ADAPTED FOR ACHIEVEMENT

The Whistler Adaptive Sports Program partners with the Invictus Games to support and celebrate individuals with disabilities

BY **DAVID SONG**

If you somehow haven't heard by now, the Invictus Games are on their way.

Between Feb. 8 and 16, more than 550 injured and sick military service members will represent 23 nations across 11 sports across Whistler and Vancouver. Six winter disciplines will join the lineup for the first time: alpine snowboarding and skiing, biathlon, skeleton, cross-country skiing and wheelchair curling.

Originating from the mind of Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex (himself a former gunship pilot with the British Army Air Corps), this event and the affiliated Invictus Games Foundation offer a platform for veterans to discover post-traumatic healing and growth.

In principle, that's not so different from the Whistler Adaptive Sports Program (WASP) and its goal to help people with disabilities improve their lives through recreation over the past quarter-century.

The charity's website elaborates: "People here at Whistler Adaptive feel that sport builds socialization, leadership skills, healthy growth and development for everyone, whether they have just acquired a disability or have been active all their lives. By providing access to a vast number of sports across the winter and summer seasons, we are opening doors to endless opportunities and creating new levels of independence for individuals with disabilities."

We may not always understand what it's like for adaptive athletes to engage in physical activity. That's why I decided to put myself in their shoes.

Over two days in mid-January, I tried out modified versions of cross-country skiing, swimming and alpine skiing under the helpful tutelage of WASP personnel.

HARDER THAN IT LOOKS

Jan. 14 yielded partly cloudy skies and temperatures just above the freezing mark in Callaghan Valley. WASP coach and volunteer coordinator Natalie O'Connor met me at there, at Whistler Olympic Park (WOP), to introduce me to Nordic sit-skiing.

This sport features multiple types of apparatuses tailored to the needs and body proportions of their users. The one I borrowed was essentially a chair with a short backrest bolted to a pair of skis, meant normally for people with limited mobility in their hips and knees and/or those with a lower spinal cord ailment.

Minimal instruction was required for me to start scooting through a pair of parallel snow tracks. I quickly discovered that a modicum of velocity was achievable, even across flat ground, and my seated posture was comfortable. "Sit-skiing is pleasant," I thought, comparing the deed to a leisurely walk on a sunny afternoon.

Everything changed when I encountered the first hill.

It wasn't large by any means. You might send preteen kids down that slope on toboggans without a second thought, and they might soon ask for more exciting fare. Yet O'Connor told me this particular hill was one most of her beginner students found difficult to conquer.

Still, I believed in my ability to traverse this obstacle. I've been doing CrossFit for months, and though I must not be mistaken for any kind of competent sportsperson, I've developed some strength. Therefore I accepted the challenge… and made it roughly 90 per cent of the way up before my arms fatigued.

Nordic sit-skiing is harder than it looks.

"We have to be aware of energy levels," O'Connor said. "You look at an incline in a sit-ski and you're like, 'OK, that pitch isn't too steep,' but once you have to propel yourself to the top of that incline, you realize your muscles burn out pretty quick. We want to push our athletes to a point where they can feel that, but at the same time make sure it's still a positive experience."

The day concluded with a few jaunts down other modestly-sized hills. O'Connor tethered herself to me, essentially acting like an emergency brake astride conventional skis, but even then I picked up a little too much momentum and botched a turn. My respect for sit-skiers grew further.

"We don't focus on the disability. We're all about the sport and the activity," said O'Connor. "Our focus is the athlete. They can push themselves if they want to look towards the competition route or just stick within recreation, but it's all about giving them empowerment so they can ski with friends and family. They can still participate in the sports they used to, or they can participate in sports their peers do already."

Skiers might occasionally encounter their adaptive counterparts at a public venue like WOP and make well-meaning remarks like "Good job!" and "Nice work!" Folks with disabilities don't necessarily like being treated this way.

"As a coach, when I am skiing or biking with someone I am focused on making sure that they are able to participate," O'Connor elaborated. "They're just doing their sport. You could be with a coach or buddy—visually impaired skiers will have someone guiding them—but we're breaking barriers down [by treating athletes with disability similar to those who aren't disabled]."

WASP communications lead Jennifer Brown adds: "Adaptive equipment is just another tool in a toolbox … in the same way we might use a knife and fork to eat or wear glasses for our sight. Tools exist that enable you to carry on skiing if you've had a knee operation or a stroke, or if you have dementia. It's just another way of keeping on doing the things that people love."

