

Alaska Daily News article below - December 8, 1988

Skier took one risk too many, friends say

By Craig Medred

One time too many the lure of untracked, powder snow tempted Todd Frankiewicz, and he paid with his life.

Frankiewicz skied onto a classic avalanche slope near the top of Tincan Peak in Turnagain Pass on Tuesday afternoon. His body was found 1,200 feet below in the rubble of a mile-long avalanche.

Mountain rescue worker Nick Parker believes Frankiewicz died in the fall as he tumbled down the mountainside. An autopsy has yet to be completed, but doctors told Frankiewicz's parents their son apparently broke his neck, said Yvonne Daley, a reporter for the Rutland Herald in Frankiewicz's hometown in Vermont.

Parker believes Frankiewicz was dead by the time skiing companions dug him out of the snow 30 to 40 minutes after the avalanche. Two hours of CPR performed at the scene failed to revive him.

"(His parents) knew that he was risktaking," Daley said. "They were glad that they saw him last August."

Friends here described the 35-year-old Frankiewicz as an experienced mountaineer and an expert skier in love with those inherently risky sports. They say he died because he took one chance he shouldn't have taken. "With 20-20 hindsight, you always have your expert antennae. It was a bad spot," said avalanche expert Jill Fredston. "He was a good friend of ours." The avalanche that killed Frankiewicz was triggered either by him or skiing companion Regan Brudie of Girdwood. The two men had skied onto a predictably dangerous, 40-degree slope of shallow snow.

Skiing companions said the two men knew the slope was potentially dangerous, but they figured that if they stayed near the top of the ridge they could kick loose any dangerous snow without getting caught. "I can't put myself in their place," Fredston said. "I was surprised (by what they did)."

"I would have expected him to check it out," said climbing friend Willie Hersman. "Maybe they misread what they saw (of the snow)." The warning signs should have been fairly obvious.

"Most large avalanches start on slopes between 30 degrees and 45 degrees, with a very pronounced occurrence peak between 35 degrees and 40 degrees," E.R. LaChapelle warns in "The ABC of Avalanche Safety." "Thickness, the simplest characteristic of the snow cover, tells a lot about stability. A shallow snow cover, usually less than 3 feet, can experience strong TG (temperature gradient) metamorphosis and set the stage for later avalanching by losing mechanical strength."

LaChapelle's words pretty well describe the conditions near Tincan. The snow that avalanched had an average depth of 18 inches to 2 feet, Fredston said; there was temperature gradient snow over unstable depth hoar. Frankiewicz and Brudie went over the lip of the

ridge and into these dangerous conditions while friend Jerry Steurer of Girdwood watched. Frankiewicz was an expert at telemark skiing the kind of downhill skiing done on cross-country skis with flimsy bindings and lightweight boots. So were the 27-year-old Brudie and the 31-year-old Steurer.

The slopes of Tincan in the Chugach National Forest attract such skiers. The area provides some of the most

popular telemarking terrain in southcentral Alaska.

"It's by far the most heavily used area," said Vic Baer of the U.S. Forest Service. Thousands of people ski the area over the course of a winter, although most of them stick to the treecovered lower slopes, he said. The majority don't ski the high bowl where Frankiewicz died, Baer said. The dangers of the upper mountain are well known.

Several years back, four people died in an avalanche off the south side of Tincan, Baer said. One of the deeply buried bodies wasn't found for a year. Most wilderness telemarkers know the dangers inherent in their sport. "Avalanches are a fact of life in the backcountry up here," Hersman said. "There's risks that we take when we go in the backcountry."

Frankiewicz was one of a party of six climbers who took some major risks to make the first winter ascent of 19,850-foot Mount Logan, North America's second-highest peak, in 1986. Hersman was another member of that climbing team.

"I just remember Todd as being real personable. He made things lively in circumstances that could have been tough to take. I'll miss his sense of humor," Hersman said.

Frankiewicz is the second member of the Logan climbing team to die this year. Climber Steve Koslo died about six weeks ago in an airplane crash near Talkeetna.

"You're not supposed to lose friends like this until you're 70 or 80 years old," Hersman said. "It's harder (on the survivors) than the ones who take the risk."

The only consolation is knowing Frankiewicz died doing something he loved, said friend and former boss Kevin House, manager of Recreational Equipment Inc.

Frankiewicz had worked for the outdoor equipment company for 10 years, first in Seattle and later in Anchorage. He started here as a ski technician and worked his way up to manager of the ski department.

Since his childhood on the ski slopes of Vermont, Frankiewicz had been an avid and talented skier. "He'd coached and raced and jumped and done just about everything you could do on skis," said House. "He was a very experienced backcountry skier. He was out there doing what he liked to do."

Fredston hopes Frankiewicz's death sends a message to other climbers and backcountry skiers. Snow conditions throughout much of the Chugach and Talkeetna mountains this year are extremely dangerous, she said.

The snow pack is weak in many places, she said, and some warm weather or heavy snow is needed to stabilize it.

Blueberry Cone, a small hill near Flattop Mountain where parents often take their children sliding, has already avalanched twice this year, Fredston said, and a couple of weeks ago a moose kicked loose an avalanche near the treeline above Bear Valley.

METRO

THURSDAY
SECTION C Dec. 8, 1988

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Daily News outdoors editor

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AVALANCHE: Skier who died took one chance too many

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