snowSports

Adapting
Quite nicely
With help from volunteers, disabled skiers continue to enjoy the outdoors

John Pelletier believes he’s a better skier now than before falling out of a tree stand while deer hunting in 2004 and suffering a spinal cord injury that left him in a wheelchair.

Now the former attorney from Westport cruises Sunday River’s slopes in a monoski every week through Maine Adaptive Sports and Recreation in Newry.

But to ski with his family, he had to travel from a dark place and learn to live again. A skier before the accident, he came upon the adaptive skiing program about six years ago.

“Skiing really saved my life,” said Pelletier, 54. “It’s just put me on a whole other level. I don’t consider myself incomplete. I feel I can do anything.”

And he does, including hand-cycling, tennis, hunting, and fishing. In doing so, he’s had the assistance of dedicated volunteers.

“They are some of the best friends I’ve ever had in my life, like family,” he said. “They are helping you out for free on their own time.”

Across New England and beyond, skiers and snowboarders with disabilities, from amputees to those living with multiple sclerosis, take to the slopes with an assortment of equipment, from sit-skis to outriggers, arranged through a number of nonprofit disabled sports organizations.

With them are volunteers who through instruction, guidance, and caring forge an uncommon bond on the slopes.

Tom Kersey, 60, volunteered at the New England Handicapped Sports Association at Mount Sunapee, N.H., for 14 years before becoming its executive director, and remembers a time when volunteers skied with goggles smeared with Vaseline to simulate vision loss.

With more than 300 volunteers providing some 7,000 hours of one-hour sports lessons to more than 400 students last year, Kersey says the program would be impossible to have without them.

He sees three types of volunteers: those passionate about their sport, some with a link to a disability, and others wanting to give back. Kersey has to figure out where each one fits.

In exchange for lift access, volunteers even pay $45 for a background check. Plus, many drive long distances from Boston or Providence.

“You can’t buy the feeling you get from volunteering and the participant can’t buy the instructor’s care. They are exchanging a feeling that money can’t buy,” Kersey said.

He finds them largely through word of mouth.

These people go back to work skipping in on Monday after giving 16 hours of their personal time, while their co-workers are dragging in,” he said. “The co-workers want to have that same feeling.”

For more than half of his 37 years, Belmont healthcare administrator Scott Regenstein has been an adaptive skiing volunteer. While at upstate New York’s Greek Peak as a 15-year-old, Regenstein bumped into some three-track skiing — one ski with a pair of hand-held outriggers — instructors. He thought it cool and asked about it. He was encouraged to join the program.

Since then, Regenstein has taught at Vail and Mount Snow, and has become a PSIA Level 3 instructor in Alpine and adaptive skiing. For the past eight years, he’s traveled to central Vermont’s Pico Mountain to teach the volunteer instructors at Vermont Adaptive Ski and Sports.

“Being 15, it looked cool, fun,” he said. “There was free training, and I love skiing. At this point being in the working world, I like to think I help people in my day job, but I really learn a lot from the participants. I learn more from them than they do from me.”

Some 500 volunteers help the organization facilitate its mission to provide diverse, year-round sports outings to more than 2,000 people with all types of disabilities. In winter, volunteers must commit to five days.

Mind-set, caring, positive attitude, good judgment, maturity, and patience make good volunteers. With a mantra of safety, fun, learning (keep everyone safe, people won’t come back if it’s not fun and people won’t learn if it isn’t fun), novice volunteers don’t need to be skiing experts. They need to ski safely down a tough beginner trail.

Volunteers are trained on land and snow, getting up to speed on equipment and teaching styles for visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning.

They initially assist and shadow lead instructors as an extra set of hands and eyes. On the slopes, they’re a buffer to curious skiers. They are part of a team, the focus being the participant.

“This puts my own bad days in perspective,” said Regenstein. “When these folks have bad days, they are immobile or in a hospital or can’t ski for a year. When I have a bad day it’s because someone says something to me at the office I didn’t like.”

Regenstein, who shares his passion for volunteering with his young son, says the participants are incredible people overcoming barriers.

“They are people who are thrown curveballs in life and they’re not letting it stop them,” he said. “It is hard to complain about anything after you see what these people have overcome in their lives.”

Regenstein has seen fearlessness and confidence. Instead of focusing on what’s wrong, what’s missing, they do the opposite.

“The students focus on what they are able to do and capitalize on their strengths,” he said.

Geoff Krill lost the use of both of his legs in a 1995 snowmobile crash. Now 43, the North Woodstock, N.H., skier has been a student, instructor, and now is sports director of New England Disabled Sports at Loon Mountain in Lincoln, N.H.

He skis competitively, and even monoskied the steeps of Tuckerman Ravine.

The organization has about 200 volunteers for Loon and 60 at Bretton Woods, with combined lessons of about 3,000. Volunteers put in 20 days, with many coming back year after year. According to Krill, many are vested in teaching skiing or snowboarding. About 40 percent of the volunteers are certified instructors and pay for the certification classes themselves.

“They have a sense of pride and want to give more through education,” Krill said last week from Breckenridge, Colo., where he was working with wounded soldiers and Boston Marathon bombing victims at one of the country’s largest winter sports festivals, the Hartford Ski Spectacular.

At the end of the day, it’s about being around positive energy,” he said. “It’s about a bunch of people getting out because they all want to ski.”

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