

Disabled veterans prove their abilities on Sierra's slopes

By Jessie Marchesseau

TWIN BRIDGES – On the hill they looked just like any other snowboarders. But underneath the helmets, goggles and bulky snowboard gear, the riders at this weekend's Pipeline Learn to Ride and Race camp are truly unique.

Amy Purdy, a tall, slender young woman with long auburn hair explains that she is a double-leg amputee. She lost both legs to meningitis more than 10 years ago. Today, she is development director and co-founder of Adaptive Action Sports, the organization putting on the camp.

In the Aspen Café at Sierra-at-Tahoe's base lodge, Purdy explains the uniqueness of each member of the group. Jasmine, with the perky ponytail of dreadlocks, is an amputee, as is Tanner in the white jacket. Chris has limited movement and feeling in his left arm. Gary suffers from a traumatic brain injury that left him blind in one eye and with no feeling in his left leg. And Beth, at 27, has several fused vertebrae in her lower back, nerve damage and is a two-time breast cancer survivor.



Former Army
Ranger Gary
Nolte doesn't
let the lack

of feeling in
one leg stop
him from
taming
Sierra's
slopes.
Photos/Jessie
Marchesseau

They hail from all over the U.S., and all are disabled veterans.

Beth Wolf had always wanted to join the military, but waited until after college to do so. She joined as a combat medic, but was diagnosed with stage 1 breast cancer while still in training. She was 22. Wolf received surgery and radiation therapy, and continued on with her military career. Just a few years later, while serving in Iraq, she was carrying a wounded soldier on her back when an RPG hit a nearby building. The force collapsed the discs in her back and left her in a wheelchair for six months.

Doctors were able to fuse the vertebrae so she could walk again, but her range of motion is limited, and she has little feeling left in her right leg, except for the constant pain.

"It's not too bad though," she laughs. "I can walk. There's these folks out here missing their limbs, and they're rockin' it. So I'm really lucky."

Wolf, who finished five and half months of chemotherapy in January to get rid of a second round of breast cancer, said coming to the three-day camp at Sierra has really helped to change her perspective.

"To be able to do something where you're going fast without feeling pain, or as much pain, and feeling the wind in your face ...," she said. "I can't run down a basketball court

anymore or go for a jog, but I can get that wind going and feel the mountain air. It's wicked cool. I'm addicted to it; I want to do it every day."

She is not the only participant who has experienced the change that this and programs like it can make.

"I can honestly say programs like this saved my life," Gary Nolte said.

Nolte, 29, a former U.S. Army ranger, sustained a brain injury while serving in Iraq when a mortar struck the building he was in.

"We go from being the toughest and the best-of-the-best to being hurt and being what we consider in our minds nothing," he said, "and this kind of stuff shows us we're still alive. This kind of stuff shows us that no matter what, we can do whatever we want to do, we just have to try, that's it."

He feels so strongly about the benefits of programs like this that he now works for a company offering whitewater boating as a means of therapy for disabled veterans.

An avid skier before his injury, this was Nolte's first time on a snowboard. And having no feeling in his left leg or vision in his left eye did not make it any easier. However, by the end of the camp he was turning both ways with a smile on his face. He said he is hooked and hopes to make snowboarding a regular pastime.

This is just the outcome Purdy and partner Daniel Gale are hoping for. They want participants in their camps to fully embrace the sport and make it a part of their lives, not just a one-time experience. With the possibility of snowboarding becoming an event at the 2014 Paralympics, they want adaptive riders to look at the possibilities of competitive snowboarding as well.

Purdy, who snowboarded competitively before her illness, is currently the top-ranked female adaptive rider in the world, having won two back-to-back World Cups. It is this passion for competition that prompted AAS to schedule the camp to coincide with the United States of American Snowboard Association (USASA) regional race at Sierra on Saturday. Purdy competed in the race and encouraged the other riders to do the same, hoping to inspire at least some of them to join the world of competitive snowboarding.

Since it was his first week on a board, Nolte opted not to enter the race this time around, but admitted he is a competitive type of guy, and he considered it.

“You got to constantly remember that you’re enabled, not disabled,” Nolte said. “It’s not what you can’t do, it’s what you can do It’s about just getting out there and doing it and having fun with what I can do.”

This is the second year AAS has had an adaptive snowboard camp at Sierra, something the organization plans to make an annual event.

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