



IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE TIME TO GO SKIING

Skiing is a liberating sport, according to Diane Barras, an alpine race coach with Maine Adaptive Sports & Recreation (a chapter of Disabled Sports USA). “You truly need to experience it to see how just how freeing it can be,” Barras said, who also served as a guide for Lindsay Ball, a visually-impaired athlete that competed at the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games in Sochi. “You’re moving in a totally different way, so your body may not be used to it.” You mainly just need to have a sense of adventure if you want to try it for the first time.

SKIING ADAPTATIONS

No matter what your disability is, there is a skiing option and adaptation for you. For stand-up skiers, **four tracking** is one way to overcome challenges with balance and may be utilized by individuals with cerebral palsy or a brain injury and who need assistance to stabilize the body. **Three-tracking** might provide someone with an amputated leg the opportunity to ski using two outriggers which helps with balance. For

true beginners or those needing a little more assistance, a slider might be the best way to go down a mountain. Sliders are essentially walkers with skis and allow individuals to rest your arms on a platform and distribute weight evenly. It is harder to fall and can take the fear factor out as well. This method also provides an opportunity to be tethered to an instructor or coach for additional support.

Sit-down skiing is another method to experience the thrill of alpine skiing. With a bi-ski, you are positioned into a shell or bucket with two skis on the bottom. You are typically tethered to an instructor or stand-up skier who can assist with steering and getting you safely down the mountain.

Ski bikes are really useful for someone who has difficulty with balance or leg strength, including fatigue.

A **mono ski** can be used by skiers who have balance in their trunk and can sit up with little support. This is a great way for individuals who can ski independently and have some upper body strength. Outriggers are used to help with balance as well as initiating turns and other movements.

Visually-impaired skiers are paired with a guide and use radios or speakers to communicate how to navigate safely down a mountain.

GEAR UP

For starters, appropriate gear will be required that will allow you to handle the weather. Layering your clothing not only provides additional insulation but may allow you to adjust for the various elements that you might endure as well. Wear something soft and comfortable under your ski gear and avoid jeans if possible. Good socks are also highly recommended (not cotton) and multiple pairs aren't necessarily needed. Gloves or mittens, neck warmers, and other items that can help keep you warm are also important. Those are the basic items you typically have to provide or bring with you. Boots, helmets (which are mandatory), and other equipment are often available at your location. "Boots have to fit right and helmets must fit comfortably," Barras said. She also suggests goggles for protection of the eyes from the sun and wind, particularly in higher altitudes. Other equipment will vary depending on the individual skier.

GETTING LESSONS

Erik Petersen, who has worked for the National Sports Center for the Disabled (a chapter of Disabled Sports USA based in Winter Park, Colorado) for the past 18 years and serves as chairperson of the World Para Alpine Skiing and Snowboard Sports Committee, encourages beginners to find a Learn to Ski program in their area. "There are so many great programs around the country," he said. "Reach out to see what is available" (Check "Getting Started" for more info).

Once you've identified a program, go out with an instructor. Some skiers can have one lesson and be good to go while others work with an instructor all their lives. "There is no right answer," Barras said. "It depends on each person." Be sure to tell the instructor what you want to be able to do or what your goals are. Beforehand, make sure you hydrate and eat

as more energy is consumed in the cold. While you are on the slopes, just relax and breathe. Often we are concentrating on other things, so don't forget to breathe. It makes a huge difference in your experience. If you don't have sensation in a particular part of your body, you will also want to be mindful of that area in extreme winter conditions.

