



EMBRACING THE OUTDOORS





Adaptive programs around the country provide opportunities for those with physical disabilities to ride, paddle, climb, ski... and more!

By Russ Willcutt



So you've made reservations at your favorite resort, the one that you know is fully accessible and surrounded by gorgeous scenery with plenty of amenities. Past visits have always been a delight, but you couldn't help noticing the many activities available to other guests and wishing that you could join in. Kayaking sure looked like fun, as did cycling, and water skiing and wakeboarding on the lake would provide a wonderful respite from the summer's heat. Too bad you don't know how to do those things.

"There's nothing stopping you from learning how, though," according to Joel Berman, co-founder and executive director of Adaptive Adventures, one of many programs found throughout the United States providing attendees with opportuni-

ties to embrace activities some may not know are possible for those with physical disabilities. "Our goal isn't for someone who enjoys kayaking to attend every time we hold an event, although they're always welcome to do so. It's to teach them how so they can incorporate that activity into their life. It's along the same lines as the analogy about giving a hungry man a fish, or teaching him how to catch one himself. By equipping him with that knowledge you've changed his whole world, and that's what we're here to do as well."

INCLUSIVE ACTIVITIES

Open your Web browser, type in "adaptive programs," and you'll find page after page of links to organizations offering snow skiing, snowboarding,

kayaking, rowing, horseback riding, golfing, camping, swimming, cycling, sailing, and many other summer and winter recreational activities at sites located around the country. Some—such as the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah—conduct the majority of their programs on site or nearby, while others hold events around the country, collaborating with local experts to host and help staff the events. Adaptive Adventures follows the latter model, according to Berman, who spends a great deal of his time on the road traveling between events.

"Matt Feeny and I launched Adaptive Adventures in 1999," he says, referring to the co-founder and current program director. "I'm

The archery program is quite popular at the National Ability Center, top right, as are cycling excursions into the surrounding countryside, bottom right. A rainbow provides an unexpected gift during an Adaptive Adventures bike trek,



an above-the-knee amputee, and Matt was a diver who broke his back diving off a 100-foot cliff. We were both working for other adaptive programs at the time, and we felt there was a lack of collaboration because they were affiliated with competing companies. We decided to start an organization that wasn't really site-specific so that we could work with many different programs to better serve the participants. We also wanted to find a way to do a better job of letting people know about upcoming events, because I personally hate it when I hear about something I would've liked to do after it has occurred. That's why we developed our Adaptive Information Research Center Web site (*see sidebar*), which provides links to other adaptive programs and activities around the country. But our idealistic vision, which we still pursue, was to bring programs to people, not people to programs."

Although Adaptive Adventures provides plenty of opportunities for snow-related activities near its office in Evergreen, Colorado—it has another office that's located in Wilmette, Illinois—the organization decided to also focus on non-seasonal activities such as cycling, and summer pursuits including water-skiing and kayaking. "Snow skiing is a great sport for those with physical disabilities, especially since it relies on gravity," Berman says. "But we'd hear people saying they were sad when they were making their last run of the season, and that



Tandem kayaking is a pleasure for those with and without physical disabilities at an Adaptive Adventures event, above, and sled hockey is available through the National Ability Center, below.



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“We decided to start an organization that wasn’t really site-specific so that we could work with many different programs to the benefit of the participants. Our idealistic vision was to bring programs to people, not people to programs.”—Joel Berman

Adaptive Adventures

they’d have to wait six months to do it again, so we wanted to provide activities they could be involved in year-round.”

In developing their niche they saw other programs emphasizing snow skiing for either beginners or competitive athletes such as Paralympians, so they chose to bridge the intermediate-level gap. At the same time they began developing programs devoted to outdoor activities at locations around the country. In considering a topic so broad as “sports” they saw activities such as basketball, rugby, and sled hockey as team events often affiliated with rehabilitation facilities, so they decided to focus on individual outdoor sports with an eye toward integration. “In the summer we hold programs devoted to cycling, for instance, and paddle sports like kayaking and whitewater rafting,” he says. “We also offer rock climbing, sailing, and tennis, and we have a pretty big water skiing and wakeboarding program as well. And one of the key things about all these sports is that people with and without physical disabilities can do them together, so that’s what we mean when we refer to offering activities that create opportunities for integration.”

