

**Accident statement and incident narrative by the victim, Mark Callaghan. This statement was made available approximately two + weeks after the 2-28-10 avalanche accident that occurred in the back country immediately adjacent to the Crystal Mountain Ski Area. See the complete Accident Report on the [Accident Page](#) of the NWAC web site.**

Dear Family and Friends,

Erin and I have been overwhelmed with the amount of love and prayers that have been showered over me this past 2 + weeks. The support has been very moving and buoyed my spirits immensely. I am sure that my surprising rate of recovery so far has been the result of all of your positive energy and thoughts. I truly feel blessed by your friendships and lucky to be able to write this thank you.

I felt it was important to give an update on my current status as well as an explanation of the events that led to my accident. The official Northwest Avalanche Control Incident report prepared by the Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol was also released earlier this week which includes a very detailed overview with pictures of the site and a full analysis. I will add some of the pictures and the link to the report at the bottom for anyone interested in reading the full report. I encourage you to read it. It is very impressive and shows the high level of knowledge and skill that resides in the Crystal Patrol.

I was airlifted from Crystal Mountain late on Sunday evening February 28<sup>th</sup> to Harborview Medical Center. My initial injuries were a dislocated right hip, broken hip, broken pelvis, broken fibula and a few lacerations to my liver. They were able to relocate my hip after several hours and drove a pin through my lower femur to keep me in traction until they could perform surgery. The liver issues sent me to ICU for two days. On Wednesday, they performed a seven hour surgery placing two long screws on the front of my hip to hold the femur in the socket and then two plates on my pelvis. I have an attractive 14" long scar (42 staples) on my right upper thigh around to my back and got a free butt lift out of the deal. I felt good enough on Thursday to test a walker and then graduated to crutches after a little pleading. I was discharged thankfully on Friday afternoon.

I must add that the whole experience at Harborview was way beyond my expectations. We are very fortunate to have this highly rated trauma center right in our back yard.

There has been a lot of discussion about the decisions I made that led to my predicament. First of all, I take full responsibility for my actions. I felt an explanation to you all about how the chain of events that took place that day would illustrate better how I let my judgment lapse. For those of you who I ski with regularly, you know that this was a rare exception to the way I approach skiing off piste at Crystal. The worst part is that I had no plans on going into Southback that afternoon.

On Sunday, I had skied all morning and went into have lunch at my condo at Silver Skis to watch the Canada USA Hockey game. I took off my avalanche beacon, my helmet and my jacket. After the game I looked outside and it was sunny and warm. It was 3:15pm and I thought I could catch one last run up Rex and ski the soft front side. I figured that for just one run I would wear my hat, glasses, a vest and heavy underlayer. On my way to the lift, I saw a good friend who was coming in and said he had just had a "Heli-type " run down "Joe's Badass Shoulder". 100 yards later I saw another friend who zipped by saying he had a similar amazing run in Southback.

On Saturday, the day before, 4 of us waited at the "Throne" gate entrance to Southback for 30 minutes with over 50 people while the patrol finished bombing and controlling "A" basin and Silver Basin. Our wait was rewarded by the first set of tracks in Southback down SE right(north of boxcar) the snow was 8-10" deep, wind condensed but stable all the way down. Since it was an eastern aspect I figured it was a good overall test of the stability in Southback.

Back to Sunday, if I rushed to Chair 6 - High Campbell Basin instead of Rex, maybe I could make it before the lift closes at 3:30. I got there at 3:28. I thought I could hook up with someone on the trail as I have done several times in the past. The trail was packed hard and fast. I passed 5 people on the trail, 3 that were headed out towards 3 Way Peak. I got out to 3 Way in almost 25 minutes. I slipped under the "leaving controlled area boundary" ropeline and continued on the traverse to Joe's (Also known as "Sparkle Party"). ***This would have been the time to make the decision that since I hadn't hooked up with anyone to stay in bounds and just ski down the 3 Way chute,.. but...*** As I looked at the bootpack up to Joe's I saw a couple people. When I arrived, about halfway up the bootpack there was an old family friend's son, Blair who is a professional snowboarder. He was climbing up to be filmed coming down the western Chute of Joe's. The photographer kindly stepped off the trail and let me pass. At the top of the trail Blair went right "west" up 40 feet to the top and I went left "east" to the 3rd chute of Joe's.

