"SAFE UNTIL IT ISN´T": PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES ON RIDING STEEP COULOIRS IN THE BACKCOUNTRY

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ABSTRACT: Steep couloir riding concentrates multiple hazards, such as avalanches, cornices, rockfall, and fall risk, into terrain leaving little room for error. Despite this, couloir riding is growing in popularity, driven by social media, advancements in equipment, sources of information and increased accessibility to suitable terrain. However, this specific backcountry activity receives little attention in both recreational avalanche education and research. We examined how experienced practitioners approach planning, decision-making, and execution of steep couloir riding; which knowledge and skill sets they consider essential, and how avalanche education contribute to these essentials. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 24 experienced couloir riders from Scandinavia, the European Alps, North America, and the British Isles, ranging from 2 to 25+ years of riding couloirs. Data were analyzed using Systematic text condensation, a thematic cross-case method conducted stepwise during data collection. Results are presented as condensates: synthesized first-person accounts that retain practitioners' voices while representing patterns across the sample. Five themes emerged: reading and timing terrain; habituation and unreliable feedback; partners and personal capability; the draw and its shadow; and the limits of formal education. Practitioners did not describe seeking risk, but waiting: watching lines for seasons until the mountain grants opportunity, with maximal control, not to conquer conditions but to stay responsive to terrain and conditions that cannot be made safe. Drawing on the concept of resonance, we interpret the fascination drawing riders to the practice as a meaningful relationship with the uncontrollable (German: Das Unverfügbare). Predictability nurtures alienation, and resonance cannot arise unless some elements extend beyond our control. For education, participants converged: courses are necessary but structurally insufficient, because couloir judgement is grown through participation and mentorship rather than delivered content in a learning environment where outcomes do not reliably track decision quality.

KEYWORDS: steep riding, couloirs, qualitative research, avalanche education, risk communication, mentorship

IMPLICATIONS FOR AVALANCHE EDUCATION AND RISK COMMUNICATION

- ✓ Build the missing mentorship tier between recreational and professional training.
- ✓ Use low-consequence micro-terrain to practice couloir riding in terrain where one can make mistakes and learn from them.
- ✓ Treat riding skill and reflective practices such as structured debriefings as safety practices.
- ✓ Deliver messages through trusted figures inside the community.
- ✓ Address the psychological costs openly rather than through the language of recklessness.

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1. RECKLESS BY REPUTATION: MISREADING THE STEEP RIDER

Steep couloir riding sits awkwardly in avalanche safety work. The terrain concentrates hazards and amplifies consequences: confinement, terrain traps, overhead hazards, and falls that can continue for long sections. People who engage in steep riding are often described as reckless thrill-seekers, particularly in media and social media narratives after incidents, but also in avalanche-safety conversations. Empirical evidence shows that laypeople judge adventure sports and their participants as more dangerous and more reckless than mundane sports even when fatality rates are held identical (Ebert, Durbach and Field, 2024). Participants themselves show the opposite profile: experienced skiers give lower danger and recklessness ratings than non-skiers while being more responsive to variations in fatality rate and competence (Ebert and Durbach, 2023). This framing matters practically as it shapes what we think education can do for participant groups, whether we consider them reachable at all, and how the community responds when things go wrong. In this paper we present practitioners' own perspectives. Our insights draw from an ongoing interview study of experienced steep couloir riders. Our aim is to establish an understanding of how competence in steep terrain is built, what draws practitioners to the activity, and whether they perceive formal avalanche education as a contributor. We then offer an interpretive reframing and a set of implications for avalanche education and risk communication. Two findings drive the paper. First, the description of steep couloir riding in behavioral terms as risk-seeking poorly captures how practitioners themselves understand it. They describe the activity as being in *a resonant relationship with the uncontrollable* (Das Unverfügbare; Rosa, 2019; 2020); a demanding relationship with an environment that cannot be made available (verfügbar), or entirely safe, on demand. Second, the widely reported feeling that avalanche courses are “necessary but not enough” is not a complaint about course quality; it reflects a structural limit on what any course can contain. This has direct consequences for how we may want to design recreational avalanche education and communicate risk to this group of backcountry recreationists.



Mike Brownlow skillfully descending Hayfork Gully, An Teallach. Photo: James Thacker

2. TWENTY-FOUR CONVERSATIONS: LISTENING TO THE RIDERS

2.1 Design and participants

We conducted 24 semi-structured individual interviews with practitioners (see Table 1) recruited through a freeride framing rather than a narrow steep-riding perspective, in order to reach the broader population that rides steep terrain occasionally as well as the dedicated core. Interviews lasted 45–90 minutes, followed an interview guide covering background, fascination and motivation, approach and practice, avalanche education, advice, and open reflection, and were conducted in Norwegian, English or German. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. Analysis proceeded interview by interview, with the analytic framework revised after each addition.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 24 participants.

