



**VALentine LINE**  
**OPEN-GATE RESPONSIBILITY**  
 COMMUNITY AREAS TAKE ACTION TO EDUCATE

BLEEPIN' BEEPERS. PHOTO: GRANT GUNDERSSON

As the sun cracked blue on February 14, 1999, at Mount Baker, a steady stream of skiers and snowboarders headed out Shuksan Arm, an exposed zone beyond the boundary rope. Just past noon a class-five avalanche ripped out in a 14-foot-deep slab that ran 4,000 feet and triggered multiple secondary releases. The cataclysmic slide caught, buried and killed Justin Parker and Shawn Riches in a tangled 1,000-ton mess of debris. One burial ran so deep the body wasn't recovered until summer. But the shock was felt instantly.

To this day, Baker locals reference the Valentine's Day Slide as a cautionary warning of danger lurking on the far side of the rope. But more than just fading into myth or legend, the event catalyzed mountain management to take action. The area responded with a policy intended to educate and equip their community. Official reaction was swift and commendable, but surprisingly, far from the industry norm.

Over the last decade, resorts have thrown open their backcountry gates to give skiers unprecedented access to unpatrolled zones long declared off limits. Yet few areas provide the knowledge required to ski it safely. Ominous warnings and stock safety speeches are common, but most mountains leave direct instruction to guide services, non-profits or local shops for fear of liability. Baker is one of only a handful of ski areas that teaches avalanche safety to the public in a classroom and field-study setting.

Whitewater, located outside Nelson, B.C., is another area that has made a similar educational commitment. Starting with one-day awareness classes in 1992, the resort's on-hill effort evolved into a three-day course offered through the Mountain Learning Center in 2002. Since then over 400 students have been educated by off-duty, certified patrollers. In addition to a current slate of five Level 1 courses, the center still offers introductory one-day classes and also spearheads awareness talks to 800 secondary-school students each season. As further example of outreach, Whitewater hosts the Cold Smoke Powder Festival in February, which places clinical emphasis on continuing education.

Silverton Mountain, Colorado, also prides itself on picking its own line. Founders Aaron and Jen Brill developed the Silverton Outdoor Learning and Recreation Center in parallel with their single-lift, expert hill to provide Level 1, Level 2 and BC 101 courses. SOLRC is certified to provide college credit and its offerings complement the calendar of the preexisting Silverton Avalanche School.

At Baker, the outgrowth of the Valentine's Day Slide was an O.B. policy requiring five essentials—beacon, probe, shovel, partner and knowledge—for access from the area. To inform the at-risk population, management also incubated an educational program, which developed into the Mountain Education Center in time for the 1999-2000 season. Since then, more than 2,000 students and resort employees have taken multi-tiered awareness courses. Baker officials say the difference in skier behavior is noticeable. "I see our students out in the backcountry on a regular basis," says center director Rachel Vasak. "And they always, whenever they see me or another instructor, ask us questions. You can tell they are thinking about things, and I have to believe people are making better decisions." —DAN KOSTRZEWSKI

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