As I walked under the "Joe's" sign I could see my friend's 5 tracks down the run as it sweeps to the right. ***Better call would have been to ski among those tracks since they***

***were already cut or better yet to alert Blair that I would ski down his chute after his filming.*** Instead I pushed out about 30 yards on the ridgeline to the 2nd of 4 chutes that was untracked. This chute has a grove of about 10 trees 200 feet below the top of the chute. You typically ski left or right of the trees to join back in with the main run that had the tracks. The chute is 60 feet across at the top and at its narrowest spot is about 20 feet wide. Before I jumped in I looked over and could see Blair setting up for his ride giving instructions to his photographer. This gave me a false sense of security that I was close to other skiers.

As I launched in off a small cornice, the first turn felt a little crunchy. I made 6 tight turns and when I reached the narrowest part of the chute the snow "puzzled" under my feet into 2 to 3 foot sections. Normally, you would try and ski off to the side, (I have been in several "slough" slides that break below your feet and have been able to ski out) but as I tried, it felt like a carpet was pulled out from underneath me. What I hadn't realized is that the chute had collapsed at the very top. There was an 18" fracture line all the way across the top. What still amazes me is how quickly the snow accelerated as it funneled down. As it raced down around me, the snow was moving faster than I was so it swept my skis right out from underneath me. I found myself moving at an accelerating speed right towards the trees. I was rudderless. I had no way to affect my direction left or right. In less than 2 seconds, I slammed into a 2 foot round tree. I had enough time to know how screwed I was and how this was probably it for me.

I hit the tree horizontally on top of the snow. I wrapped around it like a pair of pants draped over a hanger folded right at my waist. My head and feet were below my waist with the slope of the hill. I knew upon impact that I had injured my hip because of how hard I hit. Then the rest of the snow proceeded to sweep in behind, around and over me, pinning me to the tree. I had kept my hands raised over my head trying to preserve a pocket. Fortunately this saved my right arm from being crushed between me and the tree. It bounced off the side (it is very bruised and swollen) and remained over my head. Suddenly everything stopped. I could see light up by my hand and feel it was free above my wrist. I quickly flailed like a swimming paddle to clear the snow. Because the slope was so steep next the trees, the snow around my head fell away with ease. The snow behind me was another story. It set like concrete right away and prevented me from pulling away from the tree.

I suspected that I had at least broken my hip or pelvis because of how hard I hit, but in the beginning there was no pain. I figured it was the shock and adrenalin. After a few deep breaths, I tried to wriggle my toes and ankles. When they moved freely I was greatly relieved. I reached up with my right arm around the tree towards my leg and found a broken branch that was about 8 inches above my waist. It allowed me to pull

my body up level to my waist. I stuffed snow under my waist for support and it allowed me to access my lower left pocket for my iPhone. I didn't even check for a signal, funny given AT&T's spotty coverage. I had the Crystal Ski Patrol emergency number in my contacts from when Sid broke his hand in a race 2 years ago. My direct call was a little shocking to the female patrol who answered the phone. According to the report, the time was 4:09. I told her I had been in an avalanche in the 2nd chute of Joe's Badass Shoulder and was pinned around a tree at the base of the chute. After some questions about my general condition I asked them to call my neighbor at Silver Skis to keep an eye out for Sid and Greg when they came in from training.

The whole discussion was surprisingly calm and matter of fact. I was told that the ski patrol had just begun their sweep of Southback and would be there in about 30 minutes. I was then asked to hang up the phone to preserve my battery and wait. I thought about calling Erin and other family members but I figured that describing my situation would cause more fear of the unknown. I then thought about Blair and the photographer just one chute away. I yelled "help" for about 5 minutes but after no response I figured they couldn't hear me over the ridge. ***This would have been a great time to blow a loud whistle if I had one attached to my pass.***

While waiting for the patrol, I tried to dig out the snow covering my waist and behind me. The snow was so hard that I had difficulty making much headway. After 15 minutes of digging I was able to use the branch to lever my upper body up some more but that was when the pain started. I knew for sure at that point that some part of my hip was broken. At 4:34, the first patrol arrived. Ben Bowen arrived at the top of the chute and established voice contact. He skied down to me and after taking my vitals he began digging around me to stage for my extraction. I remember my first words were apologizing to him for being so foolish and thanking him for getting there so quickly. I was starting to get cold so he took off his Patrol coat and wrapped it around me. Wearing only a vest and non insulated ski pants I was starting to shake pretty violently.

