



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

Children, Teens, Adults, Veterans

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THE SPOKESMAN REVIEW

November 23rd Issue, 2006

Wounded Veterans Find Outlet in Winter Sports

Sun Valley Group Helps with Adaptive Recreation

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The Web link to this story is: <http://www.spokesmanreview.com/idaho/story.asp?ID=161173>

Note: This link may not be live after March 15, 2007.

Winter always meant snowboarding for Chad Brumpton, when he looked eagerly to the hills for signs of snow and a chance to ride.

But when the Boise man was serving as a tank commander in Iraq, his tank ran over an improvised explosive device that destroyed the tank and seriously injured the Marines on board, including Brumpton.

Both his legs were shattered from the knees down, but doctors rebuilt them with rods, pins, screws and plates. One severely damaged leg may still have to be amputated. But last winter, just a few months after he'd been released from the hospital, Brumpton was on the slopes of Sun Valley, using adaptive equipment to try snowboarding again.

"I can't ride like I used to," he said. "I don't have the muscle functions or anything to do that, so they helped me figure out how to ride again."

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is preparing for another set of severely wounded service members who will arrive in January for an all-expenses-paid snow-sports camp – a type of therapy that taps into the rush of extreme sports to help young, strong, but severely injured service members recover. People with missing limbs, blindness and other traumatic injuries will get help to ski, snowboard, paraglide, play hockey and more.

"I don't like sitting around," Brumpton said. "I'm a very active person – hunting, snowboarding, motorcycles, stuff like that. I still do all that stuff."



Marines Chad Brumpton, left, Nathan Spaulding and Ryan Dollar, all of Boise, play hockey using special equipment that allows even those with severe injuries or missing legs to play the game. (Photo courtesy of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports)



Tom Iselin, executive director of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, said, "That's just the mentality of a service member – they're going to go for it. They want to go big."

The Sun Valley program is part of a growing trend toward sports as rehab for badly injured veterans. The U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs is partnering with the Sun Valley group to route service members to its "Higher Ground" program, and other organizations around the country, including Disabled Sports USA and the Wounded Warrior Project, are focusing on sports and recreation to help wounded veterans recover.

Jeff Schrade, communications director for the Senate committee, said the panel's outgoing chairman, Idaho Sen. Larry Craig, was struck by how many wounded veterans he visited in the hospital wanted to be active again right away.

"You go, 'wow, what a tough injury,' but these guys ... a lot of them are like, 'Hey, I want to go jogging,' and they don't have a leg," Schrade said. "They're young, they're strong, they've been active, and for a lot of them, they want to continue doing that."



Iselin said, "The government knows if you can build someone's confidence and self-esteem ... then they can have belief in themselves and hope. ... You can handle the challenges of your rehab better, and you can better cope with the combat-related stress that you have."

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports has helped more than 100 service members since it started working with those wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is on pace to work with about 50 a year, between winter and summer sports camps and a handful of special sessions for individuals.

"Look at the prosthetics they have now – part of it is the technology has allowed people with disabilities to do things that they could never have done before," Iselin said.

Plus, he said, extreme sports – "stuff that's a little edgy" – are particularly inspiring to service members accustomed to being highly fit and active. "We have a guy that wants to go ice climbing – that's extreme. He has no legs. We're trying to work something out. But that's what his dream is."

Joe Danes, of Boise, was into snowboarding and mountain biking before the 23-year-old was severely injured in Iraq. He was manning a turret with an automatic grenade launcher atop a 7-ton truck on a night mission to the Jordanian border when the truck flipped at about 50 mph and crushed him, breaking three bones in his back and causing extensive internal injuries.



"Being a Marine and young, you think you're 10 feet tall and bullet-proof," Danes said. "I thought, 'Oh, I cracked some ribs or something.' "

He walked away from the crash to check on his driver, but 10 minutes later he collapsed and needed surgery. He woke up five days later in a hospital in Bethesda, Md. He couldn't eat or drink anything for two months.

"All the doctors, because of the way that I was injured, they can't understand why I wasn't cut in half or at least fractured my vertebrae and paralyzed from the waist down," Danes said.

But he recovered enough to walk and run – he just can't eat normally, and suffers from pain and continuing problems related to his internal injuries.

Danes said doing extreme sports "gives that edge, especially for guys that have been in combat."

Service members who have "been through firefights and stuff like that, the adrenalin's so far up there," Danes said. "Then you come back, a lot of people kind of get bored with other stuff unless they push things now and then, get a little bit of that adrenalin going through there."

He attended the Sun Valley snow-sports camp with several of his Marine buddies, including one who's paralyzed from the chest down.

"Everybody picked if they wanted to do skiing or snowboarding. We did snowmobiling as well, some cross-country skiing, and then we did paragliding," Danes said. He called the paragliding "amazing" – it involved soaring off the top of Mt. Baldy in tandem with an instructor, dangling from a huge parachute that took them up above the mountains and high over the ski resort before touching down in the valley.

The Marines also played hockey in special adaptive sleds. Brumpton said, "That was a lot of fun."

He's hoping to get out snowboarding again this season. "It was nice to know that I could still do it," Brumpton said. "I think it helps feel normal for people with serious injuries. It was nice to be up in the mountains and clean air and stuff like that, getting away from hospitals and regular life. ... It was a great escape."

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports is working with the U.S. Department of Defense on ways to help more wounded service members tap into such programs.

