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Avalanches – beware!

Winter is on its way, no matter where you are – and with it the danger of avalanches. In Switzerland the Federal Institute for Avalanche Research in Davos publishes information about the avalanche situation daily, and the ski resorts in New Zealand publish daily warnings and recommendations, too. Please read them and follow their advice. By taking risks you endanger your own life – and, much worse, the lives of the Search and Rescue party who have to come and dig you out, even if you are dead.



Avalanches come in two forms, depending primarily on the cohesion of the snow: loose snow avalanches and slab avalanches.

Loose snow avalanches occur on slopes on which the snow lacks internal cohesion, that is where there are weak bonds between individual grains of snow. These are most often observed in freshly fallen cold snow, or in very wet snow. A loose snow avalanche usually begins at or near the snow surface when a small amount of snow is displaced and begins heading downward. This initial mass sets an increasing amount of snow moving, and a fan- or teardrop-shaped avalanche is usually the result.

Slab avalanches are far more ominous and more unpredictable than loose snow avalanches. They have been responsible for some 95% of avalanche deaths. Slab avalanches most commonly form on slopes that allow snow to pile up, releasing an entire block only when an elastic layer of snow is stretched to its breaking point. Snow that has been stable for weeks can become overly burdened by a new storm and shear off. Spring rain can add tons of water. Overnight storms can also prompt avalanches, and so can low-flying planes, or a skier or even a falling branch can trigger them.

The best way to stay alive is to stay out of avalanche country; once caught, chances for surviving drop very quickly. There are several ways to die in an avalanche. About one third of avalanche deaths are due to trauma to the head and neck sustained during the fall. The remaining two thirds of deaths are caused by suffocation.

In Switzerland an average of twenty-six people die each year in avalanches, most of them away from pistes. Searching an avalanche, rescue teams typically have only fifteen to thirty minutes in which to recover a buried victim alive. If only one person of a group of skiers is caught in an avalanche, his/her friends might find him/her if they have the appropriate equipment with them, i.e. collapsible poles, snow shovels, mobile phones or a beacon – and start looking for him/her straightaway. It is also a good idea to carry airbags that are inflated when an avalanche hits. The airbags help keep the wearer near the surface of the snow – a bit like wearing a rubber ring in water. But most important of all, always remember that *it is better to be a coward alive than a dead hero!*

Enjoy your winter, and skiing – and stay alive! Best wishes from Paul Werthmüller

Dogs to the rescue

The only way to speed up an avalanche search is with a specially trained dog, which can cover in twenty-five minutes the same area that takes twenty men four hours.

Avalanche rescue dogs have been in use in the Alps for nearly three hundred years, since the monks of Switzerland's St. Bernard



Hospice began using dogs to assist travelers crossing the Alps. Saint Bernard dogs may have descended from Tibetan mastiffs; Xerxes apparently brought them over to Greece in about 485 BC.

The early Saint Bernard dogs were recruited to guard the mountain hospice from highwaymen, but mountain guides also took them on outings as companions and for their uncanny ability to find their way in adverse conditions. One famous Saint Bernard who lived in the 19th century is credited with saving more than forty lives.

Dogs are able to find avalanche victims, dead or alive, about 50% of the time, depending on the consistency of the snow; the wetter and denser the snow, the harder it is to pick up a scent. Human beings shed tens of thousands of skin cells every minute, and each cell, as it deteriorates and is consumed by bacteria, gives off pungent gases that are unique to each individual. Dogs, equipped with noses full of scent receptors and tiny cilia that collect passing molecules, are of the order of 10'000 times more sensitive to smell than humans, can pick up odors as they percolate up through the snow. *from "White Death", McKay Jenkins*

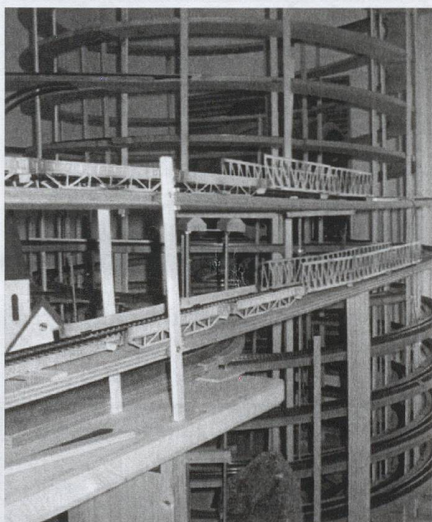


Walti and his Isebähnli

Paul Werthmüller

In Switzerland not every bloke has his own shed. This is why Swiss men have to find other ways to fulfil their dreams and to get out of the way of their wives. Walti, a friend of mine who is an engineer by profession, is a really creative man in finding an alternative to a shed. Like most Swiss he doesn't live in his own house but lives in a multi storey building on the top floor.

