

The following is a first-hand account about a rider triggered slab avalanche on the West Face of Albright Peak in Grand Teton National Park. Apologies for any time, size, or location inaccuracies. This is not a technical report.

Avalanche Details

- Location: West Face – Albright Peak – Grand Teton National Park
- State: Wyoming
- Date: January 16, 2023
- Summary Description: Rider triggered avalanche incident – heli rescue
- Primary Activity: Backcountry tourer
- Primary Travel Mode: Splitboard & Skis
- Location Setting: Backcountry

Number	Avalanche	Site
• Caught: 1 • Partially buried, non-critical:0 • Partially buried, critical:0 • Fully buried:0 • Injured: 1 • Killed:0	• Type: HS • Trigger: AR • Relative Size: R3 • Destructive Size:D2.5 • Sliding Surface: O	• Aspect: W • Elevation: 10,000 • Slope Angle: 35* • Slope Characteristics: Open Trees with Slight Convexity

Parties Involved

Benton Hodges (author), Seth Frey, Evan Flach, Charlie Pirc (injured)

Events Leading to the Avalanche

Discussion of possible ski objectives started within a majority of the group on the previous day's ski. Charlie, Evan, and Seth skied Moonwalk off 25 Short, while Evan continued on to ski Buckshot with a fourth partner that day, Connor. I joined the discussion via group chat with the three other partners later at night asking about conditions, weather, and possible objectives. We discussed what aspects we thought would be the most heads up. Wind loading from southerly winds onto northern aspect were our main concern, though we eventually deemed all aspects were within our comfort zone of planning to ski. Underdelivering snow totals from previous days, and dwindling forecast numbers made the day feel like a classic "Teton Trickle" event – a manageable amount of new snow on a day where new snow instabilities were at the forefront of our decision making. We didn't explicitly talk about a persistent slab problem being in our decision making, though we had expressed concerns in previous days/weeks about high exposed, mostly E/SE faces like the South Teton, Teewinot, and Buck.

We made a long list of possible objectives ranging from Banana Couloir, V Notch to Mayan, Four Hour/N Side of 25 Short mini-golf and more. I expressed interest in a "longer, more flowy day" with less technical components since we had four people. One option we discussed (and had discussed before) was a more exploratory day skiing West off of Albright into Death Canyon where we would have views of the Mayan, Birth Canal, and numerous other more obscure lines we were drooling over on FATMAP. After skiing in new-to-us lines/zones the previous few days, we had the adventure bug and decided to keep our day non-technical and

enjoy an under-explored powder run down into a seldom visited spot in the park – the West facing treed chutes on Albright into Death Canyon. We talked about different options to ski once we got into Death Canyon – both south and north facing shots. We decided to let the sun and weather dictate what, if anything, we skied once we got to the canyon. A pure scouting mission to look at lines wasn't out of the question. We tried to not set our sights on a big objective and let the day take us where it did.

The four of us departed the Home Ranch Lot in one car at 6:25am, a few minutes behind our planned time of 6:15. But we didn't mind, we weren't in the normal rat race trying to beat other parties to our objective. Light discussion of previous days conditions and our objective happened in the car, but we seemed mostly set on our plan from the previous night. The possibility of sunny skies and warming temps were at the forefront of our decision on what to ski after we made it into Death Canyon.

We departed the car around 7am. It was one of the most beautiful mornings I've ever had on the Wimpy's skin track. We skinned in base layers under sunny skies and comfortable temps. Not a breathe of wind, except the slightest breeze once we got to the summit. We passed two groups of two – one around 8,500 and another near the top of Wimpy's Knob. We discussed our plans to ski west with the first group who was also hoping to tag Albright summit. The second group branched towards Wimpy's and we cut over towards Albright before being able to talk plans with them. They eventually circled around behind us towards Albright. Both groups paused on the traverse from Wimpy's to Albright as we ascended the headwall. We were unsure if they were waiting for us to summit and ski, or they didn't plan to continue. We tried to yell we were skiing west and they would be good to come up once we got to the summit – unsuccessfully. We skinned until the final 50-100 feet before switching to bootpack. The top 100-200 feet of the east face of Albright was feeling the effects of sun and showed some slabby qualities. Previous hand shear tests showed well bonded snow and unconsolidated surface snow. We felt good about heading towards the west facing shade for our first run. We summited around 10:30am.

