

Challenge Aspen

“Challenge Aspen gave me the ability to dance again and to feel whole, to feel great. It will never be the same steps, the same song, but it is still dancing down the slopes.”



Building Confidence and Resilience for Disabled Athletes

ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT | PHOTOGRAPHY PROVIDED

Sam Ferguson is a very independent guy, but to ski up Snowmass Mountain in late February, he counted on a little help from his friends.

Sam, a bronze and silver X-Games medalist, lays down his tracks with a sit ski, a metal frame mounted atop a single steerable ski. Sam is so good with it he can catch air and run the half pipe—not things most folks would expect a person who is paraplegic to do.

But since the mono ski won't run uphill, on the day of the Challenge Aspen Chris Bove Memorial Uphill fundraising event, Sam hitched the sit ski to a climbing rope and asked half a dozen friends to clip in and pull, dog-sled style.

"I know plenty of disabled athletes who will be among the 250-300 doing the Uphill," Ferguson told Roaring Fork Lifestyle in January. "Challenge Aspen works with people who have all kinds of physical and cognitive challenges, and they will be there. But I think that I'm the only sit skier who does this event."

Challenge Aspen grew from the dreams of Houston Cowan and Amanda Boxtel. Cowan became interested in teaching blind skiers in 1991. Boxtel, who was paralyzed from the waist down after breaking her back in 1993, paired her teaching background with that personal experience to help the disabled gain access to sports in the Rockies. At the urging of mutual friends, Houston and Amanda met in 1994. The two formally established Challenge Aspen in 1995.

It was Boxtel who gave Sam Ferguson, who was paralyzed in a mountain biking accident, his first ski lesson. He recalls, "I kept saying no. I had had the fear of God put into me by my doctors, who said 'no sports.' I was afraid. Amanda would invite me to come ski, and I would decline. Then she'd ask again. And again! Finally, she told me that they needed a first-time mono skier to do an interview with the media. I agreed partly because she promised that she would quit nagging me after that."

"That morning, to my surprise, it turned out that my first-ever mono-ski lesson was going to be on *Good Morning America!*" Amanda taught the lesson, and according to Ferguson, it went great. "I think I only fell twice. They were there to catch me. As soon as the skis hit the snow and I made a few turns, I realized that this was something I could be passionate about. It would give me my confidence back."

Rebuilding confidence is what Challenge Aspen does. Year



round, the nonprofit gives adults and children with disabilities access to a variety of recreational sports: downhill and cross-country skiing, whitewater rafting, horseback riding, swimming, hiking and fishing.

Anne Merz, who is 58 and lives in Carbondale, was able to ski again with the help of Challenge Aspen. She wrote to them, saying "...thank you for giving me back something that had been stolen from me. When I had gotten so sick that the ability to ski was impossible, I thought that I would never again be able to feel the snow under my skis, the sun in my face and the thrill of meeting

CONTINUED >

the challenge of heading down the slopes.”

At 18, Merz was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), which she calls “a slippery-slidy disease.” Merz explains, “They call it relapsing and remitting, but it means that you get back what was lost and then lose it again. I have now progressed to where I rarely get much back, but Challenge Aspen gave some of it back.” Last winter, Challenge Aspen took Merz to Snowmass. “It was glorious,” she says. “They took me down parts of the mountain that I had always loved and thought I would never see again. They gave me the ability to dance again, to feel whole, to feel great. It will never be the same steps, the same song, but it is still dancing down the slopes.”

Basalt resident and real estate broker Matt Harrington has enrolled his son in Challenge Aspen’s summer program for nine years running. Oliver has a developmental disability. “It’s truly the most amazing time imaginable,” says Harrington. “This organization unites children with special needs from all over the country. The kids spend a week in our beautiful valley experiencing music, theater, dance and art, as well as opportunities to enjoy outdoor activities with other children with disabilities. I can’t speak highly enough of Challenge Aspen.”

Sit skier Sam Ferguson, pictured at top right, has moved from being a Challenge Aspen participant to a volunteer. He observes, “If you get too wrapped up in a disability, it gets self-defeating. Lots of people lose their self-esteem, their passion and their drive in life whether they are abled or disabled. Skiing gave me a little nudge and showed me that I could adapt.”

Ferguson, now 44, has not only adapted, he earned a level one adaptive certification with the Professional Skiers Instruction Association. He skied on the national circuit as a member of U.S. adaptive development ski team. He convinced the X-Games to add a mono ski cross event to their schedule, and he won a bronze medal in the inaugural event competing against U.S. adaptive ski team members.

“I have developed a philosophy about all this,” he reflects. “My life has been a blessing. My disability has opened doors to opportunity and adventure, and it allowed me to compete in amazing events—all of which would never have happened if I hadn’t become a paraplegic. I have heli-skied in South America. I have been able to compete, and to be a pioneer, in mono ski cross, earning bronze and silver medals in the X-Games. I have been in three Warren Miller ski films. I have been on the U.S. adaptive development team. I have had an amazing career in skiing and it felt good to finally retire from competition at age 41.”

The Chris Bove Memorial Uphill fundraising event—during which snow enthusiasts of all ages and ability levels tackle the 1,368 vertical rise up Snowmass Mountain using anything from snowshoes and skins to stabilizers and telemark skis—carries a special meaning for Ferguson. Chris Bove was a personal friend. “When we would go out skiing, I would always want to focus on something: going faster, jumping off a cliff. With Chris I was always learning something, and he was a great wingman. When we were out on the town, people thought we were brothers and we played that very well.” The two had originally planned to ski together on the day that Bove hit a tree and died of internal injuries.

Ferguson was the only sit skier who participated in the uphill portion of the Bove Memorial fundraiser in late February. The money raised is used for scholarships for people who live in the Roaring Fork Valley and attend Challenge Aspen’s programs, which serve more than 400 participants with more than 2,100 participant days a year.

