

## MCofS Avalanche Course at Nevis Range by Stephen Softley

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It doesn't take Einstein to figure out that learning about snow and the potential risk of avalanche would be a good idea for anybody walking or climbing the Scottish in winter. So, I decided to enroll on the MCofS avalanche course which took place at Nevis range on New Year's Day. I broke my journey and brought in the bells in Corran; six hours later I was up and ready for a day on the hills!

Driving to the Nevis ski range, my friend Jonathan and I were convinced that we must be the only people crazy enough to take part in a course on New Year's Day. On arrival, there were 12 participants and 3 instructors; I had forgotten what a dedicated bunch, hill walkers and climbers are!

We travelled via the gondola up to the cafe area, where we were introduced to some basics on a big screen before heading out to put it into practice. With first hand stories and some fascinating photography, the three MIC's kept us engaged and entertained. Heather explained how to make a slope assessment and evaluation, starting with sources of information, SAIS website, how their predictions worked and how this was charted. This would be cross referenced with the mountain weather forecast (MWIS).

We then headed out on to the hill for some practical avalanche assessment. As we started to ascend we learnt how to traverse slopes of hard snow and ice wearing crampons in a safe and efficient manner and how to carry and use an ice axe to improve our safety and stability.

We learnt to read the mountain and recognize indicators such as the wind-blown shapes in the snow to evaluate which slopes would be stripped of snow and which would have fresh snow deposited on them. We looked at mountain features such as terrain traps. Once we arrived at our destination, Heather expertly demonstrated how to cut a snow pit to show the numerous layers; these were further examined using hardness tests, gloved fist, fingers, pencil or ice axe pick, and using the knife of ice axe pick. We tried wetness tests by forming snow balls to establish how dry or moist the snow was. We then went on to cut individual pits and check the snow layer and compare results. I was quite surprised to learn that even with the snow pits dug in a relatively small area there were inconsistencies in the results, which highlighted that making a decision on how safe a slope is from digging a pit alone is not a conclusive test.

We then went on to measure the angle of the slope and cut Rutschblock tests. This involves cutting a block, walking around and putting your entire weight on it to see if, when, and how it shears!

I have to mention Heathers dog 'Milly' who was a constant source of entertainment. Milly is a search and rescue dog and we got a chance to see her in action when we stopped for lunch; demonstrating a simulated rescue, it was fascinating to watch.

Over a hot chocolate at the Gondola station, Heather introduced several scenarios to set into context all we had learnt during the day. Walks that we would reference on a map, given weather conditions, snow, wind etc we had to plan a route, this would consolidate the knowledge we had gained from the course. That proved to be a great exercise.

Well what can I say! A day that I reflect upon, utilise, and will give me an opportunity to build upon, what a great way to start a new year. HAPPY NEW YEAR! Thanks to the MCofS, Heather Morning, Don King and Sandy Paterson for a great learning experience.