

# **Skiing is Believing**

## **A Mom Watches Her Daughter Conquer the Slopes**

Sarah Yates, Gemma Yates-Howorth

Down the snow-covered slope she's skiing fast now, her movement fluid and confident. Into each turn, she leans far out to each side, never toppling. Watching from the bottom of the hill, I can only imagine her giggle and the smile stretched across her face. What I can see is real enough. My daughter Gemma is skiing downhill at Winter Park Colorado along with all the other athletes.

In a family like ours, skiing had seemed inaccessible, a sport for someone with more abilities and money. A week at the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD) in Winter Park, Colorado, proved me wrong. In the days we spent there, my daughter metamorphosed from a hesitant prairie kid to an enthusiastic skier, impatient to hit the slopes. How did it happen?

Our impetus was an invitation. Though I'd checked out the centre's website and read available literature, I couldn't imagine the physical reality of this skiing business. Perhaps that's what intrigued me.

To save money and squeeze the experience into the school's mid-term break, I pitched the adventure to class aide Lori Price-Mireau. Lori could help with the driving, shortening the amount of time we'd be on the road, and with lifting (14-year-old Gemma has cerebral palsy). We packed our car to the hilt and headed out onto the winter highway. It was the end of March and Denver, Colorado, was 1,017 miles away; Winter Park was further by 67 miles. In theory, the drive was cheap and do-able. In reality it was too far, and the final portion through the mountains was terrifying. The drive that takes Denverites an hour and 15 minutes took us two hours of white-knuckle driving - fog, snow, mountain goats and the mountains themselves compounded the alien feel of the situation. We were tired and hungry when we reached our destination - only to find that the dining facilities of Winter Park Lodge closed early on a Sunday! Luckily, they let us squeak in. Wine and flat space were a welcome reprieve.

Staff at the lodge were courteous and upbeat, but the sight of all kinds of folks carrying skis and looking sunburned, fit and able-bodied made me want to turn around and run. "Don't worry, they'll get you onto the slopes," one sympathetic skier told me. "Whether

you'll ever get your daughter off again is trickier. Just be sure she eats well first. Skiing makes us ravenous."

Eating a hearty breakfast and packing a mid-morning snack was good advice. The National Sports Center for the Disabled is tucked into the base of the mountain. Because I was already apprehensive, I felt completely lost when the first building we encountered wasn't the right one. In fact, you must drive through three gates, and past all the other outbuildings, before you reach drop-off at the centre. Afterward, you must walk back and park the car. At 9,000 feet above sea level, the walk is invigorating.

At the centre, disability is the norm. An in-your-face nonchalance directs all interactions. "I don't dream of walking any more. It's too SLOW," says one poster, showing a one-legged skier on the slopes. That gave me pause. "Don't try to fix me. I'm not broken," says another. I like this place.

A man whose smile arched over his moustache greeted Gemma first. I liked that too. He outfitted her with goggles, a helmet and two volunteers. He also loaned her a pair of glorious ski mitts - long, chrome, yellow zippered jobs that kept Gemma warm and made her feel the part. Everyday generousities of spirit are also the norm here, I observed.

The volunteers put us at ease immediately. Both were easygoing, friendly and confident. Jana Milsten works at the centre but takes time out to volunteer. Lee Moller owns a construction and design business in Denver and makes the hair-raising drive out to Winter Park at least ten days a season as a volunteer. Jana's ease at communicating with our silent sport put the smile back on my face.

At last outside at the base of the mountain, Gemma was decanted from her chair into a curious contraption: a sit-ski, like a high-tech sled with two hourglass-shaped skis attached to the bottom. After nine assorted bungee cords were wrapped around her she was ready, and the trio joined an enormous lineup at the lift. The other skiers admitted Gemma and her two volunteers to the head of the queue, smiling and courteous. The lift didn't stop, merely slowed down while the two volunteers lifted Gemma and her sit-ski onto the lift, hopping aboard after she was seated with their own skis attached. They were strong and agile and I was in awe of them already. I watched the lift ascend the mountain slope until I could no longer see them.

Now the fear and waiting began. Lori and I went inside to find the best vantage point. Trying to push away images of my daughter toppling from the mountain's great height, creating an avalanche of skiers and trees in her path, I reviewed the facts I'd learned. More than 30 years ago, founder of the NSCD ski program Hal O'Leary was "a ski bum who volunteered to help amputees from a Denver hospital because I thought it was a great opportunity," he told me. That first year, he ran the program out of a broom closet. Why the continuing enthusiasm and commitment? "I don't give up. It's the individual's success, the excitement and the emotions I've seen kids and adults express over their accomplishments that has fired me to continue." Thank heavens!

Hal moves freely around the centre, greeting all staff by name and introducing himself to new skiers. His egalitarian spirit infuses the space; he doesn't appear to take himself too mightily. At the Winter Park resort ("the greatest friend we could have, giving us free rent and administrative support yearly"), the NSCD runs the largest adaptive ski program in the world, giving more than 22,000 lessons last season. Lessons are available seven days a week in two-track, three-track, four-track, sit-ski, bi-ski and mono-ski disciplines. If you're a neophyte like me and don't know a sit-ski from a biplane, don't worry. Make the call and the staff at NSCD will set you up with the lessons, the appropriate equipment and the volunteers to get you or your kid whooshing down the slopes. "If you can get to our office, then we can get you up on the slopes" is no vain boast.

