

Danger:

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demic, as people seek less crowded places to play — attendance at the center's classes has followed suit, McNeil said.

The center teaches students how to analyze terrain and assess avalanche danger during a three-day course, and how to rescue people caught in a snow slide, a one-day class.

A trio of three-day classes earlier this year attracted about 18 students each, while a one-day course had 21 students, McNeil said. These are larger turnouts than in the past, and the additional revenue — three-day courses are \$450, and one-day classes \$125 — make it possible for the center to expand its work.

This is the first year, for instance, that the center has issued forecasts four days per week — in past winters there were two forecasts each week, on Thursdays and Saturdays, McNeil said.

"We've developed a bit of a reputation for high-level education," he said.

Two types of travelers

McNeil said the center's courses tend to attract two distinct groups of backcountry travelers — snowmobilers, and those who get around under their own power, whether by skis, snowboard or snowshoes.

Generally speaking, snowmobilers who take classes are experienced backcountry travel-

ers, McNeil said, and many have some skills in identifying avalanche dangers even if they don't have the technical knowledge that he and other instructors do.

As for the nonmotorized travelers, McNeil said many who attend the center's courses are newcomers to mountain travel.

But regardless of the students' mode of travel and experience level, the goal is the same, McNeil said — to teach them to recognize places they should avoid during their trips, and how to rescue someone who gets caught in an avalanche.

McNeil said that although many of the local snowmobilers he has taught have years or decades of experience traveling through the mountains, they understand the value of knowing how to study terrain and snow conditions to assess the risk level.

At the most basic statistical level, snowmobilers tend to have a higher risk simply because they travel so much faster and cover so much more ground that they're more likely, at some point, to ride into terrain where avalanches pose a threat.

"Riders are just as engaged as the skier group, if

not more so, in the classes," McNeil said. "They're just like sponges taking in information. It's pretty cool to see."

This is avalanche country

Northeastern Oregon is not infamous for deadly avalanches compared with, say, the Alps or parts of the Rocky Mountains.

But that doesn't mean avalanches are uncommon here, McNeil said.

Although the Wallowas have been branded as "America's Alps," the comparison, however apt in terms of scenery and geology, is flimsy in other respects.

Most notably, the Alps teem with villages and ski resorts and highways, all built in avalanche country.

Most of the avalanche-prone terrain in Northeastern Oregon, by contrast, is uninhabited and visited by a comparatively tiny number of people.

The bottom line is that any avalanche in the Alps is much more likely to have humans in its path than one in this corner of Oregon.

But McNeil said the conditions that breed avalanches frequently occur in

parts of Northeastern Oregon — slopes that are steep (but not necessarily vertical, since cliffs can't hold enough snow to fuel a big avalanche), and weather conditions that create unstable layers within the snowpack.

A relatively common situation that poses a hazard — and one that's in place now in much of the region — is a long period of tranquil weather, with little snow falling, McNeil said.

In that case, and in particular when the surface of the snow melts and refreezes, the shape of the snow grains tends to morph from circular, with the grains readily bonding to create a firm structure, to square.

These squarish grains, what skiers often call "sugar snow," do not bond as well, McNeil said, resulting in a layer of weak snow.

When new snow accumulates on that weak layer, the weight of the new snow can trigger an avalanche.

The weight of a skier,

snowshoer or snowmobile, naturally, greatly increases the risk.

An ice layer on the surface is similarly dangerous because new snow, like boots losing traction on an icy sidewalk, is likely to slide off rather than stick.

Various other conditions also can exacerbate avalanche danger, McNeil said.

If a couple feet of snow falls in a short period, as happens most winters in parts of the region, the new snow, even if accumulates on a stable layer, might not internally stable for a few days, he said.

During that period the deep, unconsolidated snow can be prone to sliding.

Wind is also a major factor.

When wind blows from a consistent direction at a speed of between about 10 mph and 15 mph for an extended period it can cause slabs of snow to form on the leeward side of ridges.

If slabs accumulate atop

layers of less dense snow, there is a greater risk of what are known as "wind slab avalanches," McNeil said.

He said the center's staff members use a variety of data, in addition to their own observations from snow pits they dig, to compile their forecasts. These include readings from remote weather stations.

One of those stations has a direct, and poignant, connection to the Wallowa Avalanche Center.

The Kip Rand weather station, in the southern Wallowas north of Halfway, was named for the man who McNeil succeeded as the center's director.

Rand died on March 8, 2016, from injuries he sustained in an avalanche on Chief Joseph Mountain in the Northern Wallowas, south of Joseph.

The Kip Rand station is vital because it measures wind as well as temperature.

Most of the other remote stations lack an anemometer.



JACKSON DECKER

In one quarter, Jackson Decker single-handedly turned Enterprise's fortunes to get the Outlaws into the win column Saturday, Feb. 5. Enterprise appeared on the way to a loss, trailing Grant Union 48-32 after three quarters. Then Decker heated up. The senior hit five 3-pointers and scored 18 points in the fourth quarter. He finished with 20 in the game, but most importantly, hit big shots down the stretch to propel Enterprise to a stunning 60-55 victory.

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