

THE BUFFALO NEWS

On the ski slope, missing limbs don't keep injured soldiers down

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Associated Press
2/5/2005



Associated Press Army Sgt. Andrew Butterworth, left, who lost his right leg in Iraq, gets advice from instructor Glenn Friedman during Friday's lesson at Windham Mountain in the Catskills.

WINDHAM - For the first time since losing a leg in Iraq, Sgt. Andrew Butterworth skied Friday - gingerly attempting to turn on one ski and promptly falling on his back.

Pulling him up from the snow, Butterworth's instructor motioned up at the Catskill mountainside and asked: "You still want to go?"

"You bet!" he shot back.

The sergeant quickly rejoined nine other soldiers sliding down the beginners' hill at Windham Mountain. The men, most of whom lost legs in Iraq or Afghanistan, were getting a three-day free pass to ski and stay in the Catskills under a program combining rehabilitation, "thank you," and rigorous rest and recreation.

"We don't quit," said 1st. Lt. Jeffrey Adams, a skier who lost his left leg. "If we quit, we'd be in the hospital crying, and that's kind of useless."

The soldiers are up from Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, many of them healing from grenade attacks or roadside explosions. A local chapter of Disabled Sports USA, the Adaptive Sports Foundation, helped raise \$16,000 to cover the soldiers' flight, food, lodging and fun.

Most of the men are in their 20s. Some had skied before their injuries. Others, like Adams, a native of Baton Rouge, La., hit the slopes for the first time.

"A one-legged guy from Louisiana trying to ski," he said. "It's going to be fun."

Adams, 25, lost his left leg about 8 inches below the hip in November from a roadside improvised explosive device in Baghdad. Butterworth, a 25-year-old National Guardsman from Durham, N.C., lost his right leg above the knee that same month when a rocket propelled grenade hit a gap in the armor of his Bradley vehicle near Kirkut. "Kind of a lucky shot," he said.

Both men were fitted for one boot, one ski and two outriggers, which resemble crutches with skis at the bottom. Disabled skiers use them for balance and braking.

Most of the soldiers have been wounded within the past year, which adds to the challenge of skiing, said Cherrisse Young, executive director of the Adaptive Sports Foundation. They not only must find their balance, but also rely on limbs that have yet to fully strengthen to compensate for the loss, she said.

"You're also going to deal with more of the emotional issues as well - depression, the 'Why me?' scenario. 'I can't do what I used to do,' that kind of stuff," Young

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said. "Really, what our program does is show them that they can still do it."

Young said the long weekend is a small way of saying thanks to the soldiers, who were treated like five-star generals Friday. Under a banner reading "Welcome Wounded Warriors," they chowed down all-you-can-eat chili and roast beef sandwiches, and were ferried around by a cadre of New York City firefighters volunteering their time.

The soldiers were gung ho on the slopes Friday, slowly getting a sense of balance and trying to master the beginners' hill.

Butterworth, his shaved head sweaty from moving around on outriggers, made a perfect "S" down the hill. He fell at the bottom, got up, and did it again perfectly.

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