While we were there, a plane-load of 19 Brits in wheelchairs arrived to ski. In Europe, able-bodied skiers are still disdainful, but the Americans take skiers with a disability in stride. A man walking with canes and no hip rotation, a girl in a power chair guided by her head, large adults and small kids are all fitted with skis of one sort or another at the NSCD.

Reservations must be made in advance. Nobody goes up unattended or ill-equipped. Every skier on a sit-ski goes up with two volunteers. In any one year, more than 1,000 volunteers donate at least 10 days out of the skiing season, as well as the time needed to update their skills. All of them have advanced skiing instructor experience and abilities. All volunteers are specially trained by NSCD staff. Most volunteers, like Gemma's, come from Denver, but others are from the Fraser Valley and some from as far away as Guam, Minnesota, California and the east coast of the U.S.A.

Waiting for Gemma to descend, Lori and I find nothing to talk about. Neither wants to miss that moment of magic. I see others descend in sit-skis and amputees with mono-skis. I've learned to discern the difference already. I'm told the old sit-skis looked like bathtubs. Everyone looks so smooth and accomplished. I expected sirens, stretchers and helicopters. Instead, I hear laughter and observe competence and extreme skills. I'm told skiing accidents are rarer than they used to be; skis are better and so are the skiers, no doubt. One man without legs bends his arms, leans his torso forward and whizzes down the slopes on a mono-ski, alone. Oh my... at least Gemma has volunteers... but where is she?

Suddenly her familiar silver jacket comes into sight. She's positioned well in the sit-ski and I imagine her beaming with delight. At the top of the slope, fixed outriggers have been attached to the ski that work like training wheels on a bicycle to help the novice skier learn to keep her balance. Behind her, volunteer Lee is managing the bucket assist. He holds onto a harness which he has slackened to allow Gemma to control her own turns with her shoulders. Just ahead of them, Jana ensures their passage is clear. She's one of those effortless skiers whose grace and fluidity are inspirational to watch. How will my wobbly daughter manage in comparison? Will she tip over?

I'm watching now and I'm dying to breathe. I can hear my heartbeat. The sounds of the cafeteria have stilled to a dull roar. As Gemma gathers speed and whooshes downward

toward me, I hear hysterical laughter. It's me and I'm breathing. It's Gemma and she's skiing.

Pronounced fearless, Gemma progresses rapidly until one day she whooshes down a slope dedicated to slalom. She twists back and forth, never knocking out a flag, and is given a bronze medal to wear home. The experience and liberation have lent her new confidence. The volunteers have lent me new respect for this ski culture, which once seemed so foreign and unattainable. With a little more gumption and a little more cash, I might have tried the skis myself.

(Sarah Yates is a freelance writer living in Winnipeg, Manitoba.)

SEE ME SKI!

Just Like the Other Kids

BY GEMMA YATES-HOWORTH

When Mum first asked me if I wanted to ski, I thought, "Cool, I'll be just like all the other kids that I know who ski!"

Then I wondered, how was I going to do it? If I was going to be in a walker, how would it go down the slopes? Would a rope be attached so I did not fall?

The road to Winter Park Lodge was so unlike home. It was all corkscrew turns, steep ups and downs, and curves around the mountain, going up or down.

At Winter Park the first morning, the equipment room looked like a skiing shop. It had all kinds of ski stuff like helmets and goggles and ski boots.

Skiing is so hard, and at first I didn't know why I had come. You have to know how to lean to each side to make your sit-ski move. When I saw how good the others skiers were and how seldom they fell, I said to myself, "Look how many don't fall. Why should I?" But I was still a bit scared.

I've gone up a toboggan slide and slid down, but ai-yi-yi, I was much higher up - thousands of feet higher up - than I'd ever been before. It was beautiful.

Then the volunteers said, "Gemma, you're going to ski down." Uh-oh, me? How am I going to do it? I thought my feet were going to work the controls, but instead Lee, one of the volunteers, tethered me, and when I was supposed to turn, he called out, "lean." So I did. I don't remember how I actually started out. I think Lee or Jana gave me a push. All of a sudden, I was going down the slope and it was fast and I was leaning from one side to another, just like I was supposed to do. If I'd been on my own, I would have fallen, but with the volunteers' help I didn't. It was fabulous.

The second day I wasn't so nervous or shy. I just wanted to get out of the equipment room and to the top of the mountain. Each day was better and then it was over. I was sad.

Skiing is fun, fabulous and fast.

(Gemma Yates-Howorth is a grade eight student at Grant Park High School in Winnipeg, Manitoba.)

## GETTING TO WINTER PARK

Driving to Denver is a do-able option. You can also take Northwest Airlines daily from various Canadian cities. You'll have to switch planes in one of the hub cities of Minneapolis or Detroit. From Denver, you can rent a car at the airport or take a van service to Winter Park.

There are more than 80 different properties available for rent in the area, many of them fully wheelchair accessible. Once again, you must call ahead. Winter Park Mountain Lodge, Super 8 and the Olympia motels are good; the Vintage Hotel also is a lovely property with several fully accessible units.

Resources:

Home James

Provides regular transportation service, about every 90 minutes from the airport to the lodge. The vans are wheelchair accessible but you should make reservations at least a week in advance.

Phone: (970) 726-5060

The Lift Service

This shuttle-bus system from within town provides door-to-door service for free, but you have to call ahead to make arrangements.

Phone: (970) 726-4163

National Sports Center for the Disabled

This season runs from November 17, 2002, to April 19, 2003. Call directly to get current prices and make reservations.

Phone: (970) 726-1540 or (303) 316-1540

Website: [www.nscd.org](http://www.nscd.org)

