

Winter Sports for All

Adaptive sports programs provide opportunities for people of all abilities.

By Elaine Bloom

Scott Hadley loves sports. Or more accurately, he loves coaching—Little League baseball, youth basketball, soccer. But it's when he takes off his prosthesis and straps on a ski to teach the sport to someone with a disability that he really comes alive.

"I never skied before the accident and didn't think much about it afterward. But then I saw Ted Kennedy Jr. (who lost a leg to cancer) skiing on TV, and I thought to myself: if he can do it, so can I," says Scott, who lost his leg in a car accident 31 years ago. Now, Scott, an instructor at Belleayre Mountain ski center, inspires others the same way.

"Adaptive" sports enable people with disabilities to participate in sports using special equipment or instruction. Advances in technology and techniques allow people with almost any physical or cognitive challenge to play in the snow.

In adaptive sports, an individual's abilities and disabilities determine which equipment they use. People with disabilities that allow them to balance and support their body weight may be candidates for stand-up skiing or snowboarding. Often a stand-up skier will use crutches with mini-skis attached (called outriggers) to help with stability, strength and turns.



STRIDE Adaptive Sports

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Scott skis as a “three-tracker”—one ski on his leg and two outriggers. Four-trackers use two skis and two outriggers.

Skiers who cannot stand can sit-ski on a seat fastened to a frame with one or two skis (called a mono- or bi-ski). Skiers with visual impairments or those with autism or learning disabilities can ski too, often in tandem with instructors or guided with a bamboo pole. Techniques and tools for adaptive snowboarders include tethering (where an instructor holds reins attached to the student's snowboard to help with turns and speed control), outriggers like those used by skiers, or a rider bar (a horseshoe-shaped device mounted to the top of a snowboard and used for steering).

“Every student is different,” says Anne-Marie Johansson, another instructor trained in adaptive techniques. The best adaptive instructors are endlessly innovative in devising the safest, yet least restrictive techniques. Some adjustments involve adding belts and buckles. Other times, it's seeing things through the adaptive skier's eyes. On that basis, Anne-Marie developed a technique to help kids with autism ski without being touched.

“You figure these things out because you need to,” says Anne-Marie. “The equipment is one end of it; the other end is when you offer no physical restraint, but provide a model and point of focus for the skier.”

For example, one young man wasn't sure about taking off his prosthesis to ski, but when he saw instructor Scott Hadley gliding fluidly across the snow on a single ski, he was willing



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“Three-trackers” ski by using a ski on one leg and two outriggers—crutches with mini-skis attached.

to try it. That approach, by the way, also works with “two-leggers,” as Scott calls people who ski in the traditional way. “Even if they're reluctant to try something, when they see me doing it, they don't dare tell me they can't,” he grins.



Various tools and techniques are used to help teach snowsports, like skiing, to those with visual impairments, autism or learning disabilities. Here, a student is learning to ski by holding a pole held by two instructors.

“The feeling of freedom you get going down the mountain opens people’s eyes to what they can do,” Scott says. Experts agree and say that snowsports build self-confidence and help people bounce back in the face of challenge and change.

Bettyrae Lorenz, coordinator of Belleayre’s adaptive program, explains that freedom and independence mean different things to different skiers. For many, it means mastering the equipment, navigating the lift independently or skiing with friends instead of instructors. And nearly all adaptive skiers improve in strength, balance and flexibility. For some, just going down the mountain in a sit-ski steered by an instructor and accompanied by two assistants allows them to experience the joy of being outdoors and the sense of transcending limits.

One of Anne-Marie’s favorite experiences was with a high school senior who came last winter in a wheelchair. “She told me she just wanted to feel the wind on her face and ski down the mountain with her friends. After a lesson on a bi-ski, that’s what she did.”

The beauty of it is, when they’re on the ice... you don’t know who’s disabled and who isn’t.

And then there’s Luke Wilson of Voorheesville, NY. He likes to ski, but he loves to play sled hockey, a fast-paced, bone-jarring game where players sit close to the ice in lean aluminum sleds mounted atop skate blades. The game was invented for and by athletes with disabilities, but its popularity among people without disabilities is skyrocketing, with many teams



Kim Wilson

Every participant in an adaptive snowsport is different, and uses a variety of tools and techniques. Here a student is using what is called a bi-ski.