As examples of this Berman points to an annual cycling trip through the Rockies in which a group of some 20 riders pedal more than 400 miles in a matter of days, with half of them on standard cycles and the others—including Feeney—powering over the mountain passes on hand cycles. Another instance involves wakeboarding, in which an enthusiast with a modified board can join her friends for a day of fun on the lake. “All she would need is the right equipment and training and she could

get out there and ride the wake along with everybody else,” he says.

This same spirit of inclusion is on display at many of the other events Adaptive Adventures holds. Berman recalls a young woman from Atlanta who had never snow skied before and wanted to learn, so her whole family signed up for an event held in Colorado and had a wonderful time. As a result, they now have more options than before when planning family vacations. He also points to a family beach party held last August at which more than 100 attendees gathered to bike, kayak, and enjoy a barbecue on Chicago’s lakefront. “These were people with physical disabilities along with their families and friends,” he says, “and we had both standard and adaptive equipment available for everyone to use. So it’s that type of inclusive experience we’re championing, helping people to realize that you really don’t have to section yourself off into separate groups when you want to get out and explore the great outdoors. After all, when the playing field is level, everybody has a chance to enter the game.”

ABILITIES AROUND

Just as many are drawn to the convenience of attending programs held in the region of the country where they live, some like the thought of traveling to a specific location with the geographic qualities that allow for a wide variety of activities to be conducted within a matter of miles. Such is the case at the National Ability Center (NAC), which is located in Park City, Utah. The story of how it came to be is similar in many ways to



Specialized equipment allows skiers to break through boundaries at an Adaptive Adventures camp, opposite page, and at the Park City Mountain Resort, above, where the National Ability Center's ski program is based.

the creation of Adaptive Adventures, and many other businesses and organizations that support those with physical disabilities—someone cared enough to make it happen.

“Pete Badewitz had lost part of his leg in a landmine explosion in Vietnam, and he and Meeche White, who was his wife at the time, visited Park City looking for

a place to establish an adaptive skiing program,” according to Ryan Jensen, the organization’s marketing/outreach manager. “He’d been an avid skier before his injury, and he wanted to help other war veterans get involved, too. They immediately fell in love with the area and decided that it was the perfect place to set up their program, so they were able to obtain a grant from the local chapter of Disabled American Veterans that enabled them to teach just over 40 lessons during the winter of 1985. Things really took off from there, and it wasn’t long before they were able to move operations out of the kitchen of their apartment and purchase a doublewide trailer right on the hill at the Park City Mountain Resort, which is still home to our ski program.”

Growth has continued over the past 24 years, with headquarters now located about a mile and a half away from the original site. At its hub is the Bronfman Family Recreational Center and Ranch, residing amid 26 acres of gorgeous countryside and featuring a climbing wall. The land is divided into zones where the different activities take place, Jensen says. “We have a challenge course that encourages teamwork, an archery course, and an outdoor horseback riding arena as well as a 17,000 square-foot indoor facility. We also have bike trails on site, and the whole area is protected open space, so there’s no chance that anything else will be

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Once participants have learned how to wakeboard at an Adaptive Adventures event, at left and on the opposite page, they'll be able to join their friends as they master the waves at watery weekend getaways.

Adaptive Adventures

The following is a sampling of the programs held by Adaptive Adventures in 2009. Visit their Web site to learn more about upcoming events.