Characteristic	***Range in sample***
Participants	24 (5 women, 19 men)
Discipline	22 skiers, 2 splitboarders
Involvement	Moderate recreational to full-time professional
Professional roles	IFMGA/national guides, avalanche instructors, forecaster, SAR/first responder, snow scientist, elite competitive athletes, filmmakers, freeride coaches
Experience	4 to 50+ years; 45–100 ski days per season
Regions of practice	Scandinavia, the European Alps, North America, and British Isles

2.2 Analysis: Systematic text condensation

Interviews were analyzed using systematic text condensation (STC; Malterud, 2012; 2025), a four-step strategy for cross-case thematic analysis. Step 1 establishes a total impression and preliminary themes,

with preunderstanding and theoretical frame temporarily set aside. Step 2 identifies meaning units, delimited by content, and sorts them into code groups. Step 3 divides each code group into subgroups and condenses each into a condensate: a first-person account that systematically re-edits the expressions of every meaning unit, staying close to participants' own vocabulary. Step 4 synthesizes the condensates into third-person analytic text with interpretive category headings, validated against the transcripts.

Below we present condensates rather than analytic text, departing from convention deliberately. The analysis is ongoing, and the condensates represent the point analysis has reached by now. More importantly, the condensates preserve the texture of how riders reason, which suits the question we want to put to the reader: whether they recognize themselves in these accounts, and where they do not. Interpretation and theory are therefore carried out in the discussion.

2.3 Sample adequacy and ethics

Sample adequacy was assessed using information power (Malterud et al., 2016) rather than a fixed target. Themes formed during the first interview and required few top-level revision across the following 23; emergence of new subthemes declined in the final interviews, and recent participants from previously unsampled positions (a moderate recreational rider, an academic snow scientist, a competitive athlete who does not identify as a steep skier) strengthened the central code groups rather than adding to them.

Participants gave informed consent, and quotations are anonymized; some are translated from Norwegian, some from German.

3. WHAT THE RIDERS DESCRIBE: FIVE CONDENSED ACCOUNTS

While participants represented diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds, their answers converged into shared accounts. The results below are organized into five condensates that represent a re-contextualization of the data into corresponding cohesive accounts while staying as close as possible to participants' own vocabulary.

3.1 Reading and timing terrain: "You don't go to lines, you wait for them, then verify in the field"

The first condensate connects preparation and technical assessment as a single practice of exposure management. Choosing a line and finding the moment when it is rideable are described as one continuous activity rather than two: a season of watching and tracking produces a hypothesis, which the day in the terrain then tests, and the decision to ride or turn around follows from that test.

> *I don't pick a line and then go ride it. I watch it, often for a whole season and sometimes for years, and I wait for it to come into condition. Living in the same area I go riding means I can keep track of the snowpack; which layers are down there, what previous weather patterns have done. I use the forecast, but that´s just an additional input to my own record. And I don´t focus on the danger rating, I am interested in the avalanche problem(s); where it would be and what it would do to me in this terrain. I form an expectation before I go and test it against what I find, rather than going out hoping it will be fine.*
>
> *When I am outside, I observe the effects of the wind, old avalanche activity, and signs in the snowpack. I look at safe spots and try to envision how potential sluff will slide … and how to not find myself in or close to unnecessary terrain traps. Couloirs can have different problems than other formations on the mountain, and therefore I need to know as much as possible about the snow and the weather … and everything needs to align for me to go out and try. What I want, in the end, is to be able to say in plain words why this is safe today, not merely to have failed to find a reason it is dangerous.*

3.2 Habituation and unreliable feedback: "You get used to it, and that's the danger"

The second condensate concerns how practitioners' relationship to risk changes over a career, and why experience can be an unreliable teacher in this terrain. Uneventful outcomes are easily read as evidence of sound decisions, and accumulated over time they harden into something that feels like competence. Habituation does the rest: terrain that was once demanding comes to feel ordinary, while the terrain itself has not changed.

