

THE GEAR HEADS – MOTOR SPECIFIC AVY TRAINING

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ABSTRACT: In 2012 an avalanche accident left me shattered. After losing one brother, and nearly both, I quickly realized that we knew nothing. After 20+ yrs of riding the backcountry and numerous "avy classes" we were the guys the group turned to. Our "qualifications" included attending a 4 hour seminar, we had the rescue gear, and we mostly rode safely. There were only a small number of avalanche educators offering seminar-style programs to motorized users and an even smaller number offering on-snow avalanche education. There was no standardized curriculum specific to motorized users in the U.S. and these courses were often taught by skiers who learned sledding as their second winter language. I started getting educated. I wanted to affect a change in my crew and in my region. I quickly concluded that snowmobilers were listening; they were thirsty for education. I worked with American Institute of Avalanche Research and Education (AIARE) among others, and embarked on a mission to create snowmobile specific curriculum. By January of 2016, I was invited to a working session with a group of snowmobile avalanche educators to further develop the AIARE curriculum for the motorized level 1. In the last 4 years I have seen this effort begin to affect a cultural change; I never thought I would be this involved. The public rollout of this curriculum will take place in the fall of 2016.

KEYWORDS: Motorized, Snowmobile, Snowbike, Avalanche Education

1. INTRODUCTION

Spending the majority of my life in the backcountry of Northern Colorado and Southern Wyoming traveling on snowmobiles for recreation, my brothers and I had been in a lot of places. Some good and some not as good. As kids we were always forced to take an "avy class" prior to season start and in our groups and circles we were seen as the knowledgeable ones when it came to avalanche safety. As we grew so did our machines and our thirst for deeper and steeper terrain.

By the time we were adults we were pushing the limits of ourselves and our equipment and we followed the rules and took a refresher every year. We were the outliers and none of our friends followed our steps for more than a season or two, most taking an attitude that they had been in the backcountry a long time, had never been caught and/or had already taken a class at some point

In 2012, an avalanche took the life of my little brother. It was at this point that I realized I needed to take action. So many others that knew so much less were in danger. I began my quest towards becoming an instructor and helping those around

me. The ones that always had an excuse to not have the right gear or could not be proficient would no longer have those excuses.

I took it upon myself to try and figure out why the motorized community refused to get educated and how I could use my and many other's love for my brother to turn it around.

2. THE BACKGROUND

We were educated, right? Well, since the mid-1990's my dad, brothers and I had been attending the same 1 hr lecture held by only a handful of instructors, offered for free at our local Snowmobile Expo. We learned all of what to do and how to do it. After a boring power point and some quick Q&A, we were back to checking out the latest gear or mocking the brands we didn't like. It was, for us, a rite of passage. It meant snow was coming and we were going to get out and ride soon.

I do not remember a single time that any of those instructors told me there was more to learn. Maybe they threw it in when I wasn't looking, but if they did, I certainly wasn't sold. They didn't make me thirsty to enlist in anything more. Sure, we took the occasional class at some local business or maybe even at a lodge somewhere, but education and inspiring a thirst for education wasn't on our minds. Heck, we could wear our boots at home and play with our beacons. Exposure to educa-

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tional resources was limited, and looking back on it we were lucky we had the exposure we did.

I remember the Colorado Avalanche Information Center being the place that the skiers had where we could find out where it snowed and how much, compare that with Snowtel data and we could find the goods, untouched powder and deepest around. But still it seemed that the information wasn't meant for us: it was for the skiers.

3. THE ACCIDENT

I missed that ride. I was supposed to be there and couldn't make it to the mountain. So I only know from the outside, working to get in, what it looked like: three Search and Rescue teams with about 40 personnel, 40 private searchers composed of some world recognized riders and 2 helicopters. We searched for 2 days before we found the site and my surviving brother. To say it was remote would be misleading as it was only a couple miles from the trail head.

I had never seen conditions like that in nearly 20 years of riding. The snow was more sensitive than I had ever seen and have since. As we searched, knowing only that there had been an avalanche, I felt smaller than I had ever felt before. Several times searchers triggered small slides and collapses that would send shivers down the spine. We had to continue to focus on the search and try hard to not lose sight of the hazards we were riding in.

