

Putting the wind back into their sails

Water sports have rehabilitative benefit

By Joseph P. Kahn, Globe Staff | July 21, 2008

A gust of wind ripples across the Charles River, catching the sail on Judy Ashton's windsurfer and propelling her forward with a watery whoosh. "Open the door!" cries Nate Berry, an instructor with AccesSportAmerica, who's circling nearby in a motorboat. Dutifully letting out the sail, Ashton flexes her knees for balance and surges ahead faster.

Behind her looms the Museum of Science, ahead the Zakim Bridge. A duck boat passes by, its passengers quacking encouragingly. Twenty minutes later, Ashton returns to a riverfront pier behind Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital and peels off her life jacket. "This has been a real lifeline for me," she says, nodding at the waterfront scene. "Not just the physical rehab part but socially, too."

Six summers ago, Ashton contracted Eastern equine encephalitis, a rare and debilitating viral disease spread by infected mosquitoes. Her left side was paralyzed, her speech severely impaired. Once an avid golfer and tennis player, Ashton, who's 59 and semi-retired from a downtown law practice, could barely walk. She feared her life as an athlete was essentially over.

Then she met Ross Lilley, founder of AccesSportAmerica and a pioneer in designing adaptive equipment and recreational programs for the disabled. In 1984, Lilley, an ordained minister, began adapting windsurfers and other water-sports equipment for athletes like his son Joshua, who has cerebral palsy. In 1995, Lilley launched AccesSportAmerica. Staffed by a mix of salaried instructors and volunteers, Lilley's organization runs year-round sports and fitness programs that serve more than 1,500 athletes annually, primarily in Massachusetts but in Florida and other locations as well.

For the past eight years, AccesSportAmerica has teamed with Spaulding therapists to offer windsurfing, kayaking, rowing, and outrigger canoeing sessions on the Charles. Program participants include hospital inpatients and outpatients, campers from their own program called City Street, which benefits low-income disabled youth in Boston, and individuals like Ashton who have forged strong ties to the program over the years and who pay a nominal fee to make use of its facilities and instructors.

The goal, staffers say, is to engage athletes such as Ashton - the term "client" or "patient" is never used - in activities that are at once physically challenging and spiritually nourishing, beneficial to both body and soul. Like Ashton, some of these athletes are able to windsurf or kayak on their own, albeit under close supervision. Others enjoy sailing, rowing, and paddling with varying degrees of assistance.

Whatever his or her physical capabilities, however, each athlete is regarded as an active participant and not a mere passenger.

"Ross wants us to push them just the way we would any athlete," says AccesSportAmerica instructor David "Ginger" Baker, an English-born soccer coach who joined Lilley's team three years ago.

Off-site, athletes and staffers socialize on a regular basis, strengthening the bonds developed during the sports and fitness programs and erasing the boundaries often drawn between the disabled and their helpers. "They treat you like friends, because they are," says Carol Steinberg, a Newton attorney afflicted with multiple sclerosis. A member of the extended AccesSportAmerica family for the past two years, Steinberg sums up its philosophy thusly: "Stop whining, you can do anything."

Ashton is a prime example of that philosophy at work. Four summers ago, she took her first exhilarating sail on the Charles - while strapped to a chair mounted on a specially modified windsurfer. With practice, Ashton eventually graduated to a tandem board copiloted by Berry. After Berry splashed into the water one day ("Nate claims I pushed him, but I think he lost his balance," she says), Ashton was on her own. This summer she windsurfs at least once a week. She's also taken up skiing and snowboarding in the winter, and plays tennis and basketball year-round. Nothing quite beats the rush of skimming along the Charles on a sunny July morning, though. "The rule is, if you fall off the board you have to get back up really fast or else they'll come by and pick you up," Ashton says with a laugh.

Lilley says his most important goal has been to change attitudes about what the disabled can and should do to stay fit.

"We're not militant about it," he says. "But we've got a lot of confidence we can take an athlete like Judy and get her to do more than she ever thought she could."

The riverfront setting provides a dramatic backdrop for the athletes to do their thing. In 2002, AccesSportAmerica moved its water-sports program from the community boating facility to the hospital pier and expanded its range of activities to include biking, tennis, basketball, and other land-based sports. (AccesSportAmerica also runs water-sports programs at Reservoir Pond in Canton.) Roughly 100 inpatients will participate this year, according to Rob Welch, Spaulding's senior director for outpatient network.

"These people know their lives have changed dramatically because of their disabilities," says Welch. "So it's great when they discover they can do things they'd always done before. There's a huge psycho-social benefit here in terms of self-esteem building and networking."

Welch and Lilley met with a group of duck boat captains before the summer session began, explaining the program and its goals so boat operators could talk about them more knowledgeably as they cruised past.

Fan Lucy Pope considers herself another beneficiary of Lilley's philosophy. Pope, 68, was a sign language interpreter for the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission until 2001, when she suffered a stroke. With her right arm impaired and her gait unsteady, Pope underwent physical therapy at Spaulding. Later she was urged to join a regular exercise program, but balance problems made that difficult, she says. In 2004, she heard Lilley speak at a meeting of stroke victims.

"I thought, I could get summer back," says Pope. "I was never much of an athlete, but I've always loved summertime and being outdoors." Now she windsurfs once a week, using a one-person board with a support rail attached. "Where else can I go and have fun?" she wonders. "That's what I was really looking for, having fun. And I have."

Baker says working with athletes like Ashton and Pope offers its own unique rewards. "I'm very lucky, getting to work with all these cool people," he says. "Plus you gain some real perspective, don't you?"

Joseph P. Kahn can be reached at jkahn@globe.com. ■