



Sun Valley Adaptive Sports

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Features

Vets Operate on Blind Faith

Visually impaired group attends winter sports camp in Sun Valley

By [DANA DUGAN](#)
Express Staff Writer

Sun Valley Adaptive Sports made headway with another type of veteran this past week when it hosted six visually impaired veterans and their wives for four days of winter sports recreation. This was the first-ever snowsports camp specifically for service members who have lost their vision in Iraq and Afghanistan.

According to the Blind Veterans Association, more than 200 soldiers are legally blind after having lost their eyesight in combat. As with any combat-related head injury, post-traumatic stress disorder can often come with the loss of eyesight.

"This was a therapeutic experience of a lifetime for these men and their wives," said Tom Iselin, executive director of Sun Valley Adaptive Sports. "They tried all sorts of winter sports, including skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing and ice skating. I was most surprised that four of the six guys wanted to go paragliding, though they were unable to go because of the weather."

Iselin said the therapy that accompanied this "camp" is particularly gratifying.

"What made it so special was the group therapy and intimacy that we do in the background," he said. "We talked about all the issues, struggles and traumas, about leaving families for two years, having 20 surgeries in eight months for one person, and the impact of when your husband is on 20 medications a day for two years."

Each morning the group headed to Dollar Mountain, where they worked on skiing or snowboarding with Sun Valley ski instructors.



Army Military Police heavy equipment operator Travis Fugate and his guide, Sun Valley adaptive sports instructor Dawn Hunt, bonded while working together on his skiing. "I've never felt such a connection to a student," Hunt said. "Teaching a blind person how to ski has brought a whole new meaning to the phrase teamwork." Fugate was equally moved. "I was scared and afraid the first day," he said. "This event built my confidence and courage. I now believe I can do any sport, given the chance."



"The first day was exciting," Iselin said. "They were on the magic carpet, which just goes part way up the hill. It was a huge challenge, but by the end of four days every service member skied down Dollar.

"They were nervous, a little scared. They're used to routine. This takes them out of their comfort zone and pushes that envelope. The improvement and willingness and trust was exponential. It was true blind faith. That's what really took place—an amazing amount of faith in their instructors, most of them working with visually impaired for the first time."

Erik Weinhenmayer, a blind mountaineer who had spoken a few days earlier at The Community School in Sun Valley, worked with the vets on Dollar their first day out.

"Baldy is the best mountain I've ever skied on and I believe it is the perfect teaching mountain to teach visually impaired people because of consistent runs that are long and steady," he said.

Weinhenmayer expressed a desire to come back next year to be part of this event for the whole week. The commitment of the 60 volunteers and Sun Valley Co. helped make the camp a success, Iselin said. Sun Valley provided free instruction, rooms, food and lift tickets.

"I came as a volunteer to give and left realizing that I received more than I gave," said Ketchum resident Joan Oates.

After spending the morning on Dollar, the group tried something experimental each afternoon. One day it was Nordic skiing, the next snowshoe, the next skating. The men were relentless in their dedication to recreating, Iselin said.

Army Special Forces Lt. Ivan Castro, who is training for the Boston Marathon, skied four hours each morning. One day he also Nordic skied for two hours afterwards. Then he hiked up to mid-River Run with Iselin at the end of the day "just for fun."

"This was the most therapeutic and fun event I've attended," Castro said. "Adaptive Sports is setting the standard for helping service members heal."

The men were not alone in their praise. Mary Paiser, the wife of Army National Guard Sgt. Chris Paiser, said it was a "one-of-a-kind experience for the wives. It gave us a chance to share our feelings and struggles as we learn to cope."

Her husband was determined to learn to snowboard.

The first few days he would "fall 15 times a run," Iselin said. But at the end he boarded Dollar on his own.

"That was one of the real highlights," Iselin said.

One of the things they learned was that they "need to be more with other men in similar situations," Iselin said. "They were inspired to have a greater a voice in D.C. like there is for other injuries, to band together, to get appropriations for surgeries and gatherings like this and build awareness."

Iselin said the theme of this camp followed a quote from author Napoleon Hill: "There are no limitations except those we acknowledge. Anything the mind of man can perceive he can achieve."

"We hope they take those life skills they learned back to their home communities, be better dads, improve their relationships with their wives, perform better at work and school, handle the challenges and especially cope with the combat-related stress that they all suffer," Iselin said.

Iselin himself was suffering a bit on Thursday, the day the vets departed. At a going-away party on Wednesday, he had been offered and drank three shots of tequila (and a beer) in 10 minutes.

"What? Are you going to do say no to a blind Special Forces guy?" Iselin said.

For information about Sun Valley Adaptive Sports, contact Tom Iselin at (208) 726-9298, or email tom@svasp.org.

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