

Avalanche

(continued)

p.m. He was pronounced dead later at St. Patrick Hospital in Missoula.

The avalanche occurred shortly after 1 p.m. The temperature was near zero, and the wind was gusting between 30 and 50 miles an hour in some exposed places on the mountain, Ball said.

Milan reached a laundromat in East Missoula about 2:10 p.m., and an attendant immediately called 9-1-1. An unidentified man at the laundromat immediately set out on foot up the mountain to try to reach the other boys, but snowmobiles dispatched by Missoula Search and Rescue got to them first. An uncle of the Tripp brothers also assisted in the search.

"We don't think the kids triggered the avalanche," said Deputy Sheriff Ball. "We think the kids were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Ball said the boys had hiked under a cornice, or wind-packed ledge of snow, that suddenly released and swept snow down the mountain in a swathe about one quarter mile long. The snow slab slid down the mountain perhaps 120 feet into the ravine.

An avalanche hot line in Missoula at the U.S. Forest Service said earlier Saturday that avalanche danger was low to moderate. That advisory was revised following the avalanche on Mount Jumbo Saturday afternoon. It now warns of dangerous conditions.

The boys were well-prepared for hiking in cold weather, said Ball. They were all dressed in several layers of warm clothes, wearing gloves or mittens and warm hats.

The Tripp boys said they had gone on the hike to take some pictures of deer and other wildlife

with a camera Sims had received for Christmas. They had received their parents' permission to go on the outing. They had just finished their lunch and were on their way down when the snow came crashing down on them.

"I just tried to get out the best I could and hope that someone didn't get caught underneath the snow, and my brother was the one who didn't get caught underneath," Milan Tripp said. "I just was scared and told myself to be patient. I panicked a little, but not enough to freak out and strangle myself."

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