

BREAKING BARRIERS

Athletes Excel with Teton Adaptive Sports

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Standing at the edge of Corbet's Couloir, staring into the mandatory air below, Chris Devlin-Young made history in 2011. He strapped into his mono-ski and became the first adaptive skier to shred Corbet's without a belay. Devlin-Young, a Para-Olympic and World Cup Champion, was a guest coach at the adaptive Steep and Deep camp that year.





Every year, Teton Adaptive Sports offers opportunities for athletes to get outside and enjoy the activities that lure people to Jackson Hole. The group first worked to get people who require special adaptations out on the ski slopes and they now provide a full menu of winter and summer activities for kids and adults of all ages and abilities, including: downhill skiing and snowboarding, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, rafting, kayaking, hiking, summer biking, climbing and more. "Anything you can do in Jackson we try to offer," said Ryan Burke, TAS Summer Program Manager and Adaptive Supervisor. The organization works with the Mountain Sports Schools at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and Targhee Resort to provide downhill skiing and snowboarding opportunities with the resort providing the instruction and the Teton Adaptive Sports organization providing support, including adaptive equipment and specialized instructor training.

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— Adaptive Supervisor Ryan Burke

"With winter programs, we can get absolutely anyone out on the hill who calls us," Burke said. One participant is a triple amputee with weakness in his remaining arm. "We make it as independent as possible. We have a sit ski with a system called a fixed outrigger on one side so he can lean that direction and the other side has a hand outrigger so he can control the turns. We start out slowly, connected on tethers via a rope system. We can become his brakes but the general goal is to get him out doing it on his own."

The group incorporated as a nonprofit in 2005. "We didn't want people with disabilities to stay at home," Burke said. "We wanted to help them experience everything Jackson has to offer" Each winter the group supports approximately 750 lessons, offered through the Mountain Sports Schools at Jackson Hole Mountain Resort and Targhee Resort.

The program utilizes 150 volunteers each winter, some serving as "ski buddies" for kids in the program. An instructor will accompany a group of eight students and their buddies, with the volunteers providing each student with personal attention and encouragement while the instructor can rove between the pairs, providing tips on fundamentals. "Patience is the biggest quality we look for in volunteers," Burke said. "We look for the ability to connect with someone who needs their time and energy." Other volunteers help write grants, assist with fundraising and perform other tasks throughout the year.

Independence is a key goal of the program, providing people with the skills, equipment and knowledge to enjoy these sports whenever they wish. Each activity is adapted individually for each participant, whether they are a three-year-old with Down syndrome, a 25-year-old amputee or a 60-year-old with multiple sclerosis. "Participants vary in their degree of mobility and functioning," Burke said. "Everyone has a chance to push their limits and find a boundary line they're comfortable with. We go on a trip with the mindset to cater to the lowest functioning mobility. We make it challenging for someone with more cognitive abilities as well. It's the same trip for people with a whole range of disabilities, we fine tune it for each individual with a different challenge." Examples of adaptations for a rafting trip include: rigging up a chair for back support onboard the craft, assisting with embarking and disembarking and helping with personal care needs. >>



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<< The biggest inspiration for Burke is watching people overcome their doubts. “It’s pretty obvious every time we go out with someone who has never skied, whether they have a disability or not, they have to overcome their doubt and misconceptions of what they are capable of,” Burke explained. “People who have a disability may be told for a long time that they ‘shouldn’t’ or ‘can’t’ but when they come out and experience this and overcome their disability, it creates an awareness and a raise in self esteem that is mind blowing. Lots of folks are looked at as incapable, but in reality they are just as capable, they need certain equipment and a little different version of instruction. For me, the biggest positive outcome is for people to realize they are just as capable as anyone else but need special equipment or a little extra time.”

Burke emphasizes the program is about helping people gain confidence, push their boundaries and excel at their chosen sport. “People see adaptive athletes around the hill and ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ but for the athletes it’s just getting back into what everyone else is doing and pushing their boundaries the same way,” Burke said. “We have a lot of guys who are wounded warriors, who were hurt in the war and are doing the same thing as everyone else. They’re going the same speed as everyone else, they’re not lagging behind the pack. They’re up front.” For more information, please go to TetonAdaptiveSports.com. ■

