

Wounded warriors: 'I can do this'

For more than 40 years, Disable Sports USA has helped incorporate sports into the rehabilitation of wounded service members

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ALPINE MEADOWS — In November, 1968, just four months after losing his leg in the Vietnam War, Doug Pringle stood on one ski across from a World War II Veteran who had also lost a leg in war.

He would learn to ski for the first time that day.

On Wednesday, Pvt. Richard Samudio took to the slopes of Alpine Meadows Ski Resort in a similar position.

It was just more than three months ago that Samudio, 24, lost his leg in the Iraq War, struck by two grenades while performing mounted patrol atop a humvee in Baghdad.

He would also learn to ski for the first time on one leg.

It's been more than 40 years since World War II Veterans of the 10th Mountain

Division brought together a small group of Vietnam Veterans, including Pringle, to support each other as they learned to cope with their disabilities through sports and activities. But what started as a small group of adaptive skiers at Donner Summit has evolved and come full circle to support the troops who have suffered permanent injuries in the most recent war.

And on Wednesday, Samudio along with 15 other Army, Navy and Marine Corps service members cruised down the slopes of Alpine Meadows, many experiencing skiing and snowboarding for the first time.

"It's been awesome, I've never done anything like it before," Samudio said while resting after his first few hours of skiing. "Losing my leg hasn't stopped me at all, it's just slowed me down a bit," he added, anxious to get out for his second round of lessons.

'If I can do this, I can do anything'

The program is called the Wounded Warriors Project, a nationwide foundation that

offers assistance to severely injured and disabled service members. And in conjunction with Disabled Sports USA Far West — the founding chapter of Disabled Sports USA, a national nonprofit that boasts more than 85 chapters and serves more than 60,000 people, military and civilian alike — 16 active-duty service members learned to ski and

snowboard this week as part of the Wounded Warrior Ability Camp at the disabled sports program center located at Alpine Meadows.

Part rehabilitation and part positive motivation, the ability camp is an important step in the process of recovery, said Pringle, who, in 1968, was part of the National Amputee Skiers Association, which would later be incorporated into Disabled Sports USA Far West in 1967, originally located at Donner Summit.

“Sports participation, especially in a high challenge activity like skiing, has proved to be a positive process,” Pringle said. “It proves ‘I can do’ instead of dwelling on what you can’t.”

Back when Pringle started on the slopes, adaptive skiing was perfecting the methods of “three tracking” and “four tracking” — skiing on one or two skis while using two crutch-like outriggers with mounted ski tips to maintain balance — that are still used today.

But really, the only adaptive skiing techniques being developed at that time accommodated amputees. It wasn’t until the 1980s, when the first “sit ski” was developed, that adaptive skiing could cover a wider range of disabilities, from amputation to paralysis.

And as the sit ski evolved into the mono-ski — a molded seating apparatus with a single ski mounted underneath and outriggers used for balance — which eventually gave way to the bi-ski — a similar set up but with two skis mounted to the bottom allowing skiers to ski independently with outriggers or with the assistance of an instructor — almost anyone with a disability can ski today, Pringle said.

The learning curve

Still, skiing and snowboarding is difficult to learn, especially for adults who have never seen snow, let alone are unaware of how quickly you can travel on it.

But even for those that are initially uncomfortable with being inescapably mounted on skis or a snowboard, athleticism, instinct and determination can quickly turn an awkward novice into an adept aficionado.

Just ask Sgt. John Botts, who three tracked and mono skied on Wednesday.

In Jan. 2007, just a few months after losing his leg, Botts, 25, first mono skied for a week in Sun Valley, Idaho, though he admitted it felt a little “lazier.”

Welcoming the challenge, Botts opted to learn how to three track during the morning session of the ability camp and then gave the mono ski another try later under the instruction of Bill Bowness, a silver and bronze medal-winning Paralympic athlete who was also awarded the first-ever adaptive slot on the Professional Ski Instructors of America National Alpine Team in 2004.

“A lot of guys feel they won’t be able to do it until they try,” Botts said. “But you’d be surprised what your body can do, with or without a disability.”

Skiers weren’t the only ones taking turns in the sun-baked snow on Wednesday, though. Many of the service members were dragging knuckles all day.

Pvt. Drew Goin, 20, had snowboarded twice before an injury took the sight in his left eye, and once since. And though he struggled with balance issues early on, he was going off jumps and popping 180s at the bottom of the mountain by the end of the day.

“It’s fun,” he said. “It’s a challenge, but I’m overcoming.”

Ufrano Rios, Marine Corps, who had also snowboarded before, took what he knew from his previous experience and started out slow. And after building up his confidence and balance, he went from the beginner, “falling leaf,” zig-zags to linking full fluid turns all the way down the hill.

And near the end of the day, when Rios’ instructor asked “You want that break now?” Rios replied, “No, I kind of want to do it again,” and headed toward the lift for another run.