

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO REVISION:  
AN INTRODUCTORY TOOL FOR INFLUENCING BACKCOUNTRY BEHAVIOR

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**ABSTRACT:** The open-source Know Before You Go (KBYG) avalanche awareness program provides a 50 minute introduction to avalanche safety for motorized and non-motorized users and can be presented during a school period. Intended for a 14 year-old audience with minimal avalanche experience, the program is easily adapted for older audiences and provides a valuable tool for influencing the behavior of potential, aspiring, and beginning backcountry riders. Major revisions in 2015 include messaging based on 5 points:

- Get the Gear
- Get the Training
- Get the Forecast
- Get the Picture
- Get out of Harm's way

The program begins with a video featuring prominent athletes, big avalanches, extreme riding footage, music, animation, and an introduction to backcountry social responsibility. The introductory video was posted online ([kbyg.org](http://kbyg.org)) and has received 463,000 views since November. KBYG was presented 288 times to over 16,000 people in Utah and Colorado last winter, three-quarters of them in schools. We distributed the program content across North America, with major media sources helping to promote the program. The KBYG program content is available to all avalanche educators.

**KEYWORDS:** awareness, education, introductory, video, school



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Utah Avalanche Center developed the Know Before You Go (KBYG) Avalanche Awareness program in 2004. About 200,000 people in Utah as well as over 100,000 others around North America have seen this flagship awareness presentation since inception.

The KBYG presentation was originally developed for teenage users new to winter recreation, following a tragic and avoidable accident in which 14 people in multiple parties, none of them identified as regular backcountry users, were caught in an avalanche just a several minute walk from a popular parking lot and trailhead. Three high school students were killed. The avalanche danger was rated High and an Avalanche Warning was in effect at the time, although none of those caught were aware of that or what the danger rating meant. We recognized that there was a key element missing in avalanche education – a short, compelling program to implant the awareness in a general population who were new to the backcountry or who might enter the backcountry. The following key program criteria were identified:

- It needed to fit into a school period, typically 50 minutes
- It needed to appeal to teenagers, a demographic typically resistant to safety messages
- It needed to successfully compete for user attention with highly produced and attention-grabbing products like traditional ski movies, product advertisements, and action movies
- It needed to be actionable – participants needed to leave with a clear understanding of what to do next
- It needed to be simple – no math, no charts, no memorization, no on-snow practice – just a few simple and memorable points
- It needed to be inclusive and non-judgmental of recreation modes. It needed to appeal to motorized and non-motorized

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users; skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers, snowmobilers, hunters – anyone who entered avalanche terrain

- It needed buy-in from public school staff
- It was not intended to provide a complete education, only to serve as a “gateway drug” to further learning
- Many participants would not use the learning directly or immediately, but that those living in avalanche terrain still benefited from knowing that avalanches were a serious issue and that resources were available to mitigate risk
- It needed to be scalable – we needed the ability to make hundreds of these presentations per year

To achieve these goals, we incorporated:

- A 17 minute introductory video
- An avalanche professional with a slide deck to support a talk and question and answer period
- Professional video and photos featuring terrain and riding styles from conservative to radical
- Professional athletes and forecasters as narrators and co-promoters
- Aggressive, current music
- A fast pace conveying fun and adventure, combining risk-taking with careful analysis and informed decision-making
- Disturbing images of the destructive nature and aftermath of avalanches
- Aggressive marketing to school teachers, administrators, parents, and state school board officials
- Presenting only a few points and providing information on how to learn more
- Commercial brands to help promote the program

We are careful to not advocate abstinence. Our primary message is that avalanche safety is not a boring subject and does not stifle fun, creativity, or thrill – it is a key element of being a skilled rider and is actively practiced by pros.

