Magnum – Near Miss Avalanche Incident
April 1, 2015

**Location:** Magnum, “Basketball Chute” Turnagain Pass, Alaska  
**Date:** 4-1-2015  **Time:** ≈5:00pm  
**Report by:** Chugach National Forest Avalanche Information Center Staff  
**Contact:** staff@chugachavalanche.org; website www.cnfaic.org

**Synopsis:** Skier triggered a slide on a Northern aspect of Magnum in a place commonly known as “Basketball Chute.” One person caught; carried about 900 ft. Skier was not buried and did not have any injuries. All gear stayed on and no equipment was lost.

**Avalanche Details:**
- **Avalanche Code** – HS-ASu-D2-R2-0  
- **Elevation** – 3700’
- **Aspect** – North
- **Angle** – N/A (estimated 35-38 degrees)
- **Crown Depth** – estimated 2-3’
- **Width** – estimated 300’
- **Vertical Runout** - 1200’ (Toe of debris was at 2500’.)
- **Weak Layer**– suspected facets and crust combination

* A crown profile was not possible due to the hang fire left behind from the avalanche; a profile was completed, pictured below, on an adjacent slope at a similar aspect and elevation the following day.

**Events:**
On Wednesday April 1, a party of two skiers parked at Sunburst parking area without a solid objective. They decided to skin up Magnum’s Northwest shoulder and then ski a Southern aspect into Davis Creek. They accessed Cornbiscuit from “Superbowl” and decided to ski a couloir called “Corner Pocket,” a chute off the Northern side of Cornbiscuit. They then skinned up “Superbowl” again to Goldpan Proper, and decided to ski a Northern chute off of Magnum called “Basketball Chute.”

They side-stepped down a rocky entrance into Basketball chute. Skier 1 made three turns before the avalanche released. Skier two yelled, “avalanche,” as Skier 1 was caught. Skier 1 described staying on the surface for most of the ride, but was briefly pulled under and came to a stop on the surface. Skier 1 was not buried or injured and did not lose any gear. Skier 2 could not see the whole slide path as skier 1 was swept out of sight. Skier 2 descended on the bed surface and started a beacon search at the top of the debris. Skier 1 yelled to Skier 2 and there were a few moments of confusion, as skier 2 thought Skier 1 was a person coming to help search from below. Skier 2 was able to descend through the debris to Skier 1 and they exited the slide path safely back to the parking area at Sunburst.

This was the first time these two skiers had gone into the backcountry together. They did not dig any pits. They used their ski poles to probe into the snow to feel for weak layers and didn’t feel anything alarming. They did not observe any obvious signs of instability (collapsing, shooting cracks or recent avalanche activity.) They both read and discussed the forecast for the day and were aware of the persistent problem on Northern aspects, but understood the problem to be more of a concern on periphery of the forecast zone near Seattle Creek.
Weather:
On April 1st 5” of new snow fell in the morning at upper elevations; and 0.2” of water was recorded at the Center Ridge SNOTEL (1880’). Moderate winds from the Northeast began around 8:00am averaging in the teens (mph) with gusts into the 30’s (mph.) Ridgetop temperatures remained in the mid 20’s F overnight and throughout the day. Mid elevation temperatures averaged 32F for the day.

Snowpack:
The week prior to the incident several feet of new snow fell incrementally at higher elevations, totaling 2.3” of water recorded at Center Ridge SNOTEL. Since March 14th a total of 5.3” of water had been recorded since the last high-pressure system that brought 7 days of moderate Westerly winds and -0F temperatures. This event left variable surface conditions including pockets of near surface faceted snow on Northeasterly aspects, protected from the winds.

On April 1st there was roughly 2-3’ of settled snow on top of variable old surfaces, including areas of near surface facets on Northern aspects. Surface conditions consisted of soft powder on Northern aspects while on South, East, and some West aspects had a sun crust. Below 2000’ the snowpack consisted of mostly stout melt/freeze crusts on all elevations and aspects.

Deeper in the snowpack, several older layers of faceted snow and crusts existed from previous warming and cooling events from January and February. These older layers were not seen on all Northern aspects, which make the weak layer difficult to pinpoint without getting in the crown itself.

On March 31st, the day before the near miss, several natural avalanches were reported including a remotely triggered avalanche in Seattle Creek drainage. A cornice failure on a SW aspect of Tincan near Todd’s run trigged a very small (D1) storm slab. The day of the incident on April 1st, another remote triggered avalanche was reported in Seattle Creek in Main Bowl.

On April 1st, the day of the avalanche, the CNFAIC avalanche center rated the danger as MODERATE with a warning that areas of CONSIDERABLE danger exist on the periphery of the forecast zone. Advisory link: http://www.cnfaic.org/advisories/current.php?id=1178

Video of stability test: https://youtu.be/OvZc9Vm74Kc

Map of Turnagain Pass and Magnum Avalanche (highlighted in red.)

Google Earth image Magnum and Cornbiscuit. Green lines are ascending skin tracks. Red lines are descent routes. The Avalanche crown and debris are colored white. Routes are not exact, but are what the two skiers described in an interview.
View of where the avalanche was triggered.

4-2-15
Magnum
“Basketball Chute”
North aspect
HS-Su-R3-D2-D

Skier made 3 turns before triggering the avalanche

Slide path looking from below in Taylor Creek. Taylor Pass is just out of view on the lookers far left.

4-2-15
Magnum
“Basketball Chute”
North aspect
HS-Su-D2-R2-D

Skier triggered slide near rocks

Skier stayed on surface and stopped here

Skin track to Taylor Pass

© Heather Thamm
Looking into Taylor Creek at the debris.

This photo was taken of Basketball Chute on March 31, the day before this avalanche occurred. Three skiers put in a skin track and skied the route without consequence. They chose a different variation near the top.
Notes: Pit was dug on an adjacent slope at a similar elevation and aspect as recent skier triggered avalanche on a N aspect of Magnum.