

Priest Lake Rescue proves perfect mix

By TOM HOLMAN
Special to the Times

PRIEST LAKE — In a rescue that spanned two-days, more than 14 back country rescue riders braved terrain they were experienced in to bring out an injured rider at Priest Lake on Sunday. Gary Smith of Coolin lost his sled in a ravine on Saturday, falling approximately 12 feet with the sled on top of him. He was about a mile from a Kent Lake cabin near Lionhead.

Smith had broken bones below the knee but it was unknown at the time if it was a compound fracture. The rescuers were able to get him out and to a private cabin. Several riders were with him as well as his wife Peggy. All of these people are extreme riders and well prepared. Mike Sudnickovich rode out to high ground to get the rescue started and take in food and 50 watt radios and other equipment.

The area is complex to ride in the daylight so you can imagine what it's like after dark. Scott, a paramedic from Bonner County, had gone in and was with Gary and his wife. Everyone else was sent off the mountain Saturday because of an approaching storm. Every effort by Priest Lake Search and Rescue and Priest lake Ambulance had been made to get a helicopter in but the weather had been a stumbling block. The plan was to have the air force helicopter at first light Sunday if weather permitted. Some of the best back country riders had been assembled to prepare for Sunday.

The weather didn't break so it was obvious

that Gary would have to be taken out by sled or carried about 11 miles. No one was looking forward to carrying, but we were prepared. Several hours were spent on shoveling and widening the trail to give the smoothest route. Several areas were scouted and the trail had to be changed to make it safe.

It was quite an experience to be with a group of back country riders with their skills, the knowledge, experience and energy they put into this rescue, which resulted in a successful recovery. The coordination between the Back Country sledding resource, EMT's, Priest Lake Search and Rescue, Bonner County Sheriff and the community proved to be the perfect mix when help was needed. I know I am proud of every one of them for their professionalism and willingness to risk their lives to help others.

Gary and Peggy Smith have a home in Coolin and ride together as much as possible along with other riders in the area. They are safe and responsible snowmobile riders when out there. Accidents are bound to happen sometimes. Personally, I have never seen a more devoted and professional group of rescue people.

•Update: Gary was taken to Newport Community Hospital on Sunday and then to Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane for an operation on Monday. He had a compound fracture above his ankle and during surgery they put a rod down from Gary's knee through the bones and pinned them in place. He was in surgery for a couple hours.