




Diana Golden, right, has won 14 national titles and seven gold medals competing as a disabled skier.

When disabled can mean enabled

THE U.S. CHAP STICK CHAMPIONSHIPS

B Y C R A I G A L T S C H U L



It's a dare. Walk up to any of the five members of the U.S. Disabled Ski Team who are living and training at Stratton Mountain this winter. Look them in the eyes and tell them you think they are courageous and an inspiration.

Then, duck.

The facts, of course, are obvious. They are courageous and they are an inspiration. They just don't want to hear about it anymore.

Yes, they are disabled. Though when you watch them ski, you'll put a new meaning on the word. "Disabled" is in the mind of the beholder. "Enabled" is closer to reality.

The road to Stratton began last year when the resort was named host of the Chap Stick U.S. Disabled Ski Championships March 11-16. And, if there's ever been a midweek to set aside at the mountain, this is it.

With the big event set aside for Stratton, the next logical step was for the ski resort to become the official Eastern Training Site of the U.S. Disabled Ski Team as they prepare for their national races. They are an integral part of the U.S. Ski Association.

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But, let's cut to the quick. These are world-class athletes missing a limb or having one that doesn't work any more. They've been through cancer, traumatic accidents that you and I don't even want to think about, and worse.

But, that's over now. Today, they are gaining attention all over the world because of the way they bash gates. That's what's important for them these days. And that's what they want to be appreciated for at Stratton.

The best-known disabled skier in the world is Diana Golden. She puts it all in perspective. "I'm tired hearing about being this girl who lost her leg as a kid, became a ski racer, and who now is an inspiration," Golden says. "We're top-level athletes and that is how we want people to think of us."

Nancy Gustafson wants Stratton homeowners and skiers to know that they are training hard, the same way the World Cup skiers train. "This is high-level training," Gustafson says, "serious gate-bashing. We are truly world-class disabled skiers and that's what it's all about."

Let's meet these five skiers and their coach, as the TV guys say, "up close and personal."

DIANA GOLDEN. The U.S. Disabled Ski Team centers around this vivacious personality. She's the world's most aggressive disabled racer in her category. One leg. She seldom loses.

Golden, from Lincoln, Massachusetts, comes from a skiing family. She took a fall while playing with some friends when she was 12 years old. Soon, doctors discovered bone cancer and removed her right leg, just above the knee.

She bounced back and has never looked over her shoulder. Today, during the off-season, she gives motivational speeches to companies like IBM and during the winter she's the Chap Stick Champion, the product's national spokesperson. She also represents Jeffries & Company, a financial-services company. She spent a year at the Stratton Mountain School in 1982.

She's 26, has won 14 national titles, seven gold medals in world competition, and took the gold medal at Calgary when disabled skiing became an Olympic exhibition sport. Golden is a Dartmouth graduate with a major in English literature.

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"I really thought it was important that we could all train together instead of at several different resorts," Golden says. "So I talked to everyone I knew to raise money ... people on airplanes ... groups I was making speeches to ... anyone."

While she was in Switzerland speaking to an insurance group, she ran into John Filshe, a Stratton homeowner, and he offered his condominium for the eastern team members to use during the Championships.

As this story is being written in early December, Golden says they have raised about \$15,000 and are trying for \$30,000.

Stratton is providing complimentary season passes, on-hill equipment and facilities, use of the Stratton Sports Center, discounts on food, and is partially subsidizing the cost of the condominium the group will use throughout the season at the Inn at Bear Creek.

"We'll be all over the place," Golden says. "We'll train during the week and then we'll compete at both disabled and able-bodied races all over the East."

CATHY GENTILE. When Cathy Gentile was nine, doctors found a bone tumor and had to remove her leg at the hip. She didn't start skiing until she was 16.

"Ever since then my parents kept telling me to get a 'real' job. But they've seen me race now, so they really do understand."

Gentile, 27, slim at just over five feet five inches, is from Torrance, California, where she graduated from the University of Southern California with a business degree.

