

THE ASPEN TIMES

Courage, resilience and service

Winter clinic heats up; final day of racing today

By [Charles Agar](#)
[Aspen, CO Colorado](#)
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SNOWMASS — High-tech wheelchairs crowded the snow's edge at the Snowmass Mall this week as nearly 400 disabled veterans took to the slopes for the 21st annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic.

And each chair and collection of adaptive ski gear tells a story of courage, resilience and service.

Jason Olmsted, a military veteran from Alabama, skied for the first time Thursday with the help of Joel Berman, an instructor with Adaptive Adventures. The two were one of many pairs hitting the slopes during a week of events that included everything from downhill and cross-country skiing to scuba diving, sled hockey, rock climbing and shooting - as well as new events this year like wheelchair fencing, curling and the biathlon.

Brad Smith, a Marine Corps veteran of Vietnam, skied in a mono-ski and used manual outriggers for the first time Thursday on his third trip to Aspen. He enjoyed two days on the slopes, snowmobiling and a day of swimming at the Hot Springs Pool in Glenwood.

Smith's instructor, Karen Petit, is one of nearly 200 volunteer instructors from across the U.S. and Canada who come to Aspen - many on their own dime - for the annual event. And Petit, a physical therapist from Ohio, now spends winters in Aspen working as an instructor for Challenge Aspen, the Snowmass nonprofit that gives disabled people opportunities to do outdoor sports.

Jerry Thompson, left, from Reno, skis down Fanny Hill with Danielle Vye, an instructor from Park City, during the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic at Snowmass. (Jordan Curet/The Aspen Times)



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"It's an inspiration for me," Petit said.



"Every veteran will ski," said Elaine Buehler, media coordinator for the event.

For most, especially the first-time skiers, the "transformation is absolutely amazing," she said.

Getting onto the slopes is an important component of rehabilitation, Buehler said. And recently injured veterans are inspired to catch up with veterans of Vietnam - or even World War II - who've been skiing for years.

"The only time I ski is when I come here," said Jessie Lee Duran, a Longmont resident and Navy veteran who suffered his injuries after serving in Vietnam. He does volunteer work with veterans in Denver, and teaches arts and crafts in a nursing home.

"I'm loving it," Duran said. He's had a chance to cross-country ski and snowmobile, and said the camaraderie is the best part.

Jason Olmsted, left, a war veteran from Alabama, skis for the first time ever with the help of Joel Berman, a ski instructor with Adaptive Adventures in Evergreen. The two ripped up Snowmass Thursday during the the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. (Jordan Curet/The Aspen Times)

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"You feel a lot more comfortable with people who know what you've been through," he said.

"He's my most fun lesson," said Mindy Fairchild, Duran's instructor, who makes the trip every year with four other instructors from Jiminy Peak, a ski resort in western Massachusetts.

"It's the largest event of this kind anywhere in the world," Buehler said. And it happens thanks to the support of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Disabled American Veterans, as well as generous contributions from individuals.

The next move

Disabled veterans who want to take skiing to the next level have a new target.

Chris Devlin-Young, a U.S. Paralympic gold medalist was skiing with a team of racers, including members of Challenge Aspen's new competition program led by coach Kevin Jardine.

Devlin-Young was at the first clinic in 1985, when just five racers showed up. He said the program has come a long way since then.

"We teach them a season's worth of stuff in four days," Devlin-Young said.

Mark Mix, who served in Iraq, first started skiing as part of his rehabilitation spent the season training with Jardine in the hopes of making the U.S. team, Devlin-Young said.

"It's been an inspiration to me," Mix said. "It felt good to come back and do it again."

And although today's racing is for fun, Mix warned Devlin-Young that he'd give him a run for his money.

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