Incident Summary

Once transitioned at the top, Charlie, Evan, and Seth walked their snowboards down 50-100ft while I picked my way down the scree with skis on. The time was 11:00am. We all regrouped after everyone had boards and skis on, perhaps 150 feet below the summit. I dropped an additional 10-15 feet to snap pictures while Evan and Charlie rode. I went third and we all regrouped after another 100 feet. We discussed who was going to go first, and Charlie decided to take the reins. He followed what I considered to be a solid line through trees into an open powder field. As he came to the end of the powder field near some trees, he radio'd all clear as he came to a stop, but not completely. As he stopped the snow cracked above him in a slight convex rollover. He was able to radio "I'm in a slide. I'm in a slide." what felt like 5-10 seconds after his first radio call of "all clear". There was urgency in his voice, it didn't sound like a small slough ride. It was around 11:15am at this time.

Evan was getting ready to descend, so we sent him down immediately to investigate since Charlie had been out of eyesight. Seth vocalized to me, "Okay, what's the plan?" I suggested Seth stay high and find cell service, while I skied down to investigate with Evan. About this time, 30-40 seconds after Charlie's radio call, Seth and I saw a massive powder cloud cascade into the drainage below us. The horrific site was followed by the sounds of cracking trees, and what sounded like glass shattering. Seth and I were positive we had lost Charlie at this time. My stomach sank as I prepared to descend to Evan.

Evan was standing atop a crown that looked to be taller than us from our vantage point. Amidst formulating a plan to get onto the bed surface safely, we received a radio call from Charlie – "I'm okay. I'm okay." He was alive, but he didn't sound well -- "Not buried, but I'm beat up". The sweeping relief of not having to perform a beacon search hit me and I took a pause to formulate our plan a little better. Charlie relayed that his stomach

and ribs hurt really bad, and his right leg was feeling an impact as well. His backpack strap got hung up on a snapped tree which helped him come to a stop in the moving snow.

I found a way onto the bed surface and told Evan to stay put while I descended, Seth still high on Albright. All four of us had radios which benefited greatly. As I descended the bed surface, the slide had split into two different prominent gullies. I chose the skiers left hand gully, and descended a combination of debris and unslid powder. Charlie radioed he was at 9600ft so I knew I was in the wrong gully as I had descended to 9350ft. I cut through the trees separating the two gully's and popped out onto the debris 50 feet above Charlie's splitboard that had ripped off (hardboot setup). I yelled and heard Charlie uphill from me about 100-200 feet. Evan began to descend from a higher point to reach Charlie. Even with radios and a coherent Charlie, it was hard to exactly locate him through all the debris and chaos. Before reaching him, we made the decision to call SAR. Seth called it in. I'd estimate the time to be 11:30am.

I first attempted to skin up to Charlie, but soon abandoned my skis for easier bootpacking and continued up with my pack and Charlie's splitboard. Evan reached Charlie first and began to give him extra layers and get him situated. I reached them with the splitboard and we all decided to see if Charlie could make it down the drainage into the sun and eventually to a flatter area for a heli evacuation. Charlie was quite cold, and everything he did was painful. I knew if we could get him on a splitboard, we'd move ground fast into the sun. Sure enough, Charlie was able to impressively navigate his way through debris and deep pow down into the sun on his splitboard. We regrouped in the sun. This was around 11:45am.

We took more time to properly warm Charlie up. He sat on his snowboard with foam pads, extra layers, hand warmers, and a rescue tarp wrapped around him. We sat next to him for warmth. We were not stoked on the unslid tree chutes that were above us, but warming Charlie was priority #1. After 10-20 minutes, Charlie felt up to make the final push on his board down to the area we deemed the best chance for a heli evac, at the time thinking it would be a short haul. Charlie again impressively snowboarded down to a flattish area around 9,000ft in the Albright drainage. Evan gathered the remnants of our previous staging area while I skied down with Charlie. This was around noon-12:15pm.

We had contact with SAR the whole time through our radios with Seth. We prepared to have Charlie shorthauled by digging and stomping out a flat platform. We once again warmed Charlies with layers and rescue tarp while he sat on his snowboard. He took three ibuprofen from my medkit, but we did not use stronger painkillers. At this time, he was trending in the right direction in large part due to the warmth of the sun. He remained coherent and alert the whole time. Luckily, a head injury was never really a concern. Charlie was able to effectively communicate his needs and how we could make him more comfortable through the whole rescue.

The helicopter arrived and after scouting us one or two times from the air, they returned rather quickly to the canyon – coming fast and low. It was obvious they were going to land in the snow. No more than football field away from us the helicopter made an incredible landing. Two SAR members debarked and retrieved Charlie. They return to let Evan and myself know we will be getting on the helicopter as well. We let them know we were able to ski out if needed, but we were assured to get into the helicopter. Evan and I boarded the heli with Charlie. This was around 12:45pm.

As we flew to Windy Point turnout, Seth descended from his high point of cell service to the two remaining SAR members at the landing site. The helicopter returned to retrieve them and look at the slide path. Charlie got checked out in an ambulance. A park ranger shuttled me to get my car at Death Canyon. We self-transported Charlie in my car to St. Johns. All-in-all, it was around two to two and a half hours from when

we started skiing to when all members were in the Windy Point parking lot. The speed of the rescue made it feel all the more surreal.