Over the next 30 minutes the hypothermia set in and the pain increased significantly as I shook more violently. At this point it was a beehive of activity as more patrol arrived on the scene and performed various tasks and tests. I am still amazed at how well trained and prepared they were. They all seemed to each know what their responsibility was. The sun had gone down behind the ridge and the wind picked up. They jammed a couple of heat packs in my shirt which provided temporary relief from the cold. Another couple patrol jackets were stuffed around me. I was asked repeatedly what my pain level was on a scale from 1-10. I stated that I felt like I was at a constant 9. The

shaking was so severe that I was just focusing on breathing steady with my eyes slammed shut. I consumed 3 bottles of Oxygen.

The patrol had to winch the toboggan and backboard up the hill by hand from the bottom of the run. By the time they got the backboard into position behind me, 1 1/2 hours had passed. It was almost dark, and I just remember seeing a bunch of head lamps dancing around as they rolled me back from the tree and cinched me down on the board. For a couple of brief moments when they straightened me out on the board, my pain spiked way past 10 before settling back to that constant 9. They put a C collar on my neck and duck taped my chin and forehead to the board. I was given an inhalant pain killer at this time, but I couldn't feel any effect. They then placed me in the toboggan and proceeded to carefully lower me down the hill.

I am still so impressed with the control and precision with which the patrol handled me. They never rushed or got excited. Every move seemed very deliberate. When I reached the bottom of the slope I was attached to the back of snowmobile and towed out of Silver Basin, down Quicksilver (Chair 4) to the Ski Patrol Emergency Room at the base of the mountain. I arrived at 6:48. For the last hour I was so overcome with cold that it trumped my hip pain. The violent shaking with the dislocated hip kept me very focused. Arriving in the warm patrol room with hot wool blankets fresh out of the dryer was like heaven. A good friend Gary Bamesberger was waiting for me and let me know that my boys had been taken down the hill by a friend. I then proceeded to squeeze the blood out of his hand for the next 10 minutes while they prepped me for the ambulance. They cut off all of my clothes with a razor, wrapped me in a fresh blanket and taped my driver's license to my forehead. Nice visual! Bear ass naked with my ID taped to my forehead. Before leaving I remember thanking the whole team and promising Paul Baugher the director of the Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol that I would fulfill his request to help spread the word about safety in the backcountry.

Immediately upon entering the ambulance, I was given an IV with a heavy pain med. Unfortunately, we had to wait in the parking lot for 45 minutes before the helicopter arrived. I remember hearing the helicopter arrive and being loaded in. From that point on, everything is fuzzy with spotty recollections from the emergency room at Harborview.

I want to close with a few lessons that I take away from this whole experience:

1. First and foremost, ***Never ski the back country alone***. I can honestly say in over 20 years of skiing Crystal back country, I have done it twice. Never again
2. Let someone else know if you are skiing in the backcountry, even if it is a phone call or you have to leave a message.
3. Ask the patrol what the conditions are in the backcountry. They have knowledge of current conditions and risks and are happy to share it with you.
4. Check the NWAC report on Crystal's website located on the left column. It is updated daily and has very detailed info about snow conditions and the risk of avalanche from Mt Hood to Mt Baker.
5. Wear a whistle. I have one in my backpack which I wasn't wearing. Attach one to your pass or at least have one in your pocket. Blair or the last ski patrol sweeping 3 Way Peak might have heard a whistle.
6. Carry your cell phone. Add the Crystal Ski Patrol emergency number (360) 663-3064 to your contacts. Coverage is getting better and better each year.
7. Finally, avoid making intellectual shortcuts. There were a series of decisions that led me to the top of that chute by myself. Having skied Joe's many times in the past, having skied Silver Basin on Saturday, no new snow since Friday, 5 ski tracks on the run, 2 skiers 150 feet away. Because I felt so comfortable in this area, I let my guard down. If I had stopped and analyzed each one of these independently with the discipline of a pilot on the preflight checklist, it would have raised enough alarms to alter my final decision. Using this checklist approach, by itself the skiing alone issue would have led me to communicate with the last person I saw (Blair) to ask if I could ski the run with them instead.

Again, Erin and I want to thank you for all your thoughts and prayers. We couldn't have done it without you. All the flowers, notes, emails and dinners have been greatly appreciated. We can definitely feel the love around us. Also, we will keep you posted on a fundraiser for the Crystal Mountain Ski Patrol that we have tentatively scheduled for sometime in May. We hope you can join us to show our appreciation for the very well trained and talented team that keeps Crystal a safer place for all of us.

--Mark Callaghan