

Breckenridge Colorado Disabled Sports USA Convention December 9, 2007 20th Hartford Ski Spectacular



Connie Lawn

Connie Lawn hails from the White House Press Corps and calls herself "The Skiing White House Reporter." But she prefers writing about snowsports. Her specialty is covering skiing for the disabled.

This week was a tremendous success; every one of our athletes made it to the top of the mountain and came down intermediate or advanced trails."

This was from Kirk Bauer, the Executive Director of Disabled Sports USA. DSUSA runs an enormous number of athletic programs out of Rockville, Maryland. Kirk lost a leg in Vietnam but, like most of the skiers and snowboarders at this event, is able to fly down the mountains with great speed and skill. He is assisted by his hard-working project manager, Julia Ray, who helped make this event happen. The week emphasized the exceptional camaraderie of wounded warriors and other disabled athletes, and their ability to inspire and mentor young athletes with disabilities. They dominated the mountains at Breckenridge, Colorado and were everywhere in the enormous Beaver Run Convention Center. It became normal to see handsome servicemen and women or other disabled athletes in their wheelchairs, walking around on prosthetic legs, or using mechanical arms and hands. In many cases, it was impossible to tell they had artificial limbs. But their recent ordeals were evident. Some of our friends were in a great deal of visible pain after several runs down the slopes. But the next day, they were at it again.

A word should be interjected for the caregivers – in many ways, they are the true heroes, and are often overlooked. We met one remarkable beautiful blonde woman, Katie Adams, whose husband Jeffrey lost a leg in Iraq. Thanks to her love and care along with his determination, Jeffrey has started a new life as an engineer and instructor. Katie teaches other caregivers how to negotiate through the world of social and medical agencies and to maintain the family and adapt the home.

About 900 people attended this week's convention, and several hundred are from the East. Disabled Sports USA is located in Rockville, Maryland, many of their employees or volunteers are from Maryland, Washington, and Virginia. The biggest group of 15 Adaptive Ski participants and instructors are from Wintergreen Resort in Virginia, headed by Michael Zuckerman. Five are from Ski Liberty in Pennsylvania. Their directors are here, working, studying, and skiing hard. They include Director Leslie and Dick White and instructors Trippie and Tom Penland, my neighbors from Lake Barcroft, Virginia. There is also a volunteer from Ski Whitetail and a director from Snowshoe. A large group of skiers and snowboarders are from Vermont, Massachusetts, Ski Windham in New York, and New Hampshire.

There are strong adaptive programs in the Mid-Atlantic area, including Massanutten and Snowshoe. Many Mid-Atlantic, New England and Southern areas hold their own Wounded Warrior Weekends throughout the ski season, and conduct kayaking, horseback riding, fly fishing, and other sports in the warm weather.

Some of the most remarkable athletes are the blind or visually impaired skiers. Weak eyesight is a condition many of us can relate to. My husband Charles and I skied down the mountains with two amazing women – Linda Goodspeed and her instructor Tricia Gallagher, from the Vermont Disabled Sports program. Despite visual impairment, Linda is a writer and ski racer. She has won a special NASJA award as one of the bravest people on the mountain. Tricia is a skilled guide, who says she is going to close her eyes and speed down a mountain! Charles and I tried to do it, and I lasted less than a second before panic set in. But, in the heavy snowstorm and flat light of Breck, Tricia and Linda got us down safely, when we were fast enough to catch up with them!

Another remarkable group here were New York and New Jersey firefighters and their families. Isaac Feliciano and Stephen Halliday hit the slopes and inspired and worked with the soldiers. They

and other firefighters also cooked up huge pots of delicious soups, stews, and gumbos, which they served to the participants as they came in from the slopes between lessons. The major contributor – The Hartford Financial Services Group – has sponsored these Disabled Events for fourteen years. They "focus on abilities rather than physical limitations."

Our final day on Saturday was excellent. Our disabled ski friends were out in force and we all had a fine time until heavy snow closed in. We called it quits by

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Above: Monoskier Shane White and his wife Ashley.

Top Photo: Participants are assisted with their special equipment, for adjustments or repairs as needed, by volunteers.