

Unnecessary

RISK

By CHRISTINE PETERSON | Star-Tribune staff writer

Backcountry skiing is all about choices, life and death decisions made at a moment's notice. Do you head for the steepest hill ignoring groans in the snow. Do you keep skiing even when winds increase? Do you stop and check the slope angle? "If your goal is to ski the steepest and gnarliest out there, you're more likely to get into trouble," said Ryan Hutchins-Cabibi, program supervisor and backcountry ski instructor for the National Outdoor Leadership School. "If you want to have a nice day with friends, you're more likely to turn back if things get dangerous."

Risks aside, backcountry skiing has its perks.

You've avoided the crowds of downhill ski areas, said Tye Herron, a Casper city firefighter and avid backcountry skier.

It's also a workout, you "earn your turns," by hiking up a hill before you ski down.

Follow this maze designed using information from Hutchins-Cabibi and Herron to test your backcountry decision-making skills, and see if make it out alive.

Begin

Great first step. The report says moderate, which means that you:

A) Yes, it's better to know what you're getting into.

You're at home and running late. You grab your gear, but do you take the time to check the avalanche report?

B) Bring all your avalanche gear, better safe than sorry.

A) Leave avalanche probe and beacon at home, moderate only matters on extreme slopes.

B) No, you're not worried about them, it's been nice outside.

You ski up to the top of a ridge and find a beautiful, sloping bowl. You stop to dig a hole and check the snow. It's hard on the top and soft in the center. What does that mean?

B) Ski down it, hard on the top is fun skiing.

Uh oh, you trigger an avalanche. After five days a team finds you, but your rescue became a recovery.

Bad call. Trees thin enough to ski or snowmobile through also allow snow through. If the snow doesn't smother you, "the trees, acting like a forest of baseball bats, will beat you to death," Hutchins-Cabibi said.

A) Ski for them.

Good call. If under a hard layer there's "snow that's sugary and can't make a snowball," the top layer is more likely to slough off, causing an avalanche," Hutchins-Cabibi said. You head into an area with a gully with steep sides resembling a natural half pipe. Do you:

B) Launch off the lip as fast as possible?

You trigger an avalanche and see a group of trees spread out enough to ski through. What do you do?

B) Head away from the trees and take your chances with snow.

A) Ski along the ridge?

Excellent choice. You had your eye on a slope in the distance. At the top, you use your slope meter to judge the angle. It's 38 degrees but looks safe. Should you:

A) Yes, you wanted someone to know.

B) No, you were in a rush and forgot.

You're hungry, tired, sunburned and dehydrated, but after a horrifying night alone, rescue crews find you alive.

Someone finds your car after several days. A week later they find your body.

A) Back up and go down a gentler slope?

B) Go for it? The pros do it all the time.

Dang. The snow starts to shift under you and it's already too late. You've started an avalanche. It buries you under feet of thick snow that feels like freezing concrete.

You made it!

Perfect. Any slope more than 30 degrees is considered dangerous. The day starts to warm, and by afternoon it's downright hot. The day hasn't gone as well as you'd hoped because of snow conditions and avalanche warnings. You see a perfect 25 degree slope with beautifully packed snow. These conditions mean you should:

A) Rip it; warmth just makes snow stronger, right?

A) Keep skiing? Sounds are no big deal, and the slope you're on isn't that steep.

Smart. "Sounds in the snow are a huge red light," Hutchins-Cabibi said. Even if you're not on a steep slope, sounds can mean danger and avalanches don't always start on high peaks. When you get back to town, you call your buddy, grab a burger and recount the day's drama.

B) Head back.

Another good choice. "A rapid increase in temperature increases stress and decreases strength and makes the slopes touchier and more unstable," Hutchins-Cabibi said. High winds have similar effects. On your way home you're skiing up a nearby slope and hear a low rumble and a "whoomp" sound underneath you. Should you:

B) Turn around and head back the way you came?