

AIARE Level 3 Silverton, CO March 2008
Paul Rogers

Early morning, in a modest and chilly basement classroom at the Silverton Mountain Studies Institute, I listened as each student rattled off a summary of their backcountry resume. I'd anticipated this year's AIARE Level 3 class might be dominated by professional guides and backcountry educators but thought there might be a few non-professionals in the room. By the time it was my turn to give the run-of-the-mill introduction common among outdoor courses, I found I was the only person who was there from a purely recreational standpoint.

Nearly all in the class were at varying stages of the IFMGA track, aspiring to become, or already were, professional mountain guides. The few that weren't were employed, in some fashion, in an outdoor-related profession. So with much trepidation, I described my intentions as an aspiring tour leader, participating so that I might be able to safely ski the backcountry. No harm in that, I'm certain, but on the first day I did feel that I might be in the wrong course. Was a Level 3 the highest level of avalanche certification available in the United States the right course for someone who just wanted to safely lead friends on backcountry tours? After hearing the impressive resumes of my fellow students, it appeared more appropriate for one who enjoyed studying snow crystals and desired to earn their living forecasting avalanches for a heli-skiing operation or guiding clients on the Haute Route.

The terms snow-geek and Level 3 are commonly paired in my opinion, yet to my surprise, the course was much more than an intense dive into snow metamorphism. In fact, it was nearly the opposite and was, arguably, the most practical avalanche course in the entire AIARE curriculum. Building upon the observation techniques and science learned in previous courses, the Level 3 pulls everything together. It teaches students a process on how to gather and use information correctly and apply it to terrain and actually make the decisions that professional guides make every day. To assist in this process, AIARE has some of the best instructors in the industry, like Colin Zacharias, Brian Lazar and Ben Pritchett who are able to demonstrate the application of the science to real-life decision making, in a very non-geek sort of way.

Don't misunderstand that it's an entire week of touring in the backcountry. The first days of the course are intense, to say the least. Part classroom, part field, a student expands his or her knowledge to the highest level on weather, terrain, snow pack, energy balance, weak layers, snow profiles and tests. The amount of information delivered makes you feel like you're choking on a fire hose of data. The payoff for enduring the onslaught of information is realized during the final few days of the course. Students get a chance to apply the lessons learned, plan and lead tours and are required to make terrain decisions and select travel techniques. In the end, it's rather simple what you gain from the course: the exact information you need, how to use the information and make decisions, and the ability to spend time with professionals who truly understand how to teach.

Unfortunately, the Level II is as far as many non-professionals will go in the education process. I know, because for years I found numerous excuses not to take the Level 3 and felt it was only for guides and forecasters. Upon successfully completing the course, I now realize that the avalanche education process is incomplete without it, whether you're a professional or not. Many of the goals and aspirations we had when signing up for a Level I course, can't be realistically achieved until we complete this final step in the process. AIARE has worked hard, over many years to develop a program that gives students the best avalanche education available. The Level 3 course is an example of that dedication and success. I would like to personally encourage all that are active in backcountry winter sports to take the final course in the AIARE curriculum. It is well-worth the time and effort, whether you're a professional guide or just a person who loves backcountry skiing.