After the snow dust settled, it was apparent that our education was so far below what was needed for where we were going, that it was dizzying. This is when I decided I would do everything in my power to help my friends, the riders. We needed change and I knew I could do it, but how?

4. THE BAD

Classes were few and far between, or we didn't hear about them. Mind you, it was a different time and social media was a lot different then. The classes that were put on were taught by educators that had rarely ridden a sled, had no understanding of our means of travel, and had almost no idea of our capabilities. The lessons were practically in a foreign language with little attempt to make us feel comfortable or welcome, whether perceived or otherwise.

4.1 Availability

There were few educators known in places in the world where motorized education was gaining

steam, but in 2012 when I decided that I wanted to educate the folks in my area too. The closest motor class I could find was 6 hours away and it turned out that the instructor was a skier. I took that class and had to jog my level 1 and level 2 on snowshoes. I felt that I had proved myself to the non-motorized skiers that I had what it took to be safe too. What would anyone not interested in skiing or snowshoeing and not driven by the loss of a loved one want go through that class?

4.2 Educators/Cirriculum

We could have driven across a state or two and found a motorized instructor but why? What would have truly motivated someone to designate that kind of travel? Remember, we had learned all we needed in that one seminar and we certainly were about the only one who had listened to it. I can probably still recite the whole thing. When I finally stepped up, it took some aggressive calling and convincing to even get into class. The whole issue revolved around the fact that I could not ski but I was persistent and ended up meeting some of the best people I have ever been blessed to work with through the process. I still wonder, why did I have to fight to pay for a class simply because I prefer a different means of travel?

The classes that were offered as motorized were a mixture of "important" criteria set forth by whoever deemed whatever criteria important. The class material was chosen by the instructor. There was no set curriculum; it was drastically different from instructor to instructor. To be able to pick up where you left off meant traveling to the same place and hoping to get the same instructor. Without that it, was nearly impossible to start where you left off.

4.3 Method of Travel

Trip planning a couple miles out and back requires looking in great detail how that particular day's avalanche problems factor in, what we may encounter and how to appropriately deal with it. This works in some forms of travel and as a snowmobiler I will cover a non-motorized users seasons miles in only my first trip. How can someone that has no idea of the vast amount of terrain we cover possibly understand and attempt to convey the complexity of judging the snow and reading it though a machine traveling at our speeds if they are unaccustomed to doing so themselves?

5. THE GOOD

Once I started the amazing process of delving into the educational realm there was no going back. The more I learned, the larger the thirst for more knowledge became. I had found the hook that was nestled somewhere in there. What really got me was when I would ask questions and the instructors would answer with my least favorite answers in the world: “that is a level 2 concept” or “that question is beyond the scope of this course”. That’s it, now I had to come back.

5.1 Information

Once I had begun to dig in, I found that information was everywhere. There were new websites to chase snow with and check conditions. It was so easy and was all there in apps and websites. There was a whole underground world of snow that for some reason had slipped mostly unnoticed.

5.2 Knowledge

Once I got past the feeling of being an outcast, I realized that everyone was so open, sharing and talking about every aspect of avalanches, from the science to the practical application. I found that there are teams of people working to break this wall down.

5.3 Market

The motorized riders as a whole have begun to take it more seriously. Following a huge jump in technology, where people are getting deeper in the backcountry faster following the storm, riders began thirsting for knowledge, seeing things they were unaccustomed to and the sheer power of Mother Nature up close and personal. The user group is tech savvy and eager to be challenge. They are primed and are ready to check it out.

6. THE HOOK

So I found my hook, but how do I get others involved? I have tried to take away all the arguments to avoid the learning.

6.1 Class

I have been a motorized consultant to A.I.A.R.E. (American Institute for Avalanche Research and Education) for a few winters now. They have the developers but we are the riders. In 2016, I was invited to participate in a ground breaking curriculum change. I became one of a select group, out to change how education looks for motorized us-

ers, mapping a path that allows for more instructors to save more lives by educating more riders. This is a very dedicated pool of individuals that have come together to really help the sport catch up. As the curriculum moves forward, we find more gear heads coming out of the woodwork as excellent educators that want to be a part of the movement and some that have background in motorized travel.

