



Uplifting ways for going downhill

Adaptive ski program helps those with disabilities take to the slopes

By **Janice L. Habuda**

Published: February 22, 2011, 12:00 AM

[1 Comment](#)

Updated: February 22, 2011, 7:57 AM

The start of a weeklong school holiday attracted a younger crowd Monday to the slopes of the Buffalo Ski Club in Colden — including 12-year-old Rory O'Connor of Orchard Park.

Though Rory has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair, he was able to glide across the fresh layer of snow aboard a biski: a bucket seat attached to a small suspension unit that's mounted above a short pair of skis.

Adaptive ski instructors Clete Tepas and Eric Hahn took turns with the steering, guiding the bi-ski from behind via the roll bar or with tethers.

"It's hard to find something to do as a family — especially physical," said Julie O'Connor, Rory's mother.

“We go to the beach. We go to the pool. We don’t do anything during the winter,” she said.

But that changed this year, after the O’Connors heard about the adaptive ski program at the Buffalo Ski Club. Earlier this month, Rory hit the slopes for the first time with his twin brother, Gannon, a snowboarder, and their father Michael, a skier.

“He loved it,” his mother said.

The program is headed by Andy McLellan, who grew up in North Buffalo and lost much of his left leg as a boy, when he was hit by a car.

For the past 35 years or so, he’s been a “three track” skier,

racer and instructor. Three track involves one ski and a pair of outriggers to maintain balance.

McLellan, who’s certified by the Professional Ski Instructors of America, previously worked for the adaptive ski program at another local resort.

Introducing one at the Buffalo Ski Club was a few years in the making. “They wanted to provide that as a resource to the membership and the public,” McLellan said.

The Foundation for Community Betterment provided start-up funds, according to Mark Page, general manager of the Buffalo Ski Club. “This is actually our first year where it’s up and running,” he said.

The national charitable organization, which has a Buffalo chapter, provided \$1,000 to \$3,000 in each of the past three years, Page said.

“The first year our business model was to get two . . . instructors,” Page said. “We sent them to Colorado to be trained in adaptive skiing.”

Foundation funds paid for specialized equipment that accommodates physical and developmental disabilities.

The club also has a snow slider, which resembles a walker and is used in a standing position. The next planned purchase is a mono-ski, on which the rider is seated.

McLellan is among six instructors who volunteer their service, primarily on weekends. The others are Adam Archibee, Julie Aroune and Rachel Wach.

Each weekend, the program has four or five students whose disabilities include autism and Down syndrome. If they’re not members of the ski club, the only expense is the cost of a lift ticket.

Instructors work in pairs, with one dealing directly with the student and the other keeping the immediate area clear of other skiers and riders.

“It’s safety first,” said Tepas. For those physically able to

eventually make it down the hill on their own, McLellan said the program teaches them

how to stop, control their speed and turn, as well as how to ride the chairlift.

“The goal of our program is to get the individual skiing independently as quickly as possible,” McLellan said.

With students like Rory, the goal is to enable a parent to handle the equipment.

“This moving fast . . . feeling the wind in his face, it’s something he’s never really experienced before,” his mother said.

jhabuda@buffnews.com

Comments

SORT: **NEWEST FIRST** | OLDEST FIRST

Go Rory! You rock, kid. :D

DONNA STONE, ORCHARD PARK, NY on Tue Feb 22, 2011 at 10:06 AM

REPLY

FLAG AS INAPPROPRIATE

Add your comment

Copyright 1999 - 2010 - The Buffalo News copyright-protected material.