

Ski Tales: Double H program puts disabled children on skis

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By Bill Rice

Nobody was having more fun on the slopes last Saturday than 10-year-old Conner Clark of South Glens Falls.

He finished each run at the Double H Ranch in Luzerne with a big grin on his face.

He wasn't going fast, and he wasn't doing it alone — but he was doing it — thanks to an amazing program in the Adirondacks made possible by an amazing staff of volunteers.

Holding Clark's hands on either side of him were volunteer ski instructors Nancy Driscoll of Niskayuna and Meta Rojsek of Slovenia.

Clark is autistic, and skiing at the Double H Ranch is one of the joys of his life, said his mother, Anne Clark. She was standing at the bottom of the slope, filming each run so she could show them to her husband, who was working that day.

“Conner just loves it. He loves to be busy and physical and doing special things,” said his mother. She said this is her son's fourth season in the Double H program. “He missed part of last winter because he broke his leg sledding.”

This is the 12th year of the Adaptive Winter Sports Program at the Double H Ranch, a year-round facility which serves children 6-18 who are dealing with chronic and life-threatening illnesses. The Ranch was founded by Charles R. Wood and Paul Newman in 1993 on the site of the former Hidden Valley Dude Ranch. Participation is entirely cost-free for those who are accepted into the program.

The winter activities include Alpine and Nordic skiing, snowboarding and snowshoeing.

Students ski and snowboard on a short, gentle slope serviced by a double chairlift and snowmaking. There are two runs from the top, and when the ranch opened for the season last weekend, the main slope was officially named “Robb Run” after Walter and Anne Robb, longtime supporters of the facility.

Last season, the ski lodge at the bottom of the slope, named “Charley's Chalet,” was tripled in size, an improvement that allows the ranch to host 30 students per day. That's double the previous number.



Connor Clark, 10, of South Glens Falls, is assisted by volunteer instructors Nancy Driscoll, left, of Niskayuna and Meta Rojsek of Slovenia last Saturday on the slope of the Double H Ranch in Luzerne

Last weekend was the first of five Family Sleepover Weekends at Double H. On family weekends, parents and other family members spend the entire weekend with the young students, and they can go out and ski or snowboard with them. On other weekends, only students and their instructors are allowed on the hill.

The students usually ski two hours in the morning and two in the afternoon.

Their winter activity is made possible by some 140 volunteer instructors who work one or two to a student, depending on the disability.

Linda Smith, ranch communication coordinator, said it isn't necessary to be an "expert" skier to become a volunteer instructor. Strong intermediate skiers will do, as long as they are able to ski backwards — or are willing to learn.

"It's most important to be enthusiastic and creative," Smith said. "Every student is different, and no one solution will work with every one."

Safety is a big factor, and in addition to volunteer instructors, volunteer members of the National Ski Patrol are always on hand.

Located in the chalet is a large lunch room and a well-equipped ski shop. Before we went outside, ski school director Ronnie VonRonne showed me some of the specialized equipment used on the slope.

A snow slider, a contraption with skis attached to support bars, is used to help students who can stand, but who have balance issues and/or limited use of their lower limbs. The students, on their own skis, stand between the two skis on the snow slider. One instructor can ski behind the student and control speed with a strap. Sometimes, two instructors assist the student by holding handles on either side of the slider. The cost for this piece of equipment is about \$1,600.

Severely handicapped students — paraplegics or quadriplegics — come down the hill sitting in a bi-ski. The seat is attached to two radically shaped skis, and students can initiate turns with a twist of their head, VonRonne said.

Not all of the students at Double H Ranch need specialized equipment. A number of them on Saturday were coming down unassisted on skis or snowboards.

The instructors at Double H Ranch are an upbeat and committed bunch.

Driscoll, who is in her fourth season of instruction, said, "This is a great place, and there's no other like it."

She started volunteering because her two older sons, Christopher and Benjamin, taught at the ranch before going off to college. Her younger son, Timothy, is currently a Double H junior instructor.

“I think we get more out of it than they [the students] do,” she said.

Driscoll said she wasn't sure she had what it takes before her sons talked her into it, but now she feels right at home teaching at Double H. “I would recommend anybody to try,” she said. “It makes you feel good about humanity.”

Smith said most families at the ranch have heard about the winter program through word of mouth. “Doctors, nurses and social workers spread the word and help build awareness,” she said.

Applications are reviewed by a medical advisory board, which determines if a child meets the criteria for admission to the program. Many of the students come from the Capital Region, but others come from other states in the Northeast, including New Jersey, Vermont and Massachusetts.

Information on student applications can be found on the Double H Ranch Web site at www.doubleh ranch.org. For information on becoming a volunteer instructor, National Ski Patrol volunteer, lift operator or volunteer lodge host at the Double H Ranch, contact the volunteer coordinator at 696-5676.