She was only in her second year with the U.S. Team in 1988 when West Germany's Annemie Schneider was injured and Gentile was called to Calgary at the last moment to compete in the Olympics. She took full advantage of the opportunity and won the silver medal.

Gentile continually works at catching Golden, and the two have a very friendly rivalry. When Gentile finally beat her last year in the U.S. National Championships Giant Slalom, she was in seventh heaven. Golden vowed it wouldn't happen again.

"I came east to train last year," Gentile laughs, "because the skiing wasn't very good in Torrance." She trained at Loon Mountain. "I really like the idea of training

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CHAP STICK CHAMPIONSHIPS CONTINUED

at Stratton because we are on home turf now. We'll know the territory and will be comfortable. Coming to the Nationals will be like coming home." Gentile thinks that training together will keep them all in a positive mood and atmosphere.

"The more people we get to meet at Stratton, the more they'll be excited and come out to see us race," Gentile says.

Sponsored by American Express Travel Related Services, Gentile is a "certified jock." She rides mountain bikes, jogs, hikes, lifts weights, and windsurfs.

NANCY GUSTAFSON. Gustafson, 25, has just about always been a ski racer. From Pittsfield, Massachusetts, she has been running gates since she was six years old. She competed for the Green Mountain Valley School, a major racing academy in Vermont, and later for the University of New Hampshire. She was the top junior skier at the U.S. National Championships at the age of 17 and was named twice to the All-East Team.

During the NCAA Championships in 1985 at Bridger Bowl, Montana, she crashed into a lift tower, as she puts it, "ripping out the nerves in my spine." She has partial paralysis of her left hand and arm.

Skiiing in a category for those with arm disabilities, she cuts a menacing path. At the 1988 Winter Games for the Disabled, she swept gold medals in the downhill, slalom, giant slalom, and combined. Last year at Winter Park in the U.S. Disabled Championships, they had to let her race against the men to find serious competition.

She has a dual degree from UNH in theater and business administration. "I couldn't give up either of them," she says. Ultimately she wants a law degree or a masters in business.

"Wait until people see us at Stratton," Gustafson says. "They're going to see organized, intense, group training."

DAN ASHBAUGH. When Ashbaugh was 16, he did a 16-year-old thing. He jumped off a roof onto a trampoline, landed on his shoulder, and broke his back. That jump left him a partial paraplegic during his sophomore year in high school.

"A GOOD COACH WORKS WITH EACH SKIER ON HIS OR HER OWN INDIVIDUAL PROBLEM. KENNEDY IS ONE OF THE BEST."

He doesn't look back, although he does admit to being somewhat of a daredevil.

"I pay for it," he laughs, "but it's a lot of fun. If things are too safe, they get kind of boring." The 25-year-old Durham, North Carolina, native moved to Colorado as a kid and now calls Fort Collins home.

This is Ashbaugh's comeback season. He didn't race last year after having had surgery on both knees. He was training at Beaver Creek, Colorado, when he first blew his left knee out. He came back and had skied 12 days last season when his right knee just popped.

"I got back on snow in August at a training camp at Mount Hood," Ashbaugh says, "and my skiing is coming along."

Ashbaugh is a diehard alpine skier and he races in a standing position, using two skis and two outriggers (poles with controllable ski tips on them). During the off-season Ashbaugh and his brother run a company providing technical services for bicycle events and others sports. He's attending the University of Northern Colorado.

His only ski time in the East was at the 1987 U.S. Nationals at Attitash. "I've heard good things about training in the East

and I'm looking forward to it," says Ashbaugh.

His gold medals come from the World Championships at Innsbruck in 1988, when he swept his category in slalom, downhill, and giant slalom.

BOB EMERSON. Emerson is six feet tall, 165 pounds, and his good looks could make him a model. He lost his leg in an automobile accident at age nine. "My uncle was driving a pick-up truck and we were in the back," Emerson says. "He started to race and rolled the truck."

