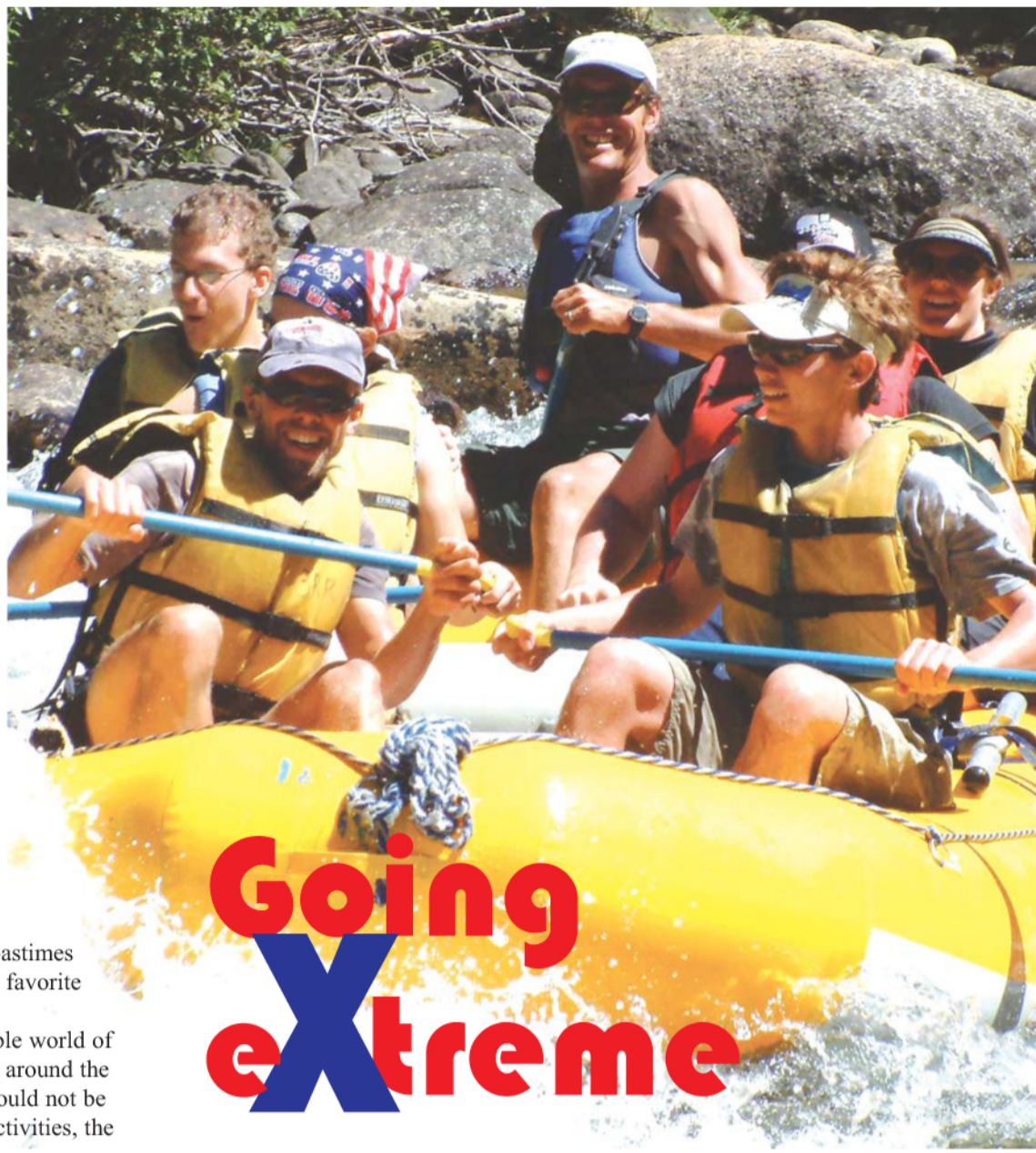




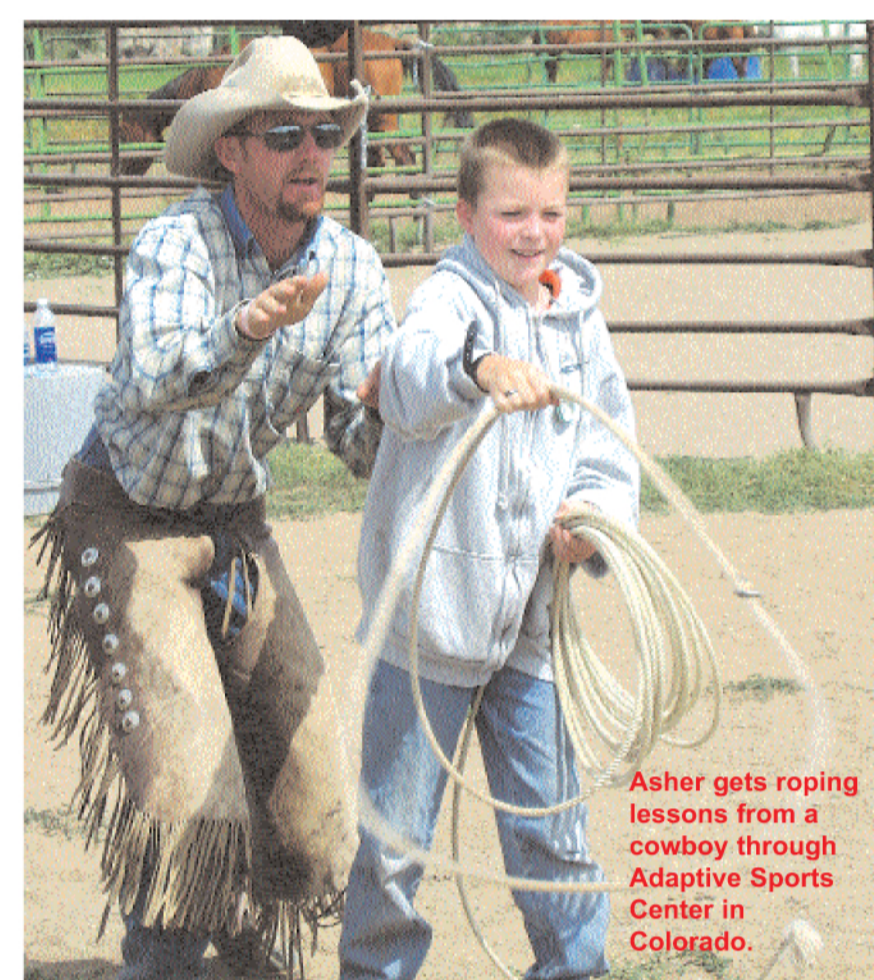
Steven Akerman on his way to Marble.

Photo by Tom Stillb

For years, baseball has been one of America's favorite pastimes and, each summer, fans flock to ballparks to watch their favorite players attempt to knock one out of the park. But, over the past couple decades, the rough and tumble world of extreme sports has been gaining support from fans from around the globe. And while it might seem like wheelchair users would not be able — or too cautious — to engage in such high-risk activities, the



Going extreme



Asher gets roping lessons from a cowboy through Adaptive Sports Center in Colorado.

sense of adventure has proven to be too much for some to ignore. Stacy Kohut, a long-time extreme sports enthusiast and competitor from Canada, said, "The whole extreme sports movement for sit-down athletics started in the late '80s, early '90s. I was kind of on the forefront of that."

Kohut, who became a paraplegic after he fell from a swing about 15 years ago at the age of 21, had a successful career as a competitive skier from 1994 until 2002. Among his list of achievements, Kohut is a Paralympic sit-ski gold medalist and two-time world champion. Today,

Kohut continues to break records, but as a fourcross competitor. Fourcross can be described as four-wheel downhill racing.

"It takes years and years of practice and dedication and broken bones to get where we are," Kohut said of fellow extreme sports competitors. "People have to realize it's not a video game. These are real sports. They are really hard to do at the high level."

"But, the one lesson I've learned; I'm not telling anyone what they can or can't do. People did that to me for 15 years and I didn't like it," she said, adding, "If you're going to pursue this at a high level, it's a full commitment, but the lessons and the journeys and the rewards are all worth it."

One perk Kohut has found is that extreme wheelchair sports like fourcross enable him to break free from the stereotypical barriers imposed on people with disabilities. "We don't look disabled at all when riding the bikes, so a lot of people think fourcross is just a new sport. And that's true for all the extreme sports. It blurs the line between the abled and the disabled."

Whether an individual has a desire for integration or simply a flare for adventure, they certainly have plenty of options to choose from when it comes to finding an extreme wheelchair sport that meets their needs.

Matt Kuehlhorn, summer program director at the Adaptive Sports Center

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Power wheelchair racing

(ASC) of Crested Butte, Colorado, said they offer lessons in kayaking, white water rafting, downhill mountain biking (fourcross), handcycling, and rope climbing, among other sports, to individuals with a full spectrum of disabilities.

Since the center was established about 20 years ago, the goal has been to provide programming that teaches independence, Kuehlhorn said, noting that instructors will provide nearly 4,000 lessons to about 400 individuals with disabilities this year alone.