> *Nobody warns you about habituation. You do something exposed, nothing happens, and the next time it feels more comfortable, almost ordinary; the terrain has not changed, but*

> *your sense of it has. And the mountain is a poor teacher, because the outcome does not tell you whether the decision was any good. After a good season you think you have become excellent, when really you might have been lucky, and you cannot tell the two apart. You just get used to everything turning out all right, if nothing bad happens. Until it suddenly does, and then it is too late. I try to be consistent in the way I read the snow and making sure I don´t get too comfortable and end up riding steep in questionable conditions. Keep the ego down. So, I ask, on the good days as well as the questionable days, whether I did well or simply was not tested.*

3.3 Riding partners and personal capability: "You build trust with your companions before you go steep, and you must be able to ski well"

The third condensate brings together two elements that participants treat as controllable in an otherwise uncontrollable world: the group as a safety system, and the riding mastery each member must bring to it. Both come down to a single pair of questions: what you bring yourself, and who you bring along.

> *Two things are outside my control: nature, and other people. I can know myself and I can know my equipment; I cannot know how a stranger perceives risk, or how they will behave when they feel uncertainty. So, who I am with decides what I will ride that day. I go into couloirs with a small number of people I have built up with over years, with some criteria: people who ski at least as well as I do and whose training and skills I know. With the wrong partners in exposed terrain, I am managing someone else's margin as well as my own, and there are days when I would rather be alone than carry that. An important element and often under communicated skill is the ability to ride. In steep terrain you should not fall, full stop. Being able to ski well is a safety measure; the more comfortable on skis you are, the more you´re able to focus on the environment around you. Touring makes you fit and good at going uphill; it does not make you a good skier; you must ride a lot to become good at riding. People underestimate riding abilities, including myself at times.*

3.4 The draw and its shadow: "As close to flying as you can get", and the costs of "flying" too high

The fourth condensate holds together two sides of the same activity: the fascination practitioners describe, and the costs that accompany it in the form of identity, ego, external expectation, and the aftermath of incidents.

> *It is not the danger that´s attractive. What I am after is the line itself: the aesthetics of a clean couloir, the absorption where nothing else exists, the moment when the snow is right and I can open up and it is the closest thing to flying I know. It can feel safe, almost like the mountain hugs you. Part of the pleasure is that I cannot order it. The line has to be granted, with the right snow and the right window; waiting is the practice, and the afterglow lasts for long. Where the uncertainty should come from divides us: some wants it from the snow and the unknown, others want the difficulty to come from the riding, the exposure, personal capacity. There is a version of this that is not about the mountain at all; a part is about identity: like you sign a kind of contract every year and have to prove yourself. The expectations come from outside too: from peers, from sponsors, from riding culture. They push you onto lines you do not want and should not been on. When I ride for myself, it is fun again. ... And then there is what happens when it goes wrong. You do not have to be buried or hurt to be damaged: being close to it, seeing it, digging someone out … that´s enough. And because people think trauma requires a body, they never recognize it. What helped was going back only with people I trusted, friends who understand. What does not help is being told we chose this.*

3.5 The limits of formal recreational education: "The course taught me what's dangerous, not what to do about it in the middle zone"

The fifth and last condensate concerns the role and contribution of formal recreational avalanche education, on which the sample was unusually consistent across every level of experience and involvement. There are clear limitations to recreational avalanche courses for those who want to venture into steep couloirs, and the practitioners choose other ways of gaining competence.

Take the courses. I could not do this without them, and I keep taking them, because the knowledge fades, and I have seen people on advanced courses who had forgotten the basics. But the course teaches me what is dangerous and how to stay away from it … but I don´t want to stay away. In the middle of the couloir, where real decisions are made, the course does not tell me what to do. I have learned the theory; some of us have a great deal of the theory, but that's just not the same as lived reality. Where I learned the practice is from going out with people who were already doing it, building up slowly, watching someone make real go/no-go decisions. When I finally did formal training, its gift was words for what I already saw in the snow. And it depends entirely on who takes you: a weak mentor hands down weak practice with exactly the same authority as a good one. You need a good mentor, a person you trust, that takes you out and teaches you the stuff. You simply cannot get that in a course.

4. WHAT WE GET WRONG, AND WHAT FOLLOWS: RESONANCE, IDENTITY AND THE LIMITS OF RECREATIONAL COURSES

4.1 Not risk-seeking: a resonant relationship with the uncontrollable

The most consistent misfit between how steep riding is described from outside and how practitioners themselves perceive and describe it, is the assumption that they are reckless adrenaline junkies that (uncritically) seek risk. What our participants describe pursuing is something they "cannot order" or obtain on demand: a line in condition, snow that answers back, a moment of complete absorption. That in itself is not risk; it´s a relationship of resonance between the practitioner, the activity and the world. The practice of steep riding in couloirs is organized around waiting for everything to align so that the opportunity can be taken.