Emerson's ski career began when Children's Hospital in Denver, Colorado,

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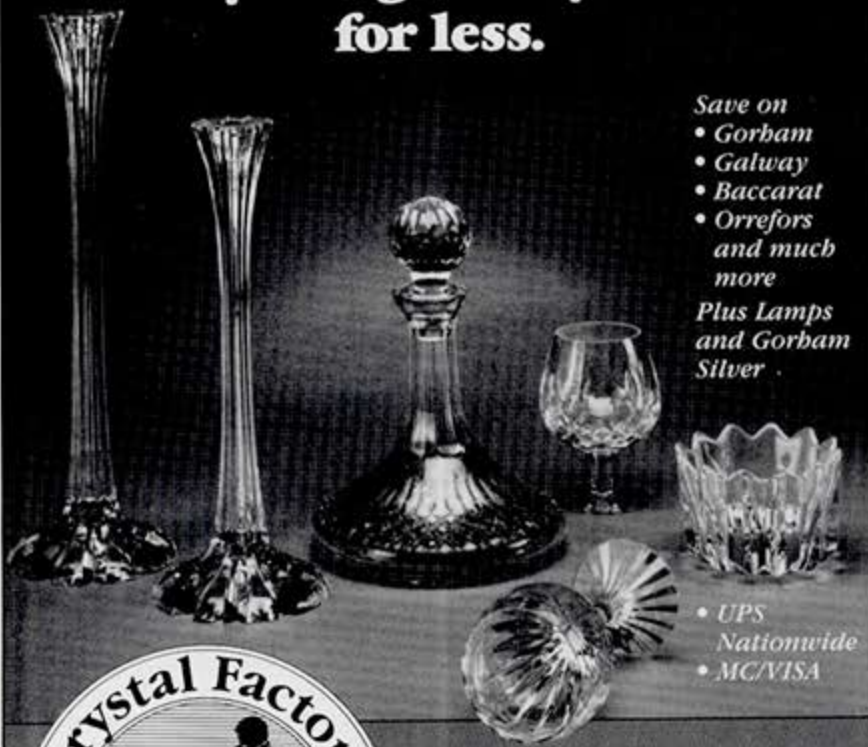
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CHAP STICK CHAMPIONSHIPS CONTINUED

got him involved with the handicapped program at Winter Park at age 14. He got serious about racing in 1985. Emerson competes in a tough category against other male skiers with a disability of one leg. Last year he says he really made some gains with some top three finishes. His best result was a second-place to the world's best male disabled skier, Alexander Spitz, in the U.S. National Slaloms.

During the summer, Emerson works as a carpenter on custom-built homes and would eventually like to get into helping design prosthetics.

JENNIFER KENNEDY. Kennedy is the coach of the eastern training team and serves as an alpine technical assistant for the entire U.S. Disabled Ski Team.

Kennedy, 29, knows how to turn skis in gates. She was a three-time All-American at the University of Vermont and was named Most Valuable Skier on UVM's Champion Team.

After graduation, she taught at the Carabassett Academy at Sugarloaf, Maine, where she met Diana Golden and eventually agreed to work as Golden's private trainer. Soon, she was coaching several disabled skiers.

Kennedy acknowledges that coaching disabled racers is somewhat different from coaching able-bodied skiers. But she says that the basic techniques of ski racing are the same. The main difference, Kennedy says, is paying attention to the differing disabilities because they affect how people ski.

Nancy Gustafson says, "A good coach works with each skier on his or her own individual problem. Kennedy is one of the best."

So, if you're planning your spring calendar and are looking for the ideal time to spend a midweek ski vacation at Stratton, plan to arrive Sunday, March 11, and to stay through the week. The Chap Stick Disabled Ski Championships will bring more than 200 of the best racers from the U.S. and around the world to Stratton. The event is conducted by National Handicapped Sports. Events will be held Monday through Thursday, and, of course, spectators are welcome.