

“I’ve always known that the love of my life takes risks in the mountains. Just, you don’t think ...”

Adventurer

would not only take them to the top of Lone Peak, elevation 11,253 feet, but also near the summit of North Thunder Mountain before depositing them just west of Snowbird ski resort. The 9-mile trek included roughly 8,570 feet of vertical, some of it through waist-deep snow.

“A lot of people who backcountry ski would probably think that this is that mission of a lifetime,” said Mallet’s girlfriend, Emily McKay. “This was just a Thursday morning for Austin.”

Mallet spent the past five years dedicating himself to becoming an adept rock and ice climber and ski mountaineer. A former competitive cyclist and skier, he moved from Texas to Montana in 2019 to hone his alpine skills. In 2021, inspired by the Wasatch Ultimate Ridge Linkup, an endurance hike-and-climb route near Salt Lake City, he pioneered the Hyalite Ultimate Ridge Linkup (HURL) in the mountains around Bozeman.

The roughly 28-mile running and climbing route included roughly 14,000 feet of climbing to the top of 12 peaks and took him more than 15 hours. He also completed the Grand Traverse in Grand Teton National Park in a single push.

Three days after the avalanche, he was scheduled to fly to Alaska for his third expedition to Denali.

Chris Labovsky accompanied Mallet on his initial successful attempts at summiting Denali last year and planned to join him again this month.

“We were a perfect fit for each other because he was somebody who really liked to move fast in the mountains. He’s incredibly physically fit,” Labovsky said. “You find a lot of people that do backcountry skiing, or they’re good skiers, but they’re kind of slow. And he and I liked to move fast.”

Labovsky said that trail proved fortuitous in last year’s trip to Denali. In 2023, more than a thousand people attempted to summit the 20,310-foot peak, North America’s highest. An endless series of storms kept fewer than 300 from reaching the top — one of the lowest summit rates in recent history. Mallet and Labovsky, meanwhile, went up and down three times.

They achieved one of those via a two-day climbing adventure up Cassin Ridge, which required them to bivouac overnight. Labovsky believes they were among just three parties to successfully complete that feat last year. They also, he said, made the only ski descent of the Messner Couloir in 2023. That sheer line, which starts at the top of Denali, was featured in “The Fifty Classic Descents of North America,”

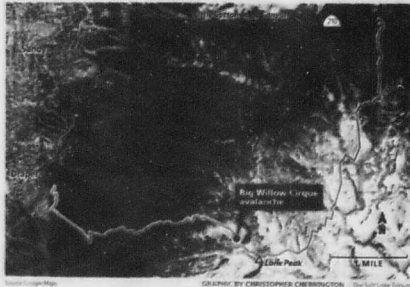


Above » Austin Mallet was an adept alpinist who skied the Messner Couloir and climbed Cassin on his trek to Denali in Alaska in 2023. **Below** » Girlfriend Emily McKay, shown here with Mallet, says the 9-mile trek and roughly 8,570 feet in vertical climb cut short by the avalanche was just a “Thursday morning” outing for Mallet.



Big Willow avalanche victims’ planned route

The three men who were caught in an avalanche on the Big Willow Cirque in Little Cottonwood Canyon were in the midst of a 9-mile, joint-to-point route that included roughly 8,570 feet of vertical elevation gain.



a book by Chris Davenport that has become the Fodor’s Guide of ski mountaineering.

Near the top of the Messner, Labovsky said, the snow was perfect. After about 4,000 feet of descent, though, it turned to blue ice too hard and slick to turn skis on. With a deep crevasse looming below the route, Labovsky and Mallet made the decision to transition from skis

to technical climbing for the remainder of the descent. Using ice climbing tools like screws and axes, the pair climbed the rest of the way down while a mass of climbers hunkered down at the 14,000-foot base camp looked on.

They both knew that these two guys had skied the Messner and they had to downclimb this sheer blue ice at the bottom,”

Labovsky said. “And so nobody else did the Messner the rest of the season.”

Many of their adventures contained an element of danger, but Labovsky said, they were far from reckless.

Prior to any big outing, Mallet would inevitably churn out a trip spreadsheet. He would detail every bit of pertinent information, down to how much isobutane gas each person would use per day, what they would eat and which duffel held his sunscreen versus which held his crampons.