VARYING CIRCUMSTANCES

The word "disability" may bring some form of physical ailment to mind: a hereditary limitation, wound or



PHOTO BY JENNIFER BROWN

amputation. However, much of WASP's clientele is neurodivergent. In other words, their brains are wired differently from those of the average Joe.

Examples of neurodivergence include autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Down syndrome and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Brown is experienced at coaching these kids in the pool when she's not doing administrative work with WASP. I joined her at Meadow Park Sports Centre to learn more.

That meant we didn't start swimming laps right away. Neurodiverse individuals often require a sensitive and intentional approach from their mentors in order to thrive.

"Research has shown us that if you have autism as a child, you're 160 times more likely to be at risk of drowning and the reasons for that are multiple," explained Brown. "It can be [related to] missing swim lessons and the opportunity to learn when you're a kid because it's harder to participate in a more rigid lesson.

"The other side of it: water is actually a sensory respite for many people with autism, so there's a pull to the water at the same time as it being a risk. This combination of circumstances means that it's even more important to have an adaptive program which can support people with ASD and other neurodiversities."



PHOTO BY NATALIE O'CONNOR

Routine and repetition are vital for many of Brown's pupils. Once they become accustomed to doing the same things over and over, they gradually internalize what is taught. Peaceful surroundings are also key, for some are overwhelmed by excessive noise and stimulus.

Therefore, I took my cues from Brown. First we kicked our legs in the pool at varying speeds before easing into the water and slowly spinning in place (which can be a self-soothing or "stimming" act for the neurodivergent). We lowered our mouths beneath the surface and worked up to full facial immersion.

It was only after all those steps that Brown gave me a pair of scuba fins and we finally got to swimming laps.

Visual aids like cue cards and floating toys may be used to transfer information to nonverbal or low-functioning students. However, advanced thinking and engagement can be necessary in other cases.

"With some of the kids I teach in Squamish who have high-functioning autism, [we focus on] understanding and comprehension from an intellectual perspective," Brown said. "We'll take time to work out the physics of swimming, why we have buoyancy, how we gain buoyancy by using our lung capacity and all of the nitty-gritty. Once you're able to illuminate that universe of swimming, a positive association to the sport is grown."

Neurodivergent people don't always lag behind in every respect. They can also be blessed with strengths, like the ability to picture three-dimensional objects or grasp scientific ideas to a markedly above-average extent. Such trends are comparable to variances amongst neurotypical persons: some are naturally better at math and others naturally better at writing, etc.

No matter which way you look at it, physical disability is just one piece of the puzzle.

"One of the amazing things about the Invictus Games is that it shines a spotlight on the breadth of abilities in the world, and the fact that not all disabilities can be seen—as in the case of [post-traumatic stress disorder]," opined Brown. "Just because someone's not in a wheelchair doesn't mean there isn't something they need an extra bit of support with."

'OUTSIDE YOUR COMFORT ZONE'

Whistler is known, arguably above all else, as a downhill skier's paradise. I would have been remiss not to give four-track skiing a go.

Brown accompanied me to the Jeff Harbers Adaptive Sports Centre at Whistler Mountain's Olympic Mid-Station, where we rendezvoused with instructor Rebecca Warren. On top of her employment at Whistler Blackcomb (WB), she serves with WASP during summer months. The relationship between WB and the charity puts 80 adaptive coaches into service each year.

Warren and her colleagues tend to deal with lots of internationals who visit for days or weeks at a time. Programming varies to suit the needs and desires of clients.

"It is a hugely important thing for us to have those types of partnerships," said Brown. "At the end of the day, Whistler Adaptive Sports Program is a small charity with seven staff, and it's through our partnerships that we're able to deliver more lessons—to reach more people—thanks to Whistler Blackcomb and [the Vail Resorts Epic Promise Foundation]."

Adaptive skiers make use of outriggers: essentially a pair of handheld skis that help with balance, turning and velocity control. These ski blades can be deployed in an upright posture to facilitate walking or dropped into a lateral orientation when it's time to go downhill with the pull of an attached string.

There are two main kinds of adaptive athletes in this context. Four-track skiers wear two skis on their feet, while three-track participants employ just one.

