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Unique UNH Program Develops Paralympic-Level Winter Athletes

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DURHAM, N.H. - A few weeks after their Wildcat teammates ski in the NCAA Championships at Sunday River in Maine, University of New Hampshire skiers Jon Parker ’12 and Ted Broderick ’12 will head to Winter Park, Colo., for the U.S. Alpine Nationals (March 28 - April 2, 2009). And as the Hockey East quarterfinals come to a close in Durham, skaters Taylor Chace ’10 and Josh Moran ’11 will defend the home ice of the Whittemore Center against the Connecticut Wolfpack (March 15, 2009).

But these athletes are Wildcats with a twist: Parker and Broderick are missing a leg and a forearm, respectively. And Chace and Moran will sit, not stand, to play sled hockey. The four students are among seven elite student-athletes with disabilities who train alongside UNH NCAA winter-sport athletes in a program that is unique to UNH. The athlete development program of Northeast Passage, a UNH program that delivers recreation opportunities for people with disabilities, is the only collegiate program in the nation that recruits and develops winter-sports student athletes with disabilities.

In addition to its focus on winter sports (sled hockey, alpine and Nordic skiing), what makes the UNH program exceptional is its integration with UNH Athletics, says Tom Carr, assistant director for outreach and athletics at Northeast Passage. The disabled athletes train alongside their non-disabled counterparts and have full access to Athletics’ resources, including training facilities, academic assistance, and scheduling flexibility. The students receive competitive scholarships.

For Parker and Broderick, both stand-up alpine skiers, integration with the UNH ski team has been relatively seamless. During the season, they’re on snow at either Pat’s Peak or Attitash Mountain in New Hampshire two or three days a week working on their racing technique. "I just ski fast and try to chase them," says Broderick, who was captain of his high school ski team in Amherst. Carr has helped them modify the ski team’s dry-land training, which includes lots of weigh-lifting, to adapt to their disabilities: Broderick, a congenital amputee, is missing his left forearm. Parker lost a leg in an accident after a high school ski race at Burke Academy in Vermont.

Because sled hockey, in which players sit on sleds and use short hockey sticks to propel both themselves and the puck, is significantly distinct from stand-up hockey, Chace and Moran participate in weight training with the UNH hockey team but are coached by Carr for their on-ice workouts.

"We consider these elite, national-caliber athletes part of our ‘family,’" says UNH athletic director Marty Scarano. "Northeast Passage and UNH athletics share a vision of creating a
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one-of-a-kind partnership to create the very best training facilities for winter-sport athletes who aspire to compete in the disabled national programs and ultimately the Paralympics."

The collaboration is paying off. "I'm a lot stronger, I'm skiing a lot faster, and I'm a lot closer to accomplishing my goals, thanks to [UNH ski team coach] Brian Blank and the ski team," says Broderick, a business major. Like Broderick, Parker, a Bow native who is also a business major, has his sights set on the 2014 Winter Paralympic Games.

Moran, an engineering major, is aiming for the 2010 Paralympics as well as the U.S. National Sled Hockey Team, which he played on for two years. "It's a lot of work to play on the national level, but that's as big as it gets," he says. The Jamestown, N.Y., native admits that balancing hockey with schoolwork means "there's no goofing off."

Moran's teammate Taylor Chace '10 is the elder statesman of Northeast Passage's athletes. Captain and a consistent high scorer of the U.S. National Sled Hockey Team, Chace helped Team USA win the bronze medal at the 2006 Paralympic Winter Games in Torino, Italy. The Hampton Falls native, a kinesiology major, sustained an incomplete spinal cord injury in 2002 when playing for New Hampshire's Junior Monarchs. While his skating skills suffered after his injury, Chace found that his hockey prowess transferred neatly to sled hockey, says Carr.

With the support of Northeast Passage and UNH athletics, these athletes are on their way to achieving their Paralympic dreams, although Carr notes that such aspiration takes a level of commitment akin to that of an able-bodied athlete pursuing an Olympic spot. He stresses that the student-athletes are students first.

"Even though I recruit hard and I want these students to come here, my main goal is that they go to school somewhere," says Carr, noting that many Paralympic-level athletes must choose between attending college or pursuing their sport. "I tell them an education provides a back-up plan. Professional sled hockey? Not really a good career choice."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 11,800 undergraduate and 2,400 graduate students.

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Photographs available to download:

Caption: Jon Parker '12, a business major from Bow, N.H., is among the elite athletes supported by UNH's Northeast Passage.
Credit: Courtesy of Jon Parker.

Caption: Josh Moran '11, an engineering major from Jamestown, N.Y., plays sled hockey with the Northeast Passage Wildcats and hopes for a shot at the 2010 Paralympic Games.
Credit: Action Photos.

Caption: Taylor Chace '10 (red jersey), a kinesiology major from Hampton Falls, N.H., is captain of the U.S. Sled Hockey Team.
Credit: U.S. Paralympics.

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