

Challenge

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***"I had no idea what I was
going to be able to do"***
***-2014 Snowboard Cross Silver
Medalist Michael Shea Jr.***

ADAPTIVE SNOWBOARDING

GET STOKED OVER SNOWBOARDING

The exhilaration of whisking down a mountain of freshly groomed snow on a single board is an empowering and euphoric experience. Anyone who has tried alpine skiing should also give snowboarding a try as well. You too can enjoy a sport that is fun and exciting!

Given the advances in technology and support, snowboarding is as simple as alpine skiing and accessible to everyone, according to Daniel Gale, Executive Director of Adaptive Action Sports (AAS), a Disabled Sports USA chapter based at Copper Mountain, Colorado. Gale co-founded AAS along with Paralympic Medalist Amy Purdy. He believes there should be no lines drawn in the sand (or snow) when it comes to skiing and snowboarding.

In fact, snowboarding can be easier than alpine skiing for some individuals with physical disabilities, states Brian Castillo, Ski and Snowboard Program Manager for the National Ability Center in Park City, Utah, another chapter of Disabled Sports USA. "There's a stigma that needs to be broken when it comes to thoughts on the sport," he said. "It can be an effective medium for folks that may struggle with traditional skiing." For example, Castillo has seen tremendous success for above-knee amputees as well as individuals suffering from asymmetry in their gate.

Beginner Lessons

Both Gale and Castillo point to the DSUSA website (disabledsportsusa.org) where you can find a location or chapter near you that offers adaptive snowboarding lessons. Before you get out on the slopes, Gale suggests that you go through a thorough assessment, including a review of your mobility and balance as well as the equipment and gear, each done on a case by case basis.

Also understand, like anything, there

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is a learning curve. “There will be success, but there will also be some spills as well,” Gale said. For this reason, it is recommended that you give it a few attempts and not just give up if you don’t master the sport your first time out. “Very few people go from zero to hero on their first attempt,” Castillo added. In fact, Castillo says that one of the jobs of the instructor is to teach people how to fall. “Gravity doesn’t discriminate,” he said. Therefore, make a plan and go back five or six times to figure out if adaptive snowboarding is right for you.

Equipment and Safety

The evolution in prosthetics and other equipment has grown leaps and bounds in recent years. During your individual assessment, you and the instructor will determine the proper equipment that is necessary.

At most facilities, you can demo the equipment. Regardless, Castillo suggests you don’t buy any equipment right away. If necessary, rent it first to figure out if it is the right fit for you. Depending on the needs of the snowboarder, the instructor can use an outrigger, tethers, or other supporting devices to help guide them down the mountain. There is also a Rider Bar that can be attached to the board and allows the instructor to assist with navigation and control.

Above anything else, safety must come first. Gale and Castillo both agree that helmets are a must. In addition, make sure you engage a qualified and certified instructor. “Without proper instruction, the risk factor goes up,” Gale said.

Taking It to the Next Level

After mastering snowboarding for recreation, the next step is to decide whether to pursue the sport competitively. “It’s different than just going out with your friends. It becomes something larger,” Gale said. One such person who transitioned to the competitive scene is Michael Shea Jr., the Snowboard Cross Silver Medalist at the 2014 Paralympic Games and a former Disabled Sports USA board member.

After suffering an accident in September 2002 that required a below-knee amputation of his left leg, he didn’t know what was going to be possible. Eventually, he met Amy Purdy and joined her at an Adaptive Action Sports camp in 2009. Until then, he had never met another amputee before and didn’t know what to expect. “I had no idea what I was going to be able to do,” Shea said.

When he first started out with adaptive snowboarding, he had nothing but leg problems. He struggled with things like the binding not being right and other issues, but the more and more he did it, the easier it became. He enjoyed the sport



recreationally, as it was a nice escape from everyday life. “I debated whether to make that switch (from recreational to competitive),” he said.

In order to be competitive, Shea suggests you must have PACE (Passion, Attitude, Commitment, and Enjoyment). “You have to have a drive and desire to pursue adaptive snowboarding at the competitive level. It is also important to have the right attitude and examine how you view yourself and how others view you. You must have commitment and be willing to put in 100 percent. And you must enjoy the sport. If you’re not loving it, why are you doing it?” he said.

Shea will be competing at the 2018 Winter Paralympic Games in South Korea. He is also expected to participate in The Hartford Ski Spectacular, the Disabled Sports USA event held in Breckenridge, Colorado. Celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, it is one of the nation’s largest winter sports festivals for people with disabilities. As someone who has been a developmental coach for others, he has seen so many smiles at that event that makes it a must for him annually. “There is no event in the world that touches more people wanting to get on the mountain,” he said. After retiring from competition, he expects to continue helping others pursue their interests in adaptive snowboarding.

Getting Started

Adaptive snowboarding continues to grow in popularity and provides an opportunity to recreate no matter your ability. In some cases, maybe skiing doesn’t speak to you but snowboarding might. Either way, you should experience the freedom you get while cruising down the mountain. To give snowboarding a try, contact one of the 57 DSUSA chapters in over 20 states that offer adaptive snowboarding. Visit your local Disabled Sports USA Chapter at www.disabledsportsusa.org/ location.