

Outdoor sports aren't as dangerous as you might think

By Laurie Schwartz
Of the Emerald

Jim Wright used to teach skydiving to University students. He died in a jump last August when his parachute failed to open.

In a highly publicized mountain-climbing disaster last May, nine people from Oregon Episcopal School died from exposure on Mount Hood.

In March 1979, world-famous mountaineer Willi Unsoeld died in an avalanche while leading a collegiate group on Washington's Mount Rainier in an area known as Cadaver Gap. One student died with him.

These incidents make dramatic front-page headlines and as a result, many people think outdoor activities, such as mountaineering, kayaking and winter camping, are more dangerous than they actually

are, said two prominent outdoor-activities experts at the University.

"People assume any time you're talking about climbing mountains, there are risks left and right — that people are dying left and right. That's simply not true," said Bruce Mason, coordinator of the EMU's Outdoor Program.

Mason and Jim Blanchard, co-director of the department of physical education's Outdoor Pursuits Program, point to statistics from insurance companies that show outdoor pursuits are not terribly risky.

"Outdoor sports are not nearly as dangerous as organized team sports that are played at high schools and colleges," Mason said. "When someone dies in a climbing accident — because it's dramatic — it always makes the news. When a



Photo by Michael Wilhelm

Jim Blanchard instructs students while on an outdoor excursion.

high school student gets a brain concussion and dies from a football injury, you never hear about it."

Nationwide studies show that 35 to 50 percent of the people who participate in formal athletics, such as football, receive some degree of injury on a yearly basis, Mason said.

"In this country, only about 60 people a year die in land-based outdoor pursuits; somewhat more (die) in water," Blanchard said. "Not to diminish the significance of 60 people dying, but it's a relatively small number."

Although the statistics appear in their favor, Blanchard and Mason are no less meticulous on the details of safety, and both are quite proud of their respective programs' safety records.

Neither Mason's Outdoor Program nor Blanchard's Outdoor Pursuits Program has ever experienced fatalities or serious injuries. Mason remembers one broken bone, and Blanchard recalled "a broken ankle or a broken wrist here and there."

Outings in Blanchard's program include formalized instruction by expert leaders and assistants. Classroom instruction precedes the trips, and a course in wilderness survival is a prerequisite for the more advanced back-country outings.

Blanchard's students sign a waiver releasing the University from responsibility in case of accident or injury. They also must read a sheet of safety information.

"You will be exposed to real risks of injury or even death, from such hazards as falls, rock falls, avalanches, lightning, river crossings, hypothermia and cold injuries," the sheet states.

In contrast, Mason's Outdoor Program is not legally liable for accidents or injuries under a legal concept called "The Common Adventurer," which applies to groups of friends who plan a trip together. The Outdoor Program is organized as a cooperative. Individuals with an idea for an outing post a sign-up sheet. Interested individuals meet and plan the trip together — there are no formal leaders.

The Outdoor Program's sign-up sheets include a statement that says, "Please be aware that this activity may inherently involve some degree of risk to you and your property."

Although the Outdoor Program does not offer formal instruction, beginners receive help from more experienced members.

The Outdoor Program, unlike the Outdoor Pursuits Program, does not have a lengthy set of guidelines for risk-management control.

"Yet they (the Outdoor Program) have very, very few problems. They have an admirable safety record. It has to do with the fact that people are inherently fairly cautious and, given a few good guidelines, the real risk is relatively small," Blanchard said.

But a "few good guidelines" seem to elude some other outdoor groups. "You see a lot of things going on out there that are appalling," Blanchard said. "Boy Scouts and church groups are notorious. There are established groups that do go out and do not conform to the standards of the trade. Some groups don't follow the safest path, and accidents do occur."

But even the experts have to live with the risk.

"I'm probably the biggest mother hen on the West Coast," Blanchard said. "We do everything we can to minimize the risk, while realizing no matter what we do, we can't eliminate all of it."

Nobody knows what happened in the case of Wright, the parachutist, Blanchard said. "He jumped, the chute never opened. He was a professional longtime skydiver. He ran a really good, safe program. Who knows?"

Willi Unsoeld was one of the first Americans to climb Mount Everest. He was 52 when he died in an avalanche on Mount Rainier. He was leading a group from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash.

"You can't fault his credentials," Mason said. "It doesn't matter how good you are at predicting avalanches. You can still get caught in them or rock falls."

After the Mount Hood accident, when nine people from the Oregon Episcopal School died after getting lost in a snowstorm, many people criticized the decisions made by the group leaders.

People who weren't there like to second guess, Mason said. "It makes them feel superior. I think that's incredibly arrogant. . . . The decisions made at that time, with that group of people, with those conditions, might have been the best decisions to make. They might have done the best they could."

Blanchard has taught outdoor activities since 1960 for various organizations including Outward Bound. About 10 years ago he was the president of Mountain Rescue and Safety of Oregon, and he remains active in Eugene Mountain Rescue.

Mason has been involved in the Outdoor Program for 12 years. He specializes in whitewater.

Mason has personally known two people who died in outdoor accidents. "Both those deaths were fluky deaths, involving extremely low levels of activity," he said. One person dived into a river in South America and never surfaced. Another tripped on his crampon, a mountain-climbing device, on a moderate slope up in the Cascades.

"They had already done the hard part of the climb," he said. Mason, 43, doesn't think two deaths among acquaintances seems like a lot, considering a lifetime involved in the outdoors. "My group of people I know are doing Mount Everest," he said.

Friday, February 6, 1987

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