

## Sidecountry is Backcountry

By Doug Chabot

Carve, February 2013

For many resort skiers, the word “sidecountry” has become a standard definition of backcountry terrain adjacent to a ski area. Usually the acreage on the other side of the boundary is administered by the US Forest Service and the ski area becomes a convenient jumping off point to access public lands. In the last few years skiers have overwhelmingly embraced this access as the in-bound crowds ski up new snow at a ferocious pace. Untracked powder is a dwindling resource, an addictive drug, and access gates are the needle in a vein to a quick fix.

Some resorts use sidecountry as a marketing scheme to draw customers. Similarly, hard goods manufacturers sell specific clothing and skis aimed at sidecountry users. As in any marketing campaign, the upside is enhanced (“Face shots for everyone!”), while the downsides are hidden (“I’m sorry to inform you your son has died in an avalanche”). Sidecountry users are a distinct group. They are not backcountry skiers and riders nor are they strictly in bounds users. But avalanches are an equal opportunity killer and don’t care if you are on a snowmobile, snowboard, fat skis, touring gear or snowshoes. Avalanches don’t care if you’ve just ridden a lift and ducked the boundary rope or entered through a gate. Every year the world over, weak layers form in the snowpack, slabs form on top of these layers and when the balance is precarious, people trigger avalanches. Sometimes these slides release just spitting distance from a ski area boundary.

Sidecountry is backcountry. It’s a simple message that’s easy to understand. Most resort skiers have no frame of reference for the inherent risk that lies outside the boundary. Sidecountry to the thoughtless



may “feel” safer, sort of a backcountry with training wheels or “backcountry-lite” with help an arm’s length away at the ski resort, but that is a delusion. Watching dozens of people exit out of bounds to ski fresh powder is a strong draw and makes it easy to rationalize that if so many people are doing it there can’t be much danger. This is herding behavior. And many believe that sidecountry terrain is controlled because the resort has the gate open and many runs even lead back at the ski lift.

Unfortunately, this is all false. The snowpack on the other side of the rope line or gate of a ski

area boundary is uncontrolled, unpatrolled backcountry. Once again, sidecountry is backcountry. Avalanches have not been beaten into submission with explosives. Instead it’s the Wild West where there are no rules and serious consequences. Sidecountry skiing is even more dangerous than backcountry skiing where remote slopes are accessed from the bottom. A backcountry skier must have

specialized skis, bindings and other backcountry travel gear. Skiing in the backcountry also requires a substantial financial, time and knowledge investment compared to sidecountry skiers. Backcountry skiers are more likely to carry rescue gear and have some avalanche education. Ascending a slope from the bottom provides an opportunity to gather valuable snowpack information. The decision to ski is only made after climbing up the hill hundreds or thousands of feet and assessing the snow along the way. Exiting a gate from the resort can be done on the spur of the moment. Gathering information and making clear decisions keeps us alive; blindly heading into avalanche terrain does not. Quick access and a carefree party atmosphere often found in sidecountry settings are the opposite experiences of most backcountry skiers.

Here in southwest Montana many, but not all, local skiers have gotten the message that sidecountry skiing is just as dangerous as backcountry skiing. The "Sidecountry is Backcountry" message is part of our broad avalanche education efforts. However, reaching everyone, especially non-locals, is a challenge. Signage at the gates or on the lifts help, but it is not enough of a deterrent. The best way to raise awareness of the dangers of the backcountry is by talking face-to-face. As a community we have the power to use our collective knowledge to inform the uneducated. Everyone can help by talking about the seriousness and dangers of sidecountry skiing with fellow local skiers, with friends from out of town and with a stranger on a chairlift. These are simple and effective ways to destroy the myth that heading out of bounds into the sidecountry is safe.

I'm an advocate of more access to public lands and encourage people to get out and play. I ski the sidecountry and it's super fun! But sidecountry is backcountry and there's nothing inherently safe about it. Sometimes the snowpack is stable, sometimes it's not. Staying alive requires treating the sidecountry with high respect, the same respect we extend to the remote backcountry.