Hartmut Rosa's (2019, 2020) concept of resonance offers a precise vocabulary for this. Resonance describes a relationship in which the world is not a mute backdrop or a resource, but something that addresses us and that we can answer. Crucially, resonance requires that the other side remain uncontrollable (Rosa, 2020), because what is always available on demand goes silent. This explains the apparent paradox at the center of our data. Nobody exercises more control than the practitioners of this study: season-long observation, problem-based assessment, partner vetting, riding capability. However, the control is not deployed to fully eliminate uncertainty or to make the mountain *available on demand* (to render it *verfügbar*). This would silence the fascination and extinguish the very thing that draws them in, the core element they came for: the uncertainty; the uncontrollable. The control they practice is deployed to survive staying in contact with terrain that cannot be made safe. Mastery in the service of contact, not domination.



"I hate the mountain because it has power over me." Norwegian philosopher Peter Wessel Zapffe's (1974) iconic statement matches how the mountain's uncontrollable nature has the power to both fascinate and traumatize. Photo: Tarjei Westerlund

Our data also refine the idea of Rosa in that the uncontrollable is not one singular thing. Several participants deliberately minimize uncertainty related to snowpack stability, preferring bulletproof and already-avalanched conditions, so that the uncertainty they face comes from the difficulty of riding and exposure rather than from the snow. Others seek the opposite. Practitioners partition (un)controllabilities, embracing some while suppressing others, and this partitioning varies across the sample independent of skill, discipline or individual comfort and preference. For education and risk communication, the practical consequence is that "steep riders" are not one motivational type; not one homogenic group

4.2 When the relationship hollows: identity, expectation and trauma

The same theoretical framework accounts for when the activity of steep riding is practiced for reasons that puts the practitioners themselves in an unease. When riding becomes instrumental, undertaken for status, image, sponsorship, or purely to uphold an identity to satisfy others, the resonant relationship hollows out. Participants described this transition from the inside with striking clarity: paying the meter on an identity contract, riding just to feel good enough. Several linked their worst decisions directly to these pressures, and their recovery to riding in their own way again; for themselves more than for others. This is not a moral observation. It is safety-relevant, and it identifies and focuses on a major risk factor in the social environment of the sport. The relationship between activity and practitioner is naturally dynamic, and the social environment plays an important role that extends way beyond the avalanche terrain itself.



"Nature is not a backdrop for human activity, but a reality to which we owe reverence" (Zapffe, 1974). Embracing Peter Wessel Zapffe's call for true reverence in the wild. Steep skiing is less about dominating risk and more about entering a deep, resonant dialogue with an environment that can never be controlled. Photo: Tarjei Westerlund

Trauma belongs to the same account. If fascination arises from environmental and social uncontrollability, trauma is the lethal realization of that uncontrollability: not an intrusion from outside the activity, but its shadow. Participants reported that proximity to accidents witnessing and rescue involvement are traumatizing even when they had not themselves been buried or physically injured. They identify how such experiences often go unrecognized because trauma is assumed to require direct bodily harm. In resonance terms, trauma converts a responsive relationship into a silent or hostile one: riders described losing decision-making capacity in terrain where it previously had felt fluent. Recovery involved social repair: returning with trusted partners, stating plainly what one cannot yet do, rebuilding through practice, teaching, mentoring and taking time. This recovery is exposed to silencing from two directions: from outside by the stigma that says you chose this (you are a reckless thrill-seeker), and from inside by a culture in which admitting fear can be experienced as a loss of standing.

4.3 Why courses feel insufficient: participation and a wicked learning environment

Participants consistently described formal avalanche education as necessary yet insufficient for the decisions they face in couloir terrain. We read this as a category problem rather than a quality problem. Wenger (1998) distinguishes reification, meaning knowledge packaged into transportable objects such as scales, frameworks, checklists and drills, from participation and the lived competence that grows through practice. Courses are excellent at the first and cannot, in principle, deliver the second. Couloir judgement is largely of the second kind, acquired through what Lave and Wenger (1991) call legitimate peripheral participation: newcomers learn a craft by taking part in it alongside more competent practitioners. Our participants mentioned mentorship repeatedly and underlined how formal training just put words to what was already seen. The gap they report is therefore structural and cannot be closed by adding more course content.



