

Fully Accessible Skiing in Telluride

By Kevin Foster,

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He competed on the US Paralympics team in 1995-1996

I recently went skiing with the Arizona Ski Council, through the Motorola Ski Club, in Telluride Colorado. It was truly an amazing ski vacation, with perfect weather and snow conditions. In preparation for this trip, I had so much to do, as I hadn't been skiing in over four years. In addition to new skis, bindings, and a new jacket, I realized that before I went on this trip, I had to work with the mountain to arrange for a ski buddy, or guide, as I am a blind skier.

Approximately 1.3 million people in the United States are legally blind. Most people don't realize that about 80% of this population has some limited usable vision. I started losing my sight at the age of ten and was legally blind at the age of twelve due to a congenital eye disease. I fall into this 80% group, as I have some limited residual vision. Essentially, I have no central vision and I am slowly losing my peripheral vision. All I can see is shadows. I can't see things like signs, faces, obstacles, or other skiers.

One of my most vivid memories as a child was people telling me everything I would never be able to do as a result of my blindness (i.e., college, bicycling, golf, skiing, etc.). Well, I have done all of these and a lot more. Attitudinal barriers are one of the most significant issues for people with disabilities. All too often, people with disabilities are viewed in terms of their perceived limitations rather than their true potential. Such barriers have contributed to the current unemployment rate for people with disabilities, at an estimated 65-70%.

With recent advancements in assistive technology and the passage of new legislation, the world is becoming increasingly accessible to people with disabilities. The Telluride Adaptive Sports Program (TASP) is an excellent example of how sports and recreation are made fully accessible. I contacted TASP, a non-profit organization, prior to my trip and requested a ski buddy, or guide, and some ski lessons. They were fully equipped to accommodate virtually any disability, including mine.

Blind skiing has developed over the past 25 years in terms of guiding techniques and guide proficiency. I was so impressed with the quality and professionalism of TASP – they are truly leaders in adaptive sports. They make skiing accessible and fun for people with disabilities regardless of their ability.

I was so pleased that the ski clubs of Arizona, through the Arizona Ski Council Silent Auction, raised thousands of dollars and will be sending a number of blind children from the Arizona Blind and Deaf Children Foundation to ski through TASP. Such programs help children with disabilities realize their potential, build self esteem, and shatter attitudinal barriers. I am grateful that initiatives like TASP exist and encourage support and participation. If you have any questions, you can contact TASP directly by e-mail at tasp@tellurideadaptivesports.org.