He created many of them during lulls in his job as a petroleum engineer in the Permian Basin. He would work two-week-long night-shift “hitches” that Labovsky is convinced Mallet took because they afforded him ample time to research trips and techniques.

“He was incredibly methodical. I mean, incredibly methodical,” McKay said. “He just had spreadsheets and spreadsheets and everything. Before he did anything, he just did so much research.”

“And he just had such a cool head on him, too,” she added. “He kept it tight. If he was in a stressful situation, he could remain so calm and still be methodical. And I think that’s what made him so incredible outside. I think Austin was physically incredibly strong, of course, but mentally as well.”

Which is why it’s so hard for her to believe he’s gone.

AN UNEASY FEELING

Around 10 a.m. — about when authorities believe the avalanche thundered down the Big Willow Aprons — McKay said she felt something was wrong deep in her body.

She texted Mallet. He didn’t text back, which wasn’t that unusual, considering he was on

... it’s gonna happen on a Thursday morning in your backyard in spring conditions.”

— EMILY MCKAY
Austin Mallet’s girlfriend

a trek through the mountains. Then she checked his phone’s location. He’d stopped moving, which was a little odd for him. Maybe, she hoped, they needed a break.

An adept alpine climber who previously volunteered for Search and Rescue, she said she was reluctant to “sound the alarm.” Outdoor recreation has its risks, but Mallet, whom she described as “the love of my life,” has always come home.

“That morning, I felt something was wrong, my whole body was shivering,” McKay wrote in an email. “And I reached out to his best friends for advice on what to do, collaborate on how worried to be.”

When she saw the Instagram post by the Utah Avalanche Center stating it believed skiers had been caught in an avalanche near Lone Peak, though, she knew. Who else would be on a route that remote and grueling?

According to a UAC report on the slide, the men had just finished skinning up the Big Willow Apron and had begun boot-packing onto a thin ridge that ran through the middle of the cirque when the avalanche hit. The skier in the lead was tossed to the looker’s right side of the spine and partially buried. Mallet and Cameron were thrown to the left and carried further down the avalanche path.

Once the survivor dug himself out, he set out to rescue Cameron and Mallet. He likely arrived just a few minutes too late.

According to Salt Lake County Search and Rescue volunteers, all three carried standard avalanche gear — a beacon, shovel and probe — and helmets. Cameron worked at SkiSkiCo and often participated in twice-monthly skimo races held by Utah Ski Mountaineering. The third man worked in the outdoor retail industry. Craig Gordon, a UAC rescuer who worked the scene, called all three “very experienced, very serious, very dedicated backcountry skiers.”

Labovsky knows others who have died in the mountains, and he and Mallet have made a few rescues themselves. This feels different, he said. He can’t brush this tragedy aside by saying they must not have known what they were doing.

“It’s especially hard because it’s not clear what you change,” Labovsky said. “It wasn’t like Austin was doing one of the hardest things he’s done. This is sort of, for him, a somewhat mundane ski tour.”

Labovsky said he will continue to seek adventure in the remote mountains, and he’ll take what lessons he can glean from Mallet’s experience with him, no matter their weight. He’ll carry his avalanche airbag more often, for example. He’ll pay more attention to subtle changes in snow conditions and question what clues they offer.

He’ll take the time to have breakfast and coffee with his wife.

“I’ve always known that the love of my life takes risks in the mountains,” McKay said. “Just, you don’t think it’s gonna happen on a Thursday morning in your backyard in spring conditions.”

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For the e-edition, the deadline is 3:00 p.m. two business days before publication. For the Sunday print edition, the deadline is 10:00 a.m. Friday. For the Sunday print edition, the deadline is 10:00 a.m. on Friday and the Wednesday print edition deadline is Tuesday 10:00 a.m.

The Salt Lake Tribune

(ISSN 0740-5825)

Established April 15, 1871. Published daily and Sunday by The Salt Lake Tribune, 601 West North 100, Salt Lake City, Utah 84103.

Individuals: Please Note: The Salt Lake Tribune is a Postmaster: Second class. Changes to The Tribune the above address.

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