Kim Wilson

Organizations like STRIDE Adaptive Sports sponsor sled hockey teams made up of people with and without disabilities, enabling those with disabilities to play a competitive sport on an equal level with their peers.

including both types of members. Rules are like traditional ice hockey, but players propel the sleds and control the puck with two picks—shortened hockey sticks with metal teeth at the end. Sixteen-year-old Luke, who has cerebral palsy, plays center for the Capital District Sled Warriors, based at Albany Academy. The co-ed team, sponsored by STRIDE Adaptive Sports, has 12 players, both with and without disabilities. Luke’s family credits the team, which includes Luke’s twin brother Ben, with giving Luke the opportunity to play a highly competitive sport on an equal basis with his peers.

“We live in a time where technology allows anyone with a disability to participate in any sport,” says Mary Ellen Whitney, founder and director of STRIDE, a non-profit focusing on sports for people with special needs. “People without limbs are climbing mountains and scuba diving and skiing.”

Or as Kim Wilson, Luke’s mother and a Sled Warriors coach, sees it: “The beauty of it is, when they’re on the ice, you’ll see all these wheelchairs lined up next to the rink, but looking at the team on the ice, you don’t know who’s disabled and who isn’t.”

Elaine Bloom is a contributing editor to *Conservationist*.

Where to Play in the Snow



A number of ski centers in New York State have facilities, equipment and specially trained instructors to accommodate skiers with a wide range of disabilities. Some also have facilities and instruction for adaptive versions of snowboarding, Nordic skiing and snowshoeing. Here are a few of them:

Belleayre Mountain (Highmount)

www.belleayre.com/winter/adaptive.htm

Belleayre's new Adaptive Snowsports Center has highly trained instructors and state-of-the-art equipment for three-track, four-track, and sit-skiers. They offer one-on-one lessons for beginner, intermediate and advanced skiers on varied terrain. All ages are welcome. Lessons are 2½ hours, by reservation only. Don't miss Adaptive Awareness Day, February 27, 2011, when the Helen Hayes Hospital staff visit to educate the public about their Adaptive Sports Program. For information, call 845-254-5600 ext. 2473 or 2474.

Windham Mountain (Windham)

www.windhammountain.com/lessons-programs/adaptive-sports-foundation

The largest adaptive sports program on the East Coast for children and adults with disabilities. Skiing and snowboarding lessons are available seven days a week from December to March. Lessons are full- or half-day; season-long program options are also available. Advance reservations are required. In addition, Windham's Adaptive Sports Foundation offers a season-long race competition program for advanced adaptive skiers. For more information, contact the Adaptive Sports Foundation directly at 518-734-5070 or asf-windham@mhccable.com

Greek Peak (Cortland) www.gpadaptive.org

Adaptive sports program offers equipment, snowboards and mono-skis, one-on-one instruction from more than 70 trained volunteers, staff of 30 certified ski and snowboard instructors and Special Olympics instructors, and a fully accessible Adaptive Snowsports Building. For information, call 607-835-6111 ext. 2.

USA Hockey www.usahockey.com

Click on "disabled" under the players tab. USA Hockey has four programs for people with disabilities including sled hockey. Check their website for teams in New York and across the country.

Double H Ranch (Lake Luzerne)

www.doublehbranch.org/winter.html

Private, non-profit organization that offers children aged 6-16 dealing with chronic and life-threatening illnesses the opportunity to participate in various winter sports in the Adirondack Mountains. **Families must apply in advance.** For information, or to support the program, check out the website, or call 518-696-5676.

Whiteface Mountain (Wilmington)

www.whiteface.com/mountain/lessons_adapt.php

The Adaptive Snowsports Program is for adults and children with disabilities who want to learn how to ski and snowboard. Lessons are provided for everyone from first-timers to advanced skiers and snowboarders. Lift ticket, lesson (usually two hours, depending on the student) and rental of adaptive equipment are included. For information, call 518-946-2223.

Lounsbury Adaptive Ski Program, Holiday Valley Resort

(Ellicottville) www.lounsburyadaptive.org/index.html

Lessons are available for people of all abilities, both physical and cognitive. Each student is instructed individually with full emphasis on his or her ability. For information, call 716-699-3504.

STRIDE Adaptive Sports www.stride.org

STRIDE is a volunteer, non-profit organization that offers free programs in 16 different sports to children and individuals with special needs. STRIDE has more than 350 skilled volunteer sport instructors and serves families at 25 locations in the Northeastern U.S. Its Wounded Warrior Project provides sports opportunities to recently injured members of the military. For more information, call 518-598-1279.

See also: www.adaptivesportsfoundation.org