Gates of Ladore Trip (rafting)
Utah/Colorado

No Barriers Festival
Miami, FL

Chicago Air Show Wounded Warrior Sports Camp
Chicago, IL

Lake Powell Experience (family watersports)
Lake Powell, UT

Jr. Wheelchair Sports Camp
Aurora, CO

Volunteer Water-Ski Training
Denver, CO

Sloan's Lake Wakeboard Clinic
Denver, CO

Expand Cycling Ride
Boulder, CO

Ride The Rockies w/ Adaptive Sports Center
SW Colorado Loop

Expand Rock Climbing
Boulder, CO

6th Annual STARS Camp Trek Youth Sports Camp
Libertyville, IL

Chicago Kayak Family Paddle and BBQ
Montrose Beach and Osterman, IL

Adaptive Cycling Team Colorado Peace Ride
Colorado

built here," he says. "We have access to some local scenic byways for biking, a sled hockey facility about a quarter mile away, and a reservoir for water sports like canoeing and water skiing about five miles down the road. The ski program is at the Park City Mountain Resort, as I mentioned, which is only a short distance away. So the majority of what we offer can be done right here on our property, with the rest requiring no more than a few minutes to get there."

Despite this varied terrain and wealth of recreational space, the NAC does range beyond Park City, with activities including a Memorial Day rafting trip for veterans on the Grand Canyon's Colorado River, a similar event on the Snake River, and a biking trip through Yellowstone National Park, both of which are located in Wyoming. In addition, the center collaborates with related entities in Predazzo, Italy; Sierra Nevada and Baqueira, Spain; and Pattaya and Chang Mai in Thailand. The NAC is also an official U.S. Paralympics sport club, training hopeful athletes for competition, with one having recently been named to the upcoming Vancouver games.

Whatever the activity, and wherever it is being held, Jensen has observed a common reaction among participants. "Rather than just being pleased to find out that it's possible for someone with a physical disability to kayak, or snow ski, or ride a horse, it's usually their own individual ability to do so that surprises them the most," he says. "They know that the Paralympics exist, of course, but they've never really seen themselves as being involved in those sports, or even capable of it. And they discover that adaptive equipment doesn't automatically make them a great athlete, that's something they've got to find within themselves, so it's really meaningful to watch them identify a goal and then work toward achieving it. That's the really fun part for all of us here, in fact—watching people become what they want to be."

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Although these programs represent two very different models, they still have a great deal in common, beginning with the front-row seat the staff has shared in watching the evolution of adaptive equipment over the years. "Back in the eighties some of the ski equipment looked more like a bobsled than anything else," Jensen says with a laugh, "and since there really weren't many companies out there designing and manufacturing adaptive equipment, a great deal of innovation was required on our part, as well our guests."

Sometimes this merely involved finding a way to connect the tips of a pair of skis so that they wouldn't separate mid-slope, or to find a way to clip skis to the legs of a walker to provide stability. Some of the best suggestions, of course, came from the participants themselves, with

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fewer of these adaptations being required now that so many companies have entered the market (see the profile of Invacare Top End sports wheelchairs and hand cycles in this issue).

Berman, of Adaptive Adventures, agrees that there is more adaptive equipment available than ever before, but also makes an interesting point: "Sometimes it's more about learning how to do something than acquiring specialized equipment," he says. "For instance, eight out of 10 people with physical disabilities can use a standard kayak with no modifications whatsoever."

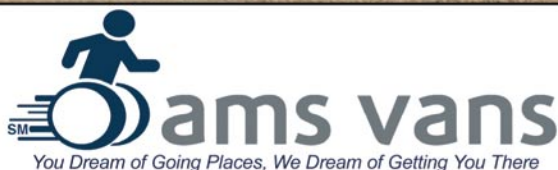
Over the years both organizations have relied on the kindness of friends and strangers alike, who donate used equipment to be reconfigured to meet the program's needs. "It doesn't matter how old it is, because we'll find a way to give it new life in helping people learn and develop these skills," Petersen says.

Another resource both programs depend upon—as do most adaptive sports entities of this nature—is more than helpful, it's invaluable. "And that's volunteers," Berman explains. "One program that stands as an example is the All Mountain Adaptive Ski Camp held in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, which we hold each year in conjunction with the Steamboat Ski & Resort Corporation, the Steamboat Powdercats, and Craig and Andrea Kennedy of Access Anything."