6.2 Classroom

With a lack of motorized educators, travel in the name of educations, has become a huge part of my life. This winter, we will debut our mobile classroom: a trailer that we have been working on for the past 2 summers that will bring the classroom to the student on the trailhead. We are setup to run classes of up to 14 students without any outside resources. Hauling our equipment and providing a suitable classroom was an amazing task but we are confident that until there are more instructors, mobile coverage is paramount to catching the motorized groups at this point in time where many feel that their ability has greatly surpassed their knowledge.

6.3 Snowbikes vs Snomobiles

The argument that all gear heads are the same is quickly been dissolved with the recent advent of the snowbike. The technology that has brought new means of travel to the backcountry has brought new challenges along with it. As with all winter travel, the snow is the same, but how we address the specifics of differing modes of travel need to be addressed. Each user group brings their own take on terrain and how they approach it. With each approach, we must address the specifics that apply to each form of travel and make that group feel it has a place to learn. This year, we will be implementing snowbike specific courses that will address just this.

7. THE STUDENT

In the past 4 seasons we have seen a drastic increase in awareness and reception. From scheduling to trade shows, the amount of positive reception has dispelled any feelings that the motorized community is unreachable. We as educators, strive for inspiration in every aspect of our pitch. We must maintain constant outreach in order to provoke a hunger for knowledge.

Students that are taking classes a second time to stay fresh, groups and regions that have a solid base of riders that are looking for that “rite of pas-

sage” for their new riders and senior riders alike must be able to know where to turn to learn. Having the ability to know what to do in the case of an accident and how to pre-trip in a manner that will minimize the chances for mistakes in the backcountry is imperative. Knowing that to be rusty on your backcountry travel and rescue skills will lead to grave consequences is monumental.

Watching classes fill to capacity and meeting people on the snow that have been applying lessons from former students and seeing a cultural shift from one of arrogance to one of humility, as to the power of the terrain we ride are all testaments to the eagerness of this user group to get educated. Four years ago I can remember how odd it was to see a float pack, whereas now, it is almost an embarrassment to not have one. This is a far cry from just a few years prior when beacons were seen as unnecessary in the same community.

I am humbled to be part of this movement. If I can be a part of the group that saves even one life, I will know that I honored the loss of my brother.

8. ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Tyler’s Backcountry Awareness (TBA) was founded to help those in “our area” of Northern Colorado and Southern Wyoming. We have educated riders all over North America and from several other countries.

Maintaining a volunteer staff dedicated to helping the community, TBA has been a resource for Search and Rescue and snowmobile clubs and our drive had helped to motivate change in education that has led to specific courses for motorized users.

We have been written into several published articles promoting safety and safety, as well as multiple articles in a seasonal publication distributed to clubs members in Colorado. We have been in Snowmobile magazine publications outlining things from choosing the correct gear to how to properly use and care for it.

TBA is on the committee for placing beacon checkpoints under the Know Before You Go campaign: A program that is working to build internationally recognized signage accompanied by a beacon test station to trail heads.

9. MOVING FORWARD

Where do we go from here? This is the big question. Is there any way to stop the momentum? If

we back off now, the opportunity presents itself for the programs to falter and fade into the books. It is my direct intention to lean on those in the community and continue to press the curriculum to keep up to the ever changing times. TBA intends to bring light to the hazards we face, to battle the uphill fight to keep people interested in practicing safe travel techniques We intend to continue to bring in new and motivated educators, both bringing recreationalists and guides up to a level where they can become professional educators and reaching out to the existing professionals that wish to use their extensive background to share with another group and maybe further their own riding skills.

We intend to continue to work with the development team to further the educational paths of motorized users. When it comes to education and safe travel, we intend to fill the knowledge void, opening doors for my user group and others, bringing them into the present and keeping them here for the future.

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