

Skier Profile

Mark Drake – Healing through the Soul

Mental and physical hurdles won't stop U.S. Army veteran Mark Drake from conquering the Rocky Mountains at the 2006 National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. In spite of some significant challenges, Drake stays active and maintains an extremely positive outlook on life.

A strong family military history coupled with his own desire to serve his country gave Drake the incentive to fight in the Vietnam War when he was drafted at age 20. Serving in the Army from 1969 to 1970 as a medic and X-ray technician, he was a member of the MEDEVAC 1st Cavalry Division stationed in Tay Ninh, a small city north of Saigon.

Drake finished his x-ray training in a Sacramento hospital and continued to work in the field until 1993. He continued to work part-time in the hospital although his favorite hobby was working full-time in the two bicycle shops he owned. In 1991, he was diagnosed with Post-Polio Syndrome (PPS) a condition that affects polio survivors anywhere between 10 and 40 years after recovery. "I got polio from the vaccine," Drake explained. "When I was in the second grade, I developed polio so bad that I couldn't walk for four months." Now 57, his leg muscles have weakened to the extent that he uses a wheelchair for most activities, although he can stand for short periods. Although he had to give up bicycling because of his disease, Drake turned his interest to handcycling instead. A resident of Longmont, Colo., he now competes in numerous handcycling races in his home state and is extremely active in promoting adaptive sports. In addition, he manufactures and develops adaptive sports equipment through his at-home project, Adaptive Sports Technology.

This year's Winter Sports Clinic will be Drake's second year skiing the slopes of Snowmass. "The Clinic is the most amazing thing for me," he said. "I had a lot of self-imposed prejudices about being in a wheelchair, but attending the Clinic has allowed me to see through those things. A completely new area of sports has opened up to me." Among his favorite aspects of the Clinic are the staff and volunteers who make the event a reality. "The staff at the Clinic is the most professional and empathetic group of people I've ever met," he said. "I was nervous to step out of my comfort zone at first, but once I saw how supportive they were, I realized that I was stepping into an even bigger comfort zone."

Mark Drake plans to improve his mono-skiing technique this year and attend some of the many educational seminars the Clinic offers. He sees the Winter Sports Clinic as tool to not only help him physically, but mentally as well. In his words, "The Clinic can't put your legs back together, but it can certainly help your soul."