"Three-track is generally going to be for someone who's an amputee that hasn't got their prosthetic on … getting used to steering with one foot. Outriggers are there as extra balance," Warren explained. "Four-track can be anyone who's had a stroke, weakness on one side, cerebral palsy, anything limiting [lower-body] range of movement. If we're struggling with stand-up skiing, we can use outriggers to assist our turns."

I've only skied four times the conventional way, and I quickly learned the classic snowplow: pointing the tips of one's skis inward as a means of slowing down. Warren didn't let me rely on this basic technique because many of her clients can't pivot their legs freely. Instead, four-trackers brake and turn mainly by pointing their outriggers to the left and right.

I couldn't follow Warren's instructions particularly well. Snow-plowing felt like second nature, as did moving my legs independently to affect my direction.

Three-track skiing was even harder. Due to a mediocre sense of balance, I struggled to remain upright after one of my skis had been removed. Turning reliably, even down a very gentle slope, was out of the question.

"One of the things about adaptive sports is sometimes they can actually be even more committing [than conventional sports]," Brown remarked. "If you get on an electric-assisted adaptive bike, you're low to the ground, taking corners with a big, heavy piece of equipment—same as skiing. Well, that's a heck of a lot of equipment and it can be pretty nerve-racking.

"For someone who is able-bodied to have that insight into adaptive sports, you'll know what it really means to step outside your comfort zone, challenge yourself, and how transformative that experience can be."

'AMAZING, AMAZING PEOPLE'

Wayne Katz understands exactly how liberating adaptive sport is for those willing to put in the effort.

Seven-and-a-half years ago, Katz was diagnosed with leukemia. His right leg was amputated above the knee, and at first he didn't have the mindset to return to physical activity. Understandable… but fortunately, he kept going.

The longtime Whistlerite doesn't remember how he first got connected with WASP, but he's been swimming for about three years and mountain biking for almost as long. Katz didn't feel comfortable with stand-up Nordic skiing, but others talked him into sit-skiing—which he's now done for approximately 12 months.

Not bad for a 68-year-old cancer survivor. Not bad at all.

"I've always been that kind of character. I've been strong-willed and [this disease] isn't going to beat me. I'm going to beat it," Katz declared. "I'm competitive when it comes to business, when it comes to anything, so I pushed myself. As I saw myself get stronger, I thought, 'OK, I'm going to start competing.' [I did] a triathlon two years ago, and last year was the open-water swim [across Okanagan Lake]. Now I'm thinking of bike racing. I used to do it. I'm going to do it again because they allow e-bikes."

Tears come to Katz's eyes when he thinks about his support network, especially swim coach Bronwyn Hill.

"I want to start off by thanking the person who has shown up twice a week for three years as a volunteer. I get emotional because—", Katz takes a few moments to compose himself before continuing, "—she puts in time and effort to be here for me. Not only is Bronwyn here to encourage me, but she has a background in swimming and makes the effort to try and improve my technique.

"Then I've got Janice Tedstone and Bill Moore, who have started to train me in sit-skiing. They give me all these pointers on how to be better at it, and they're so encouraging. [WASP] is full of amazing, amazing people … those who are paid through the organization and the volunteers. They just go above and beyond to assist you in getting better at something you're interested in."

Brown confirms volunteers form the backbone of WASP. As of this writing, 108 individuals give their time without pay to support members of the adaptive community, and it's a mutually beneficial experience.

Testimonies like Katz's represent the soul of the Invictus Games. It doesn't matter what your disability is: the point is how you can overcome it and learn something about yourself in the process. For this reason, these Games stand apart from other major sporting events.

All of WASP's hands are on deck to help. Much of the charity's equipment will be used by competitors, and some personnel will be in Vancouver supporting athletes. Whistler Olympic Park and the Jeff Harbers Centre are of course going to be key hubs of activity.

When asked how she hopes the Invictus movement can further the conversation regarding disability, O'Connor said: "Just to have the population of Whistler or those around the area be aware of adaptive sports and realize it's not only about physical disability. It's also about neurodiversity, PTSD, recovery and rehab.

"You can be any age or any experience level to come and get involved. For some who are neurodiverse, it could be that just putting on a ski boot is [a huge achievement]. For people with physical disabilities, it could be their first time in a sit-ski after a spinal cord injury. From that, you just build."

Brown likewise believes the Invictus Games will shine an essential spotlight upon WASP and its values. People can't try adaptive sports if they don't know about them, but exposure begets demand.

At least a few folks who watch the Games today might find themselves checking out a new pastime tomorrow. ■