

Wounded Warriors Get Inspired on Telluride Slopes | TASP Works With Four Servicemen and Servicewomen Injured in Iraq

by Marta Tarbell, Telluride Daily Planet Newspaper

In March, the Telluride Adaptive Sports Program teamed up with Disabled Sports U.S.A. to conduct TASP's first-ever Wounded Warrior Disabled Sports Project. Four members of America's armed forces, now rehabilitating from injuries suffered in their tours of duty in Iraq, arrived in Montrose Thursday, March 23. Telluride Rotary arranged transportation via Telluride Express to Telluride, where they were met by TASP staff.

After hooking up with host families, the four participants – and the physical therapists, friends and family members who accompanied them – headed for the Telluride Elks Lodge for the first of the weekend's three celebratory dinners.

"We were lucky to have these Wounded Warriors here," says Dianne Pauls, longtime TASP volunteer who organized the event, in part because many recovering servicemen and servicewomen were already booked for the Snowmass Winter Sports Clinic the following weekend, and then too because so many servicemen and veterans were attending commemorations for the 1942 Bataan Death March, the Japanese troops' brutal 1942 march of American POWs in the Philippines during which any troops who fell behind were executed.

All of the Warriors, despite their injuries (three were missing portions of their legs; a fourth, Army Staff Sergeant Yegor Bondarenko, had lost an arm) were candidates for learning to ski or snowboard with TASP instructors using outriggers and the slider.

Following a steak dinner at the Elks, the servicemen/women settled in with their hosts Thursday night, turning in early so they could make the 8 a.m. Friday morning pickup for the snowmobiling appointment with Dave's Snowmobile Tours.

"It was an exciting ride for most of them," says Pauls; Bondarenko opted for snowboarding with TASP instructors instead, in part because no equipment was available to retrofit a snowmobile for the use of a person missing one arm.

Snowmobiling up on Wilson Mesa, "Carla Best had a blast," Pauls remembers, "doing jumps. After one," Best, an Army sergeant injured in an IED [Improvised Explosive Device] bombing, "had to come back to the rest stop because her leg had fallen off and she needed to readjust it.

"It was fun to see everyone doing a sport that they could excel at so quickly."

Friday afternoon the group gathered in Mountain Village for a pizza lunch hosted by Telluride Mountain School seventh-graders. The kids were especially

fascinated by above-the-knee amputee Best's computer chip prosthetic leg, engineered so it "remembers" to reset itself so she can walk on it. Best, who worked with the Army as a mechanic, now uses the high-tech prosthetic, which she "has to plug in at night," Pauls reports. "The kids thought that was pretty interesting."

The TMS seventh graders, who received community service credit for their participation, spent Friday afternoon on the mountain with their lunch time guests.

Because Best can stand on her remaining leg for maybe 10 seconds, due to her injuries, TASP staff and Best's occupational therapist Marilyn Rodgers, an Army captain from Walter Reed Medical Center, opted to use the slider – a kind of walker on skis – and then move on to four-tracking (two skis and two outriggers, Canadian crutches with ski tips attached).

Best is determined, reports Pauls, to "four-track until she gets stronger, and then to three-track," using one ski and two outriggers.

"You usually don't ski with your prosthetic leg," Pauls explains, "because they are so extremely expensive." Because of Best's "many injuries to her standing leg, time on the hill has to be used as efficiently as possible."

Twenty-three-year-old Jesse Schertz, an intermediate-level snowboarder before losing his leg in Iraq, had some trouble at the outset getting his non-bending prosthetic foot into a snowboarding boot. The solution? He took off the foot, pushed it into the boot, then reattached the booted prosthetic. Schertz and Bondarenko – another 20-something intermediate snowboarder – had "excellent TASP snowboard instructors," Pauls says.

Friday night the group headed to former Telluride Town Councilmember Harley Brooke-Hitching's home in Telluride, for a ham-and-asparagus dinner topped off with Alpine Chapel's Heidi Koenig's "killer brownies," says Pauls.

The next morning, the group headed back to the slopes. A high point for TASP organizers came that afternoon when 9-year-old Alberto "A.J." Flores, accompanying Marine Lance Corporal Alberto Flores, his father, swooped down to the Meadows where Alberto Senior was still getting used to three-tracking. "Dad! Come with me!" A.J. shouted, and the two sped away, down the Meadows.