Unfortunately, Walti is sawing whole forests to wood chips at night and therefore he is allowed in his wife's bedroom only at certain times. Because of his boring office job he can't be as creative as he wishes to be and therefore he was seeking a new, greater challenge in his life. After a long decision finding process he chose to get stuck into building model railways. Not just a locomotive and a few wagons, but a whole truckload full of gear, paid for with some windfall money he had inherited.



First of all I had to build him a platform above his bed. He left his writing desk as it was and built this second floor right over it. This is a very good support for the platform he recommended and I'm still able to use the drawers. As a desk job man he couldn't figure out how to build the railway track from the front only. A couple of weeks later I

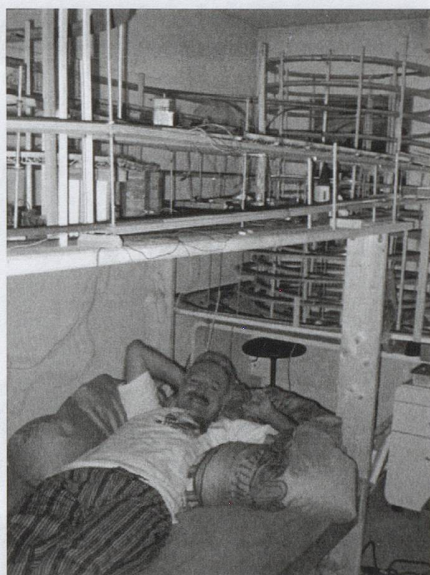
had to saw a big hole into his desk and into the platform as well. Now Walti could sneak under his desk and stand up in the hole to work much closer to where all the action was. He also moved his bed and the platform away from the wall to be able to work between the wall and his bed.

To get rid of 120 meters of railway track he realised he needed to build a few full circles. It took me a few days in my workshop at school to build wooden supports for his tracks. I also bought 80 pieces of 6 mm thread rod to adjust the wooden supports to the right levels. He worked it all out nicely on paper and it didn't take him long to build three outer circles to get up with his Isebähnli and three inner circles to go down again. All tracks are no steeper than 3%, this is as steep as a locomotive will pull a train uphill, he told me. I must admit Walti, being a desk job man, did a superb job. I probably would have given up soon after the start because it must have been quite tricky to fit all the nuts and the wooden supports on the thread rod. Very proud of himself, he let the first train run and after a few adjustments it was all set to run more than one train at a time.

Now Walti wanted to see all his different model trains running and he soon got sick of packing and unpacking the trains in and out of boxes all the time. It took me another few days to build him a display cabinet with glass sliding doors. Seven shelves it had to be, and three step-like levels bent out of an aluminium sheet on every shelf. The cabinet needed to be exactly 1.4 meter in length and had to fit in between the bookshelf and the door. Now he had all the space he needed to display all his different locomotives and wagons. I don't think there are more than a couple of centimetres left in his display cabinet.

But Walti was not content with what he had. There were still a few meters of tracks left in his box and

sure enough, he found a way to use them: I received another order to build a tunnel on top of the display cabinet, a metal bridge to get from the platform to the display cabinet and a lot more wooden elements for full circles. Being an expert track-layer by now, Walti fitted it all together in no time. As proud as a man without a shed ever can be, he told me it takes just over five minutes for a train to do a full run and most important, he has got no tracks left.



I'm wondering who might present Walti with some more railway tracks, maybe for next Christmas? There is still some space left under his bed, and if he knocks out a brick or two it could open up a whole new world to him. Hundreds of meters of new railway lines could be laid across the living room over to the kitchen and back again. Walti might never have to leave his room again, Ingrid could serve all his meals by train.

If you happen to be a model train fanatic as well and would like to discuss a problem or two, call Walti on 0041 41 360 97 82; he would just be so happy to talk train!

Well, Walti, as it happens I can tell you where you could find more railway tracks: in our attic in Eastbourne. You will have to talk to my son Grant - but he might have got some ideas reading this... Heidi