



Everett Mountaineers Scrambling Committee Safety Bulletin

1/3/22

Axe versus Trekking Pole usage

Background:

A student was injured in an accident at the 2021 Experience field trip – slipping on snow and failing to arrest. While the root cause was judged to be failing to use the skills learned at the Snow field trip, a contributing cause was that the student, carrying an ice axe in the uphill hand, was also carrying a trekking pole in the downhill hand. Upon slipping, the student let go of the axe, and slid while gripping only the pole.

In discussions with the scrambling committee, and members of other branches, it is not clear if there has been much discussion on when it's OK to use trekking poles, versus when a switch needs to be made from poles to an axe. Additionally, it does not appear it has ever before been specifically identified that using the technique of an “axe in one hand, pole in the other” can be a safety risk.

Hazards:

Most scramblers learn naturally in snow scrambling that poles can be very useful for low-angle slogs on the approach to a peak, but that as the slope steepens and/or the snow becomes more firm, one generally reaches a point on a route where a fall is possible, such that the poles need to be stowed and only the ice axe used. Trekking poles are poor tools for self-belay & self-arrest.

The hazard of the “axe + pole” technique is perhaps less obvious, but more serious. With this technique, if you slip, you need to quickly toss away the pole and get both hands on the axe. The resulting delay in grabbing the axe, especially if it's not instinctive & immediate, can make a significant difference in arresting. The delay & hazard are further heightened if you have your hand thru the wrist strap of the pole, as it makes it difficult to toss away quickly.

Guidance for Instructors:

At field trips, students should use only ice axes – no poles. This will allow students to focus on how to use the axe, while enhancing safety.

At field trips, instructors should explain to students the concept that on snow scrambling trips, trekking poles may be used on the approach to a peak, but when entering mountaineering terrain (i.e. as the slope steepens and/or the snow becomes more firm such that they judge a fall is possible), they should proactively stow away any poles and only use an axe. And they *must* use their axe if a trip leader instructs to do so.

For simplicity, it is generally best to not discuss the “axe + pole” technique, unless students specifically ask about it.

Guidance for Trip Leaders:

On gentle terrain, it's of course often entirely appropriate to be in "pole mode", and use just poles. But maintain your awareness that when passing above dangerous runouts, encountering steeper slopes, and/or encountering firmer snow – such that a fall is possible – participants should change into "axe mode", as follows:

- For students: Trip Leaders should take primary responsibility for deciding at what point on the route that students need to use an axe (and, if using poles, to stow them away). Students may certainly use an ice axe before this point. Do not encourage students to use an “axe + pole” technique (if they do, explain its unique hazards, and that it is not to be used above the point where an axe is needed).
- For graduates: Graduates should primarily take responsibility for themselves as to what point on the route to change to “axe mode”. Experienced members may be able to safely continue traveling in “pole mode” (using poles, or an “axe + pole” technique) at somewhat steeper slopes than students. However, if a graduate has not yet changed to “axe mode” upon reaching terrain where their safety (or safety of the group) is negatively impacted, trip leaders should feel comfortable issuing instructions to stow away poles and just use an axe.

Ideally, trip leaders should maintain awareness of the terrain *ahead*, for ensuring the group switches into “axe mode” *before* it is absolutely needed.

In summary, the key for you as a trip leader on a snow scramble is to maintain awareness of hazards and the skill level of participants, and to use judgment in instructing them in equipment use accordingly.

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