They skied to the bottom without a hitch. "It brought tears to everyone's eyes," reports longtime TASP instructor and trainer Gigi Gerlich-Jones, who worked with A.J.

Local officials – TASP Ambassador of Skiing Felix Snow and Executive Director Colleen Trout; San Miguel County Commissioner Vern Ebert; Telluride/Mountain

Village Mayors John Pryor and Davis Fansler; St. Patrick Catholic Church's Deacon Mike Doehrman; hosts Kathy West, Harley Brooke-Hitching, Andy and Jeanne Loomis and Dan Perkins – and former TASP volunteer Kristi Ericson, a major in the Marines, held a welcome ceremony for the Warriors Saturday afternoon, with Commissioner Ebert reading a message from U.S. Retired General Norman Schwarzkopf.

“As the co-chairman of the Telluride Foundation,” Schwarzkopf wrote, “it is a great honor for me to welcome you to our town. You served your country by first volunteering to be a member of the armed forces. You and your families willingly sacrificed well-earned time together. You went to distant lands when called upon to do so, and you shed your blood to protect your fellow service members and the cause of freedom. On behalf of all of the citizens of Telluride, welcome to our town. Thank you for serving us and your country.”

That night, the trip wound down with TASP's annual End of Season Appreciation Party, complete with dinner and dancing at the Silver Trestle Building, on Telluride's main street. “It was a privilege” to host Bondarenko and Schertz,” declared former Marine Perkins, who drove his guests to and from his home daily, and plied them with donuts. “What a privilege to be a host family to a soldier and his son for the Wounded Warriors Project,” said Kathy and Danny West, as well as to “be part of the Telluride community extending itself and giving a special weekend to heroes who sacrificed so much for our country.”

“I was honored to be included in the program and to spend time with our locals who make the magic for the rest of us,” was Brooke-Hitching's final assessment. “Added to the experience, I had young men and women staying in my home” who exhibited “the true courage to face a war and to face themselves.”

The Loomises weighed in with the hope that “the Wounded Warriors will come back to Telluride soon,” maybe with Rotary sponsorship.

Sunday morning, the group headed to the airport. “Some of them couldn't get more than a four-day leave,” Pauls explains, “because they're still in intensive physical therapy.”

Although Telluride's Wounded Warriors program is just starting – and it is tiny, compared to, say, Aspen's, which hosted more than 200 participants this year – it's a logical step for TASP to take, says Colleen Trout, the organization's founder and director.

This last season, more than 300 disabled snowriders have been able to ski and board on Telluride Mountain, thanks to TASP's 23 paid adaptive instructors, 11 volunteer instructors and the 109 others who volunteer their time to the organization in a wide variety of ways.

For more information about the Wounded Warrior Project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to assisting wounded veterans of the U.S. Armed Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, visit woundedwarriorproject.org or call 800/404-2898. Disabled Sports USA was founded in 1967 by disabled veterans of the Vietnam War; the nation's largest multi-sport multi-disciplinary organization, it serves more than 60,000 veterans nationwide. A member of the U.S. Olympic Committee, DS/USA offers rehabilitation and recreation programs through a nationwide network of over 80 community-based chapters; for more information, call 301/217-9840.

This summer, Pauls reports, the TASP-spawned San Juan Riding Program "is going to try to bring in a couple of Wounded Warriors." The program, begun by TASP, is in Ridgway, where it is run by Olga Spanhoff and some of the same TASP instructors and volunteers who help out, working with some of the students "who ski with us in the winter program." For more information, Spanhoff can be reached at 626-3018.

Pauls reports she was especially thrilled by a post-visit thank-you letter from Best, thanking TASP for "the great time I had in Telluride." Best, who has already participated in similar events – "one ski trip, and two marathons" – pronounced her Telluride weekend as "by far, was the best that I have been on.

"The level of attention given to us, and the genuine care of the townspeople reaffirmed my faith in humanity. I thank you so much for having me as your guest to such a beautiful area, with carte blanche to every person's dream. Thank you so much, from the bottom of my heart!"

"Getting that letter reminded me of how Telluride pulls together for important events," says Pauls, "and my amazement at the generosity of the awesome people we have here."

Pauls also expressed her "heartfelt thanks to the TASP Board of Directors and TASP Executive Director Colleen Trout for letting me run the Wounded Warriors program."

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