



# Snow Without Limits

An adaptive skier tears down the mountain at Breckenridge.

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By: **Gina DeMillo Wagner**

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Thanks to advancements in adaptive skiing and snowboarding, thousands of disabled men and women will take to the slopes this winter. And they'll probably outski you.

In 1969, Kirk Bauer lost his leg—and nearly his life—to a grenade while serving in the Ninth Infantry Division in Vietnam. He endured seven surgeries and six months of hospitalization.

In 2013, 34-year-old Marc Fucarile was rooting for a friend at the Boston Marathon finish line when a bomb exploded nearby. Fucarile lost his leg, broke his back, and suffered severe burns. He was the last of the Boston Marathon survivors to leave the hospital, 100 days after the attack.

What these men have in common beyond their injuries might surprise you. This winter, Bauer is hoping to do for Fucarile what a [10th Mountain Division](#) veteran



*Kirk Bauer at the Hartford Ski Spectacular in Breckenridge. Photo courtesy of Disabled Sports USA*

did for Bauer many years ago: give him hope by teaching him how to ski.

Recovering from an amputation is as grueling emotionally as it is physically, Bauer says. After his injury, he lost hope that he'd ever live a normal life again. But something shifted when a volunteer from the 10th Mountain Division offered to take Bauer skiing in Lake Tahoe as part of an adaptive snow sports program. "He pushed me up the mountain all day long," Bauer recalls. "He didn't give up, which helped me keep going." As Bauer got the hang of adaptive skiing, the sense of accomplishment propelled him to recover from his injury. "Skiing was the sport that got me back into life again," he says.



*Adaptive ski program at Vail Mountain. Photo by Dan Davis*

Today, Bauer is the executive director of [Disabled Sports USA](#), an organization devoted to improving the lives of wounded warriors, youth, and adults with various disabilities by providing recreation opportunities. Fucarile is just one of thousands who will take advantage of on-snow instruction this year.

A lot has changed since the early

days of adaptive snow sports. Back in the 1960s, amputees or those with disabilities like cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis could ski with forearm crutches, modified walkers, or outriggers to provide stability. Technology has evolved to include sit skis and monoskis, which allow those who are paralyzed to ski. New materials, fancy suspension systems, and better instructor training has opened the doors to even more disabled adults and children, including quadriplegics and the visually impaired. Today, Bauer tells people, “if you can still breathe, you can ski.”

Resorts nationwide offer adaptive ski schools, with the hub of education and technology being in Colorado, at Vail and Breckenridge. For 26 consecutive years, the latest advancements have been highlighted at the [Hartford Disabled Sports Ski Spectacular](#), hosted by Disabled Sports USA at Breckenridge. This year’s event takes place **December 2–8, 2013**. “This is a hotbed for learning, sharing techniques, and the latest equipment,” Bauer says.

During the week, more than 11,000 hours of adaptive ski and snowboard lessons will be provided, plus advanced training to more than 3,000 instructors. Athletes travel from all over the world to attend. Among them: Victims of bombings, wounded servicemen and women, visually impaired skiers and riders, and disabled youth. Here are just a few of the courageous athletes planning to attend this year:



*Making some turns at the Hartford Ski Spectacular in Breckenridge. Photography (here and top) by Tyler Stableford*

## Amy Purdy, world champion adaptive snowboarder

At age 19, Amy Purdy lost both of her legs below the knee due to bacterial meningitis. She was given less than a two percent chance of surviving, let alone walking or snowboarding again. When she recovered against the odds, she looked for prosthetics that would allow her to ride again. Unable to find any, she built her own. Just



*Amy Purdy. Photo courtesy of Business Wire*

seven months after her illness, she was back on the snow. Today, she is a world champion adaptive snowboarder representing the United States at the 2014 Winter Paralympics in Sochi, Russia in March. She co-founded [Adaptive Action Sports](#), a nonprofit organization that helps people with physical challenges participate in action sports. This is Purdy's 12th year at the Hartford Ski Spectacular, this year to teach adaptive snowboarding to wounded warriors, Boston Marathon survivors, and other participants.

## Daniel Acosta, retired U.S. Air Force Senior Airman

Daniel Acosta, 28, served in Iraq as a member of a 12-person explosive ordinance disposal team.

On December 7, 2005, a bomb exploded within 20 feet of him, knocking him to the ground, resulting in severe injuries. Sustaining third degree burns, Acosta arrived at Brooke Army Medical Center four days later where he underwent several surgeries and lost his left arm. He is the recipient of the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, and the Air Force Commendation Achievement Medal. Through [Warfighter Sports](#), Acosta became involved in scuba, golf, and winter skiing. He remains as active as he was before his injury.

### Insha Afsar, 13-year-old earthquake survivor

Originally from the Kashmir region in Pakistan, Insha Afsar lost her right leg to an earthquake in October 2005. A photograph of Insha in *Time* magazine captured the attention of the Shriners (an organization dedicated to helping children and families in need), who brought her to America for treatment and arranged for a host family during her stay. After her initial treatments, her host family offered her an extended stay so that she could enroll in school in America. Afsar began skiing at a local mountain in Vermont three years ago. Her passion for the sport inspired her school to start its own ski team. Insha hopes to become a nationally and internationally competitive Paralympic skier. She returns home to Pakistan each summer to spend time with her family.

### Justin Widhalm, retired Army Sergeant First Class

In 2005, while serving as an Army sniper in Iraq, Justin Widhalm suffered traumatic brain injury after being exposed to 14 separate explosions. He was finally evacuated in 2006 after he was knocked out of a Blackhawk helicopter. The Nebraska native fell more than 25 feet and landed in a



concrete irrigation canal, severely injuring his feet, knees, and back. His injuries required numerous surgeries, physical therapy, psychiatric therapies, cognitive therapy, and speech therapy. Widhalm was medically retired from the Army and is a U.S. Paralympic hopeful in biathlon and track cycling. His military awards include the Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Army Commendation Medal for Valor, and the Combat Action Badge.

### Shawn Cheshire, Army Specialist, Honorably Discharged

Shawn served in Operation Desert Storm and logged eight years as a helicopter systems mechanic. She was honorably discharged in 2002, but lost her vision in 2012 as a result of a service-related injury. Later that year, Shawn began to Nordic ski. She has quickly progressed as an outstanding athlete in the sport, and has aspirations to be a member of the U.S. Paralympic Biathlon Team as its first completely blind female competitor. She is also nationally ranked in road and track tandem cycling. She resides with her two daughters in Syracuse, New York.

*For more information about the Hartford Ski Spectacular, visit [www.skispec.com](http://www.skispec.com). For more about adaptive sports and recreation opportunities, check out [www.disabledsportsusa.org](http://www.disabledsportsusa.org).*

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