This four-day event, which was established in 2006, draws 25-30 attendees each year from around the country, including many Vietnam, Gulf War, and Iraq War veterans. In addition to two or three staff members from Adaptive Adventures who oversee operations, there are between 50-60 trained volunteers each year. "We held a kid's camp in Chicago a while back, where we partnered with a local adaptive sports group, and in addition to our staff we had something like



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28 volunteers working with about 30 children for five days straight. And that's a huge resource for anyone involved in these types of programs, because a lot of manpower is required with fairly limited financial means, especially if you're a nonprofit like we are."

With a full-time staff of about a dozen people, the National Ability Center relies on some 100 seasonal workers annually. "We teach around 5,000 lessons out of our ski center each year, so that program requires a lot of instructors, as do

our Adventure Learning and horseback riding programs," Jensen says. "But we have quite a few volunteers as well, which can provide some unexpected benefits."

He explains that the local school system has a requirement for each grade level in which children must devote a certain number of hours to community service. This presents an opportunity for collaboration, in which the NAC can allow schoolchildren to assist in one or more of the 20 programs it offers as they meet their commitment. "Kids love recreation, and with everything we're involved in we're bound to have something they'll find appealing," Jensen says. "So not only will they be able to get involved in doing something they like, at the same time they'll be developing an understanding and sense of empathy toward people who enjoy the same things they do, but just go about them a little differently. We feel that this is an important means of breaking down the barriers that sometimes exist between those with and without physical disabilities, because the more contact you have, the more you understand that we're really all the same. We may approach things differently, but the goal of getting out there and enjoying doing exciting things is something we all share.

It's really meaningful to watch participants identify a goal and then work toward achieving it. That's the really fun part for all of us here, in fact—watching people become what they want to be.—Ryan Jensen

"I think it was Napoleon Bonaparte who said 'ability is nothing without opportunity.' Many people know they have the ability to do something, but they don't know how to go about it," he says. "We want to provide the answers. All of our program managers love what they do, and they thrive on the challenge of working with an individual to help them realize their dreams, whether that's adapting a piece of equipment or learning a new skill. We don't want people to come here just because they can do something, we want them to learn how to do it, which is something they'll take back with them into their everyday lives."

CELEBRATING DIFFERENCES

In launching Adaptive Adventures, Joel Berman and Matt Feeney were interested in fostering collaboration between like-minded organizations. Proof of their dedication to this principle is found in the way they reach out to existing regional programs, and also in how they deal with inquiries from interested parties. "If someone contacts us wanting to learn how to kayak, for instance, and they live in New Hampshire, I'll refer them to a program like Northwest Passage, which I know from personal experience is an excellent group," he says. "And we steer dozens of people to the National Ability Center each year, which we collaborate with quite often. So even though we definitely want to generate enough revenue to keep doing what we're doing, our primary goal is to help people with physical disabilities to discover their potential, and to get as much as they can out of life."

And, as always, to level that playing field. Berman likes to think of an advertisement he once saw for an adaptive program, in which a group of kayakers were drifting across a sparkling lake. "It said something like 'one is a dentist and the others are a lawyer, a paraplegic, a musician, a veterinarian, and an auto mechanic... can you tell which one is which?' I've always loved the thought of that, because that's really what we're all about. We're all the same, in many ways, but it's our differences that make us individuals. And that's something to be celebrated." ✍



National Ability Center

The NAC presents a wide variety of ongoing activities at their 26-acre property in Park City, Utah. More information is available on each of the following programs online:

Adventure Learning
Alpine Skiing*
Aquatics
Archery
Bobsled

Canoeing
Climbing Wall
Cycling
Discovery Camps
Equestrian

Hippotherapy
Nordic Skiing*
Outdoor Education
Sled Hockey*
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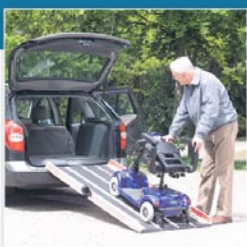
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