

AVALANCHE SCHOOLS IN THE U.S.A.

Rod Newcomb
American Avalanche Institute, Wilson, N.Y.

The following is a list of avalanche schools in the U.S. which are available to the public and which charge a tuition fee:

National Avalanche School
USDA Forest Service
Box 2417
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20013

American Avalanche Institute
Box 308
WILSON, WY 83014 Telephone 307-733-3315

Attention: Rod Newcomb

Sierra Avalanche Seminars
Box 8
NORDEN, CA 95724 Telephone 916-426-3037

Attention: Norm Wilson

The Mountain School
15630 S.E. 124th St.
RENTON, WA 98055 Telephone 206-226-2613

Attention: Ray Smutek

Sierra Ski Touring
Box C-9
MAMMOTH LAKES, CA 93546 Telephone 714-934-4495

Attention: David Beck

The National Avalanche School was established in 1971. Currently, courses are held every other year. The courses are divided into two phases, the classroom session held during the first week of November and the field sessions held during the winter in various localities. The instructors include many of the persons active in snow research and management in the U.S.

The American Avalanche Institute was established in 1974 by Rod Newcomb with the help of Norm Wilson. There were 100 participants the first year; 317 during the winter of 1979-80. If the courses are filled in the winter of 1980-81, there will be 420 participants. The curriculum includes both classroom and field work. The field groups are small: the instructor-participant ratio is one instructor to seven or eight participants. Instructors represent the entire spectrum of avalanche workers, from the field person active in control work to the scientist.

Sierra Avalanche Seminars were established in 1974 by Norm Wilson. Courses are held in Donner Pass with seven students in each course. Special courses are given by request. Much of the time is spent in the field looking at the snow in the avalanche terrain around Donner Pass.

The Mountain School offers three-day courses, two days in the classroom and one day in the field. The courses are designed to increase the students' knowledge of the avalanche phenomenon and the methods of reducing exposure to avalanche hazards.

Sierra Ski Touring has expanded its program to include a five-day course for wilderness skiers. One-day and four-day courses are also offered. The courses are held out of Mammoth, California.

An Avalanche Workshop in the U.S.A. is needed. Plans are underway to hold one in November, 1982, in Colorado, Montana, or Utah. This workshop, like the Canadian one, would be held every four years. By staggering the dates, a workshop could thus be held every two years.

DiscussionKingery:

The Far West Professional Ski Patrol Association has tried to organize a course similar in quality to the National Avalanche School in the off-years of the USDA Forest Service School. Without financial backing, however, the course has proved to be uneconomical, unless it is attended by 150 to 200 people. Do you feel that there is still a need for this type of course in the years between the USDA Forest Service School? If so, what would be the best time of the year?

Newcomb:

Since the National Avalanche School started charging a tuition fee the attendance has dropped slightly. I doubt whether there would be enough interest to hold an off-year course in the far west. The American Avalanche Institute School, or other private schools, could take up the slack.

Smutek:

There is a big need for a national avalanche school that is totally back country oriented. Perhaps it would make more sense to alternate between back country national schools and operations schools.

Kuleta:

The current schools are very good. However, there doesn't seem to be enough definition as to who should attend, that is, lay persons, or experienced mountaineers. With a mixed type of attendance, the seminars are boring for one person and too technical for another. I would like to see more education for lay people, plus continued education for mountaineers, ski patrollers and guides. More advanced courses plus refresher seminars should be offered.

Newcomb:

The American Avalanche Institute offers an advanced Forecasting Seminar which is oriented towards persons experienced in the field.

Stewart:

You have been very successful in your avalanche courses; what blend of classroom and field work do you recommend?

Newcomb:

One-half field work and one-half classroom sessions. The active person taking an avalanche course tends to become restless after a few hours of class work and needs to get out in the field. Conversely, after a few hours of field work, it is best to return to the classroom to warm up, have a cup of coffee, and continue with classroom discussions.

LaChapelle:

I wish to challenge the comment that there ought to be separate courses for back country ski tourers, because I do not see the distinction myself. I learned about avalanches in ski areas and in dealing with highway problems, but I don't feel that this is in any way handicapped my ability to cope with back country conditions.

If skiers want to learn as much as possible about avalanches, I would advise them to go with professional ski patrolmen on control missions and see what avalanches really do and where they fall. We need courses that will give people more chances to see avalanches released, to see where they occur, and to see how snow fractures. I think Rod Newcomb's courses are quite good for this because he takes people on these training courses out and bombs avalanches for them.