Whether or not a person is newly disabled, "Our program enhances lives by teaching new skills and showing people the boundaries are endless," he added. And no matter what a person's ability, there seems to be something for everyone.

The list of extreme wheelchair sports seems to be growing daily, but here are a few that just might make want to leave your wheelchair behind:

• **Fourcross/downhill mountain biking and handcycling**

If you can operate handles on a regular bike, then you can operate a fourcross bike, said Kohut, who is co-owner of R-ONE, a fourcross bike manufacturing company. "All we are doing is bringing four wheels to the picture and that is it. It's not that much different than a two-wheel bike in the way it handles," he said.

According to Kuehlhorn, downhill mountain biking (or fourcross) is one of the most popular programs offered at the ASC. With guidance from an instructor, individuals take a chairlift or van up Mt. Crested Butte and cruise down the terrain in the gravity fed mountain bike with four wheels.

Those with good upper body strength also might want to consider handcycling as an alternative to bicycling.

• **Skiing**
Wheelchair users who want to give skiing a try can receive one-on-one lessons or take part in instructional camps at ASC or similar facilities around the country. Staff are trained to provide instruction on the use of mono-skis and bi-skis, which were

developed to accommodate individuals who are only able to ski from a sitting position. Upper body strength and good balance is necessary to achieve success on the slopes.

• **Water skiing**

If the thought of whizzing down the snowy mountains of Colorado gives you a chill, perhaps water skiing in the warm waters of Florida is more up your alley. As the founder of UCanSki2, Ann O'Brine-Satterfield has been teaching wheelchair users how to sit-ski since the early '90s and always welcomes new students.

"The sit-ski is designed to hold your body in the tuck position," she said. "With the ski six feet long and 13

inches wide, you can not only balance yourself easily, you can get right up in the water."

O'Brine-Satterfield, who has relied on a wheelchair since age 2, said water skiing gives the feeling of being free from limitations. "I know firsthand what sports and recreation can do for a person who uses a wheelchair, cane, or prosthesis, and I want others to have the chance to know what it feels like also. You seem to forget all about what you can't do and start doing things that most able-bodied people have never tried."

• **Kayaking/whitewater rafting/sailing**
Another popular activity is whitewater rafting, Kuehlhorn said.

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However, it is important to note that individuals in wheelchairs may need some assistance getting into the raft's specialized support seating. The same goes for those interested in kayaking since getting in and out of the boat may prove challenging for some. Still, Kuehlhorn has seen quite a few individuals make a smooth transfer without any help.

• **Sailing**
Those who would rather set sail can turn to volunteers from Sailability, a non-profit organization with 350 clubs around the world, for free lessons. According to Tono Miakodo, co-founder of the New Jersey club, instructors have at least one sailboat

that is equipped with an electronic system to make it easier for those with limited abilities to navigate the waters. Lifts also are brought on site to help individuals transfer to and from the boat.

• **Rope climbing**

Rope climbing or rolling across a high swing bridge might be hard to visualize, but it's possible, Kuehlhorn assures. "We can certainly make the ropes course very low impact."

According to Kuehlhorn, participants often pull themselves up to the zip line platform or have family or friends hoist them upwards by way of a pulley system. To get to the high swing bridge, individuals must also use their arms to climb the rope ladder. Once they reach the top, participants ride in a special chair across the bridge.

• **Power wheelchair racing**
Although many extreme wheelchair sports require quite a bit of upper body strength, power wheelchair racing is one activity that even those with high-level injuries or limited abilities can do, said John Mryczko. Mryczko and his friends decided to turn their wheelchairs "into more than something used for mobility" when they began racing each other every other weekend several years ago. Shortly thereafter, Mryczko began

hosting an annual two-day race that is open to anyone who uses a wheelchair. During the event, competitors travel a total of 40 miles in their wheelchairs as they navigate through forest trails in Illinois.

"I get e-mails and calls from people all around the world who said, 'this is a great idea,'" Mryczko said, adding, "It's just fun and exciting to be next to each other riding quick and weaving in and out of each other. It kind of gives you a sense of accomplishment when you go so far."

Mryczko also heads up the Power Wheelchair Racing (PWR) association, which he established to promote the sport.

For more information on any of the extreme wheelchair sports mentioned, visit the following Web sites:

- Adaptive Sports Center (ASC) of Crested Butte, Colorado: www.adaptivesports.org
 - R-ONE: www.r-onefourcross.com
 - UCanski2: www.ucanski2.com
 - Sailability: www.sailability.org
 - Extreme Chairing (Power Wheelchair Racing): www.extremechairing.com
- *There are many extreme wheelchair sports instructors located around the country. Individuals interested in engaging in extreme wheelchair sports are advised to consult their physicians first. *

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