

Consumers guide to outdoor instruction

Editor's note: Todd Rentchler is a ski instructor and on the Eugene Mountain Rescue team. He also works at Berg's Nordic Ski Shop and has led several group trips into the mountains.

By TODD RENTCHLER
For the Emerald

Are you considering going with an organized group for outdoor activities? Many of us have or will sometime consider doing so. Whether a novice seeking instruction or an experienced person interested in a trip, you should examine your options carefully. In the hazardous outdoor environment your life can easily depend upon (or be threatened by) the reliability of the instructor/leader. Here are some examples of true incidents that have occurred in this area:

A group of boys participating in a well known youth program led by volunteer instructors, were on a canoe trip. They left their camp early and started down the river. The map they were using indicated a waterfall on the run they were to do that day. They passed a sign that stated "Falls Ahead" and continued down the river. One by one each boat followed each other over the falls. A large investment in equipment was lost. Upon counting heads, the leaders discovered they were one short, and started a frantic search of the water. Later the missing youth came walking down the trail. They had left him in camp that morning.

In a beginning rock climbing class taught by a paid instructor, a girl was seated on the edge of a cliff belaying another participant below her. A curious bystander examined the girl's anchor rope — it ran through an anchored carabiner, but there was no knot in the rope. In the event of a fall the girl belaying would be pulled from her ledge 60' to the ground below.

On a wilderness ski touring trip the experienced volunteer leader (carrying a heavy pack including extra gear and a first aid kit) took the lead and set off at a brisk pace into the woods. Later that evening the beginning members of the group (their first winter ski and camping experience) were troubled by darkness, cold feet, and exhaustion and forced to make camp having never been able to catch up to the well conditioned "instructor".

During a beginning mountaineering class students were required to rent and carry ice axes for a mountain climb but were never shown how to use them (to arrest a fall). While crossing an exposed snowfield on the mountain, a student slipped and the paid instructor (working for a well-known institution) had to run and grab him to prevent a serious tumble.

Whether they are paid or volunteer, working independently or for an organization, outdoor leaders assume a heavy responsibility for your pleasure, education, and well being and should therefore be an object of some discriminate thinking.

Instructors, like professionals anywhere, are hesitant to openly criticize the incompetents of their circle. However, a lot of useful information regarding instructors' abilities circulates through the grapevine and is available if you look for it.

Shop around. Be sure to inquire of the individual instructor and/or organization they work for:

- How many years (prior to teaching) has the instructor had in their specialty?
- How long have they been instructing? for whom?

- What are their major personal outdoor accomplishments?

- What first aid and rescue experience and training do they have?

Most leaders will be happy to inform you of their qualifications. A leader's investment of time is an important factor — good judgment is not learned from a textbook, years of experience is required.

Certification (advanced first aid, senior lifesaving, an Oregon boat operator's license, EMT, PNSIA skiing certification, etc.) says little about a leader's ability to safely instruct in a dangerous environment. You can't certify good judgment. Do not assume an individual instructor is competent because they work for a prestigious or reputable organization. Organizations may or may not have stringent qualifications and requirements for their leaders. Be sure to inquire about this.

When you go into the field with your group, assume a questioning attitude. Outdoor activities of any nature are hazardous and as a participant you have a responsibility to remain alert and critical of all that you're involved in. A useful question to ask a leader is "Why are we doing this?". Good leaders always have specific reasons for making decisions in the outdoors. If there is no reasonable explanation for something that confuses or causes you doubts, then you and others may not be receiving proper care — speak up about it. If there is a badly managed situation endangering participants, an accident or near accident, due to neglect — then you should inform the leader and their superiors or associates of your feelings.

Here are some specific things to watch for on your trip be it ski touring, mountaineering, rafting, canoeing, backpacking, rock climbing, etc.:

- Are your destination, objectives, responsibilities, risks, necessary equipment and experience, number of participants, time of departure and expected return made clear before you leave so everyone understands them?

- Is the first aid kit and leader accessible (last person on the trail or within earshot) if something goes wrong? (blisters and sore knees, etc. should be cared for).

- Does the leader encourage a questioning attitude? Does he/she present problems for the group to solve?

- In a potentially hazardous environment (river, trail, mountain ridge, bad weather, etc.) does the group stick together?

- Is the leader familiar with the area before taking you into it?

- Does everyone in your group who needs extra help get it?

- During a dangerous experience (running a rapid, crossing a stream, rappelling, climbing, etc.) are participants properly prepared and supervised?

- Does the leader insist that every individual participant be properly clothed and equipped, including as a minimum: a complete wool layer, a complete waterproof layer, and appropriate footwear?

- Does the leader also make sure that group equipment includes: First aid kit, emergency shelter, stove, extra clothing, and equipment appropriate for the activity and season?

Groups should always carry sufficient equipment to spend an unexpected night out and/or to stabilize an ill or injured person until outside help arrives. Individuals should be prepared to survive unexpected separation from the rest of the party.

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