TASP Brings Adaptive Skiers To Int’l Freeride Camp in Chile

BY ALLISON PERRY

Taking Adaptive Awareness To a New Height in South America

TELLURIDE - This summer, as part of a continuing effort not only to empower disabled athletes, but also to bring awareness of adaptive programs to another part of the world, Telluride Adaptive Ski Program teamed up with Arizona's Alpine Ski Club and brought six disabled skiers to the First International Freeride Camp at Nevados de Chillan resort in Chile.

In a recent interview, TASP Program Director Tim McGough said the trip, which he hopes to grow and continue into the future, transcended shredding the 4 ft. of fresh snow a big storm brought in — and even skiing, in general. "This trip was about empowerment, independence and awareness," he said, "in addition to providing new experiences to our athletes and getting some disabled skiers down to Chile."

Although it is not unusual to see a sit-ski or a visually impaired skier racing down the hill in Telluride, or at any ski resort in the U.S. for that matter, McGough said it's a whole different story in South America. "There is no [Americans With Disabilities Act.] in South America," he explained, "so things like navigating the airport, getting to and from the hotel, which has no ramps or wheelchair access and traveling were also huge challenges for us. Some of the things we take for granted here simply do not exist down there."

These challenges extended from traveling onto the ski resort, where adaptive skiing is something a great majority of the staff — including lifties and ski patrol — have never even seen. McGough noted that the only workers on the mountain with any experience in adaptive skiing are primarily those who work at ski resorts in the U.S. over the winter, and head to South America to continue working at ski resorts during the summer.

In addition to the language barrier posing a challenge, McGough talked about getting "the Look" when skiers and resort staff saw his small group of disabled athletes take to the hill on mechanisms such as sit-down skis and special prosthetics. Among his group were three above-knee amputee skiers who ski on their prosthetics, which is extremely rare, one below-knee amputee snowboarder, a visually impaired snowboarder and a gentleman with a spinal cord injury in a sit ski. Three TASP volunteers traveled with the group to assist McGough when he needed it, but he was solely responsible for managing the program, especially during on-snow time, from recruiting athletes to coaching them.

Just because adaptive ski programs are not ubiquitous in Chile does not mean Nevados de Chillan is opposed to hosting one, however, and McGough said Ski School Director Christian Ahses was an ally in bringing more awareness and more adaptive skiing to the resort and the region.

"The cool thing about this mountain," he said, "is that Christian, the ski school director, wants this resort to be at the center of a movement to start adaptive skiing in South America. Having the freeride camp there really allowed us to begin promoting awareness in addition to starting to educate Chets and some of the resort staff."

In a recent interview, Ahses said, "For Nevados' future, I hope to improve logistics for teams and accessibility, and to train the operators to know how to help and give good service to adaptive skiers. This is the beginning of adaptive skiing here and Nevados has so much to offer. The mountain is wonderful and the place is special."

"I was very impressed with TASP," he said, "and with the high level of the prosthethics that some of the athletes have. This was the first time I have seen an adaptive freeride team. We have had adaptive alpine teams training before, but this was the first freeride team. It was awesome! Many skiers from here can't believe it when they figure out the freeriders have one leg. Adaptive sports impresses and inspires other people and demonstrates that human capacities have no limits."

With Nevados enthusiastically on board, McGough hopes to operate the trip solely through TASP in future years, as not having to partner up with the Alpine Ski Club would allow the disabled skiers and coaches to better plan and stick to their own schedule and timeline, and be more autonomous as a group.

"Because of the challenges and lack of staff we had this year, we really had to keep our group small and limit it to only the most
advanced and independent athletes," he adds, citing the fact that the skiers not only had to be proficient enough to ski without direct on-snow instruction, but also were responsible for getting themselves to and from the airport.

"Next year we hope to be able to increase the limit to 12 skiers, and bring along enough of a coaching staff that we won't have to turn anyone down," McGough continued. "We are a non-profit as well, so we can even offer scholarships to the program as long as we have enough staff to facilitate a larger group."

McGough said what will not change is location, and that Nevados de Chillán was exactly what he hoped a freeride camp would look like.

"The terrain is unique and amazing," he said. "It is similar to Telluride, in that it is steep, there is a lot of hike-to terrain, trees, and everything is on more of a grand scale, but it also has lava flows, rocky and knobby spines and everything is above treeline." Adding to the grandeur of the terrain is the fact that Nevados de Chillán is also an active volcano. "We did a cat ski run, and before we dropped in, we were standing next to smoking craters," he said.

In addition to smoking volcanoes and variable and steep terrain, avalanche danger also has to be addressed, as, according to McGough, the resort does not do much avalanche mitigation. And the group focused on backcountry protocols and safety as well as on adapting to different terrain and snow and line selection.

McGough cited the snowpack itself as offering both the biggest difference and the biggest challenge for the skiers. "It is a maritime snowpack down there," he said, and is "more similar to the West Coast than Colorado; thus the snow is very thick, wet and heavy, which is much harder to ski."

Watching his group confront and conquer this unique obstacle created some of the most inspiring moments of the trip, McGough said. "One of our skiers, Greg Mammone, from Montrose, he says, "is a Hall of Fame skier and a Paraolympic champion and had never skied [conditions] like what we saw in Chile. This guy is used to crushing gates on ice and hard-pack at super high speeds. When we got there, he looked at me at first and said 'Tim, I can't turn,' but the camaraderie and support of the group helped him - and everyone - feel comfortable enough to conquer that challenge and have fun doing it.

"We have a family here," McGough said of the group's time in Chile. "No one is left behind and no one's leaving until you accomplish your goal."