Aspirants, instructors and guides discussing route options together on an informal outing: learning the practice by taking part in it. Photo: Tim Dassler

Two boundary conditions sharpen this. First, participation only produces competence where the environment (social or natural) supplies usable feedback, and couloir riding rarely does so. Outcomes in couloirs are delayed, rare and weakly coupled to decision quality, and thus considered a wicked learning environment in the sense of Hogarth et al. (2015). A clean run may reflect a sound call or good luck, and it feels identical (good) either way. Practices that have merely not yet been punished acquire the authority of practices that are sound, and because they are transmitted through the same mentorship that carries genuine expertise, an entire group can learn the same problematic prac-

tices. Second, access to mentorship is unevenly distributed, and mentor quality is uncontrolled; a weak mentor transmits weak practice with full authority. Both conditions are actionable, and both point away from simply adding more content to recreational avalanche education.

5. IMPLICATIONS FOR AVALANCHE EDUCATION AND RISK COMMUNICATION

5.1 Avalanche education

If competence is grown through participation rather than delivered as content, the task is to build the conditions for participation. Our participants, including several educators, converged on the following.

- Build the missing tier. Recreational avalanche education typically stops before the level of steep terrain riding, and the next step is professional training. Longer, mentored, apprenticeship-style formats and courses aimed at steep riding rather than at avoiding it fill a real gap; participants who found such courses wanted more of them.
- Use micro-terrain. The feeling of couloir riding, including its many elements, can be trained and rehearsed in low-consequence features before it is practiced in consequential terrain. This delivers participation-style learning within the liability constraints instructors actually face.
- Treat riding skills as safety content. Descent capability is a precondition, not a separate hobby: the ability not to fall is what allows judgement to keep operating in steep terrain. Learning to ride can only be attained by riding.
- Make mentorship a designed component, not a coincidence. Structured shadowing of experienced decision-makers, guided days framed explicitly as learning, and mentor development address both access inequality and mentor quality.
- Teach a reflective practice explicitly. The most transferable skill in a wicked learning environment is the habit of identifying the discrepancy between what we think we (can) do and what we actually do. This can be done through video review, structured debriefs, or comparing predictions against observations.
- Be careful with framing and licensing Participants supported steep-specific course formats but warned that a certificate implying mastery of steep riding risks manufacturing confidence without competence.
- Course design and marketing should anticipate a different learner. Educators running freeride-oriented courses reported that participants want the outcome they see in films without necessarily accepting the skill-building prerequisite, unlike avalanche-course learners, who more often accept doing something unglamorous first. Maybe different course formats can inspire each other.

5.2 Risk communication

- Drop the risk-seeking frame. It is inaccurate for most practitioners, and it supplies the stigma that keeps people from seeking help after incidents. Speak the language practitioners already use.
- Use the messenger, not just the message. Generic safety communication bounces off this community. Public accounts by experienced riders of their own accidents, shared with the intention of learning, were described as unusually powerful.
- Make the luck-or-skill question a safety routine. Debriefing good days as well as bad ones is the practitioner-counter to false feedback. It cannot replace or manufacture the feedback the mountain withholds, but it prevents a run without incident from standing as proof of decision quality.
- Communicate at the level of avalanche problems and consequences. The steep riders we interviewed largely act on the problem, its distribution, and what it would do in confined terrain, not the regional danger number. Bulletin and avalanche course language that supports this reasoning is more usable.
- Acknowledge and talk about the potential emotional strains that can be present when partaking in risk activity; rescue work, proximity and witnessing incidents can traumatize. Normalize the need for recovery process and treat post-incident support as community structure.
- Address the social drivers. Participants linked sponsorship pressure, identity status, and gendered expectation to their most consequential decisions. Normalize the decision to turn around, and provide communication aimed at athletes, sponsors and media

6. PATIENCE, NOT RECKLESSNESS: ALIGNING EDUCATION WITH THE PRACTICE

Twenty-four experienced steep couloir riders contradict the reckless risk-seeking narrative and describe a practice driven by patience and respect for the alignment that needs to happen between terrain, conditions, partners and self. Such elements cannot be commanded. Read through Rosa´s concept of resonance, the fascination becomes intelligible, and so do its failure modes: the practice hollows when it becomes instrumental, and trauma is the shadow of the same uncontrollability that makes it compelling.

For education, steep riders see courses as necessary but insufficient: couloir competence is grown through participation and (often informal) mentorship, in a learning environment that does not reliably tell practitioners whether they were good or lucky. Courses cannot supply that, which is a structural limit rather than a failure of course quality. The practical consequence is to resist the urge to fill avalanche courses with more content but to build the conditions for participation: use of micro-terrain, designed mentorship, riding skills, and a routine habit of debrief and honest reflection. Communication benefits from employing language that describes the activity as practitioners actually experience and live it.

These accounts are not definitive but represent the stage the analysis has reached. The question we would most like to put to the reader is whether steep riders recognize themselves in them, and in particular where they do not.

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