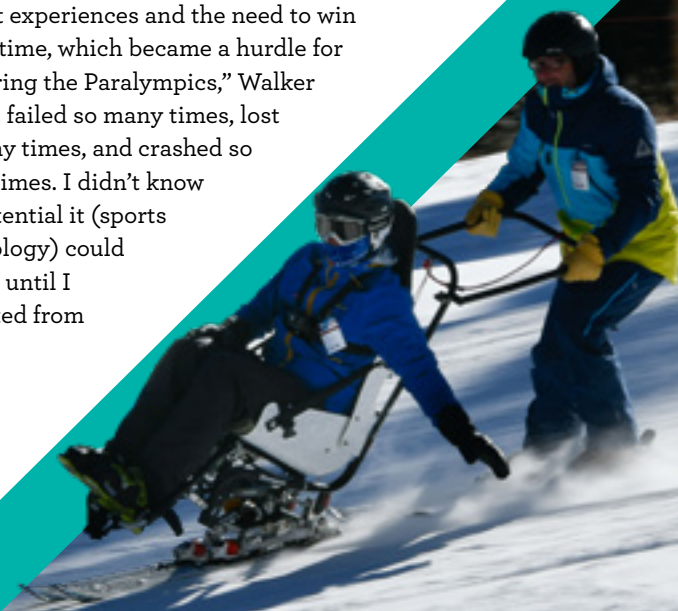
GOING COMPETITIVE

If you reach a point where you have mastered the mountain and want to challenge yourself or want to do more, what's next? Racing may be your next step. To compete at the highest level, you have to be technically, physically, and mentally ready, according to Kevin Jardine, Director of the Alpine Team for the United States Olympic Committee. It is also a huge commitment. "Skiing is not just a winter sport," Jardine said. "Our athletes are year-round."

Jardine recommends the more time you spend on the snow, the better, particularly working on the fundamentals. Four-time Paralympian and silver medalist Tyler Walker agrees. "Technique is the most important thing. You need technique first because you can't handle speed without it."

Strength and conditioning as well as nutrition is also emphasized. Walker suggests spending a lot of time in the gym during the summer to build strength and then maintain it through the winter. "You have a lot less time in the winter to go to the gym." He also recommends eating more protein and make sure that you have a healthy and balanced diet.

Being ready mentally is just as important as physically and technically. "You have to be in the right frame of mind," Jardine said. "Some athletes need pumped up and some need calmed down." The important role sports psychology can play was first ignored by Walker. "I didn't think it was a good use of my time until I actually needed it. I had become paralyzed by past experiences and the need to win all the time, which became a hurdle for me during the Paralympics," Walker said. "I failed so many times, lost so many times, and crashed so many times. I didn't know the potential it (sports psychology) could unlock until I benefited from it."



To start racing, you will want to find a race camp or program. The NSCD Program at Winter Park as well as programs at the National Ability Center (a DSUSA chapter in Park City, Utah), and at Aspen offer elite training programs. But many others, like the one offered at Maine Adaptive, exist across the country. Disabled Sports USA also offers a race camp at the annual The Hartford Ski Spectacular each December in Breckenridge, Colorado. “Everyone should come to Ski Spec,” Barras said, who happens to co-lead the camp.

If you get into racing, you will need your own boots (because you will be in and out of them a lot), helmet, and other equipment that can be fitted properly or tailored to your individual body and needs. Other things, such as a race suit, can come down the road.

There are a number of ways to get actual race experience. It is recommended that you start local, as most camps often hold races at the end and several DSUSA chapters host races throughout the year. Jardine points out that there are several lower level races sanctioned by World Para Alpine Skiing, where you can enter open races and earn points toward international ranking. Check into NASTAR, which provides such opportunities.

Eventually, you must get classified by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) to qualify for the World Cup. “An athlete can compete on the circuit for one year before getting classified,” Jardine said. “Getting classified is part of racing,” Barras said. “It has nothing to do with your ability to ski. It has more to do with how your body moves.”

Barras hopes everybody who wants to race at least tries it. “It is a great way to challenge your skiing and your skills.”

GETTING STARTED

As with any activity, don’t give up after your first try. Often weather, or other factors, can make or break your experience. So give it another shot before hanging up your skis. There are over 70 Disabled Sports USA chapters that offer some sort of adaptive skiing program. For an opportunity near you, visit disabledsportsusa.org/chapters/location-map/. If you don’t live near an adaptive program, don’t hesitate to reach out to any program about your interest in adaptive skiing.



Photo by Danny Chin/Wheelchair Sports Federation



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