ASK**ANDREW**

Q ***While hiking up a couloir last year I had a close call with an avalanche near the top and I'm now having second thoughts about chute skiing. Why do you recommend hiking up couloirs and how do you deal with close calls?***

Having poor short-term memory and being a slow learner definitely helps me get back into the saddle after a close call in the mountains. If you could separate the passion from backcountry skiing and look at it objectively, most sane people would agree that the risk is not worth the reward. But then again, skiing is all about passion, so that doesn't leave us many options.

When a friend called to tell me that Doug Coombs had died, I said "I can't believe it!" to which he said, "Really? I can." It's not that Doug was a reckless skier, but that ski mountaineering is a dangerous sport. All slopes should be considered guilty until proven innocent—which is only when you are safely off of them. Ignorance and innocence are virtues in the Great Alaskan Bush Company (Google it), but not in the backcountry.

The silver lining on a close call is that you've been given a powerful lesson—and another chance. Although there are thousands of mistakes to make, hopefully you won't make that particular one again. In that regard, if talking or writing about your close call keeps others from making the same mistake, a slice of humble pie is a small price to pay.

Being an "experienced" backcountry skier is just a nice way of saying you've survived a lot of mistakes. Bob Athey, one of my all-time favorite cranky backcountry vets, claims that you shouldn't be allowed to teach avalanche classes until you've been buried in one. I tend to agree. Assuming you live through it; getting caught in a slide is the best avalanche education you can receive.

Along the same lines, surviving mistakes gives you the *carte blanche* to buck peer pressure in the future. "No, I'm not going to ski that 50-degree sheet of blue ice with crevasses at the bottom, but please, knock yourself out."

As far as hiking up couloirs before skiing them, it's simply the lesser of two evils. Yes, you are spending more time in the danger zone (cue music), but you are also easing into it in a controlled, step-by-step basis, rather than a Hail Mary from the top.

Snow safety depends on a multitude of variables, but in general, the starting zones tend to be at or near the top of a couloir, especially if there is wind loading. By climbing a couloir from safe zone to safe zone, you should be able to feel the snow getting deeper, more sensitive, or icy as you go. If you notice changes in the snow, remember, avalanches are like committing adultery in Syria: you don't get a second warning. If mental images of being stoned (in the death way, not the munchies way) don't work for you, here's a cute mnemonic device: "When in doubt, turn about."

Persisting at ski mountaineering takes a dose of incurable optimism. You have to believe the weather is going to clear, the snow is going to be stable and the sun will be shining, otherwise you'd never go. At the same time, it's not a bad idea to have a seed of doubt planted in the back of your mind.

Although you can never eliminate the risks involved with the sport, you can minimize your exposure to them by staying focused, using good safety protocols and assuming the mountain is trying to kill you. In that sense, it's a lot like spending holidays with your parole officer. The time for second thoughts is before accidents happen—after that, if you decide to keep skiing, it's all about getting back on the horse, learning from your mistakes, and movin' on.

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