon. With this storm the wind had been relentless, causing huge pockets and snowfields to move and form with the mounting precipitation. The morning of the 6th, the Sun popped out and we were again blasting away trying to get big pieces of the present avalanche puzzle to settle in, or knock it down and relieve some tension. We had also been mitigating the ski area throughout his same time frame and the resort had just opened back up in the morning to the delight of all the hungry and patient powder skiers stuck inside for the prior three days. With the temperature climbing because of the sun and just after eleven am, a large Class 3 Avalanche crossed from the North of our ski resort and into the main roadway of State Road 210, running over it and covering a quarter of our beginner ski terrain near the Chickadee chairlift. I was in the office at the base and saw the giant powder cloud darken the windows as the calls of "Avalanche" hollered out over the radio. Running down the stairs and grabbing personnel, we were on the scene within a minute and beacon searching shortly after. The first canine, my pup Frank, (working with my secondary handler) was on site within 4 minutes from the top of the Gad 2 chairlift, with 3 other canines, 1 from Snowbird and 2 from Alta (2 miles away) on scene within 10 minutes. As the minutes ticked by, and modifying our search width strips to accommodate for the possibility of the smaller bodies of children, we secured areas of cleared

sections, utilizing avalanche guards and our resort employees in probe lines. In total 12 ski patrolmen, 1 county sheriff, 4 dogs, 3 resort managers, and 40 people in probe teams.











# Sundance - WBR

- Importance of Canine Team to the individual resorts
  - Responsibilities to resort
    - The financial commitment of resorts to WBR and individual teams
      - Reaping the benefits of the highly trained WBR team at the resort

In conclusion, WBR is maintaining fluidity within our organization. Ready to adapt and respond appropriately to what our community needs. Whether it be more in-bounds responses with our resort canines, or more injured user extraction sleds placed strategically throughout the region. We are there to make a difference to our skiing community.

We have all felt greatness...

We have all fallen short...

But together we will thrive..