While the program was intended for a teen-age audience, we found that it appeals to users of all

ages, both recreationists and those who live and work in the snow. Examples of presentation types and participants:

- School Physical Education classes and assemblies
- Resort employees and pass holders
- Retail shop employees and customers
- Workplace safety meetings
- Freeride and race competitions
- Prequels to ski, snowboard, and snowmobile movies
- Boy Scout, Girl Scout, and church youth groups
- Specialized presentations for filmmakers, ice climbers, fat-tire mountain bikers, snowshoers, utility workers, Search and Rescue personnel, and more

## 2. RECENT PROGRAM REVISION

By 2015, the Know Before You Go program clearly had made an impact in Utah. The program was accepted as an elective PE credit by the state school board and was promoted to teachers at the state level. The Utah Avalanche Center regularly presents 150 -200 times per year to 8,000 to 15,000 people. We receive anecdotal reports of backcountry riders who remembered what they saw 10 years ago and were motivated to get further education. We regularly meet parents who tell us of their children describing the program to them. A teenage resort skier was able to help with a hasty search that saved the life of a skier buried in an inbounds avalanche, citing her recent KBYG experience in her decision to step in. We distributed the program content to other groups around North America. Other youth-oriented programs were developed.

By 2015, we needed a refresh to inject fresh music, gear, athletes, high definition video, and a crop of new POV close calls. Other groups from the US and Canada expressed interest in adopting the program, suggesting more terrain variety and outside advising to make it appeal more to a North America-wide audience. The recently-developed Get The- points campaign provided a platform to refocus the message and the KBYG program provided another way of packaging the Get The-points campaign.

Utah Avalanche Center partnered with the Colorado Avalanche Information Center and Friends of

the Colorado Avalanche Information Center in summer, 2015 to produce a completely new program, with support and guidance from Avalanche Canada, the National Avalanche Center, and American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education, and cutting edge video from Red Bull Media House, Sherpas Cinema, Brain Farm, Teton Gravity Research, Alpine Assassins, Boondockers, and others. Other avalanche centers, foundations, and backcountry gear brands provided financial assistance to make a North America-wide program a reality.

Well-known and influential athletes such as Mikaela Shiffrin, Jimmy Chin, Jeremy Jones, Travis Rice, Chris Davenport, Jonny and Angel Collinson, Brody Leven, and others are featured.

The introductory video/slide deck/Q&A format continues. It is easy to modify the program for shorter or longer presentations or to include more local images and issues. The program is based around explaining the problem and why it matters with images and stories, and a framework for users to follow to increase their safety based on the five Get The- points. The concept of social responsibility and interaction with other users, roads, and infrastructure is introduced. A website, kbyg.org, has been created to house the program and provide a way for users to view the video and potential instructors and hosts to gain access to the content. About 150 people worldwide received the content and the video was translated into Bulgarian and Russian. Over 600 presentations were made to over 27,000 people last year that we know of, with only a fraction of those receiving content reporting results so far. We aggressively promoted the video, resulting in about a half million online views and multiple mentions in the snowsports media. We did a minor revision to the slide deck in summer, 2016 and a Spanish language version is in progress.

## 3. PROGRAM LOGISTICS

Anyone can view and download the program content at kbyg.org. A thumb drive containing the content may be purchased at a nominal cost to cover media and shipping costs. A video showing a complete presentation to assist in instructor training will be available by the end of 2016. Presenting the program is simple for anyone with avalanche safety experience and good public speaking skills and we have had good success with recruiting younger (college-age) presenters for junior- and high-school audiences.

It has been easy to fund ongoing KBYG operations, with local philanthropic foundations, community foundations, mountain town governments, resorts, and outdoor brands providing support in Utah. Funding has been used to pay instructors and mileage, continue content development, purchase audio-visual equipment, and pay an administrator to coordinate instructors, hosts, and venues.

Northwest Avalanche Center  
Red Bull Media House  
Sherpas Cinema  
Sierra Avalanche Center  
Spitzer Family Foundation  
Steve Romeo Memorial Fund  
Theo Meiners Snow Safety Foundation  
Travis Rice  
US Ski Team  
Zeal Optics

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The Know Before You Go program is an effective tool in the quiver of tools used to reduce avalanche accidents. In 2015, a diverse coalition joined forces to update the program and make it more region – neutral. We hope that other avalanche centers and educators can use the program content and the concept to continue this important work.

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