We all can't thank those involved with the rescue enough. They remained calm, collected, and professional which personally helped my mindset through the whole thing tremendously. The ability of the helicopter pilot to land and navigate the terrain in Death Canyon is truly impressive. The rescuers on board never hesitated and the efficiency of the rescue couldn't have been better. After triggering the avalanche, we had a lot of things go in our favor. I'm forever grateful to the whole SAR community here in the Tetons and beyond.

Photos



Charlie descending the first pitch of riding off Albright. Light, "blower" snow



Evan descending after Charlie.



Crown. Charlie was below where this photo was taken from by 20-40 feet when it broke.



Evan atop tallest part of the crown. We felt the most exposed standing on the unslid snow. Making plans to get on the bed surface safely.



Tallest part of crown. Charlie was just down slope of the thickest part of the crown.









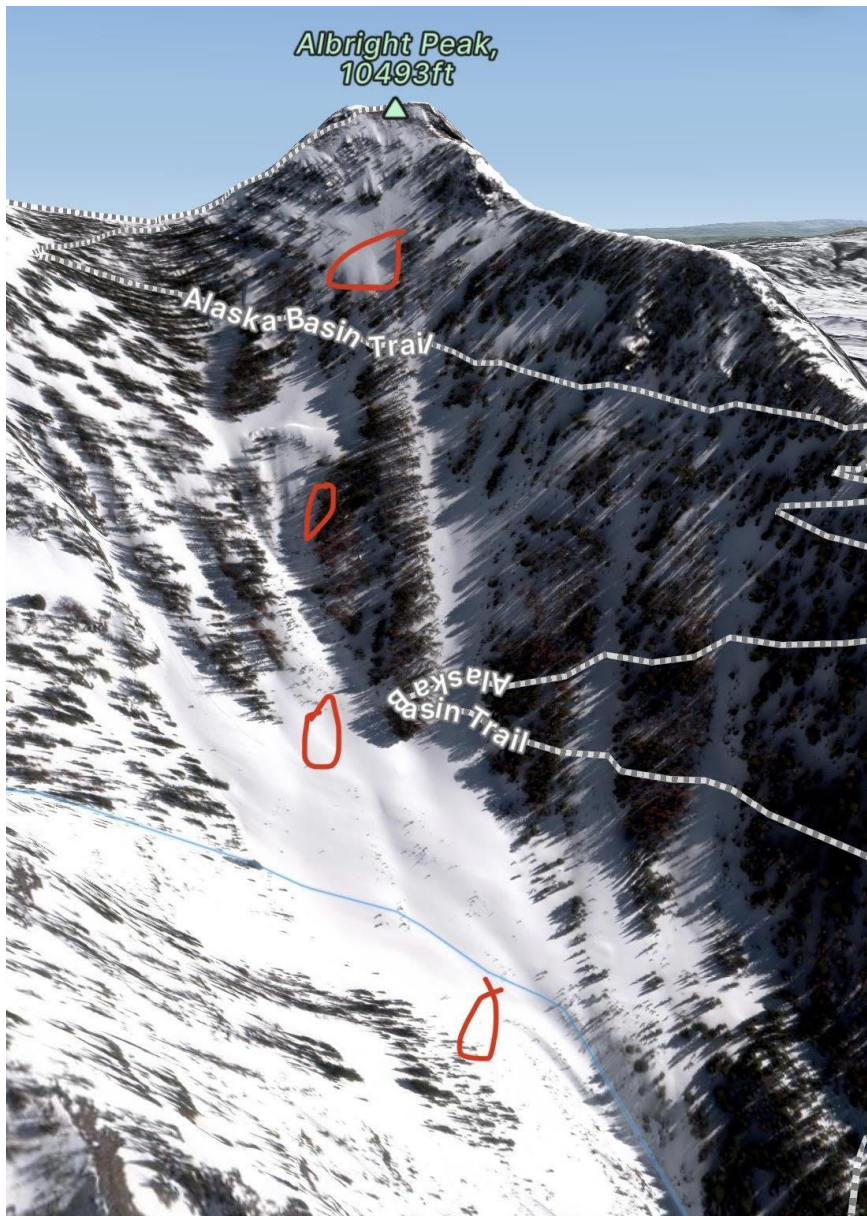
Charlies splitboard in debris. He was stopped uphill and to the lookers right around the corner of the chute in the trees.



Debris path below where splitboard was found



Debris path from first stopping point in the sun. Final staging area and landing spot can be seen in the opening downhill on the right side of the picture.



Best guess on location of: crown, Charlie's arrest point, where we first stopped in the sun, and then the final heli landing spot