

USA's Leaps of Faith Disabled Water Ski Club

Adaptive Ski Program Offers Confidence, Fulfillment for the Disabled

Champion water ski jumper Joel Zeisler has introduced thousands of persons with disabilities to both recreational and competitive waterskiing in Sandy Hook, Connecticut

In 1991, a young man called Joel Zeisler was seeking water ski jumping lessons. At the end of the conversation, the man said, "By the way, I'm blind." Zeisler, who'd won a national jumping title the previous year, said, "Okay – is there anything else I need to know?"

It was a life-changing call for Zeisler, whose risk-taking to accommodate a blind skier led him to create Leaps of Faith, a waterski program that each year introduces hundreds of persons with disabilities (including the blind, amputees, and those with spinal cord injuries) to recreational and competitive water skiing.

The Leaps of Faith Waterski Program

According to Zeisler, waterskiing is an ideal activity for those with disabilities. "Water is very forgiving," he says. "And everyone likes to be out in the sun with water splashing on their face."

A typical Leaps of Faith program accommodates 12–20 skiers. The USA Water Ski Association trains all personnel; all programs are insured and lessons conducted on blocked-off a section of lake.

Leaps of Faith provides the equipment, including Ski Nautique tournament boats, skis of all sizes, wakeboards, and adaptive devices such as sit-skis for the physically disabled and audio slalom equipment for the blind.

Participants need no previous waterski experience. A typical day runs thus:

- 8:30: Arrival, registration, and an on-shore lesson
- 9:00: Waterskiing classes begin
- 11:30: Lunch, provided free to all participants
- 1:00: Skiing continues (skiers average three 10-minute runs apiece)
- 4:00: Program ends; skiers receive participation ribbons and medals as well as pictures and video.

How Leaps of Faith Makes Water Skiing Accessible

For the physically disabled, including amputees and those with spinal cord injuries, Leaps of Faith provides sit-skis (often equipped with outriggers) that are more or less foolproof for first-time skiers. Trainers on jet-skis provide support.

Guides ski beside blind and visually impaired participants, providing verbal instructions, while whistles and tow-line tugs facilitate communication between skier and boat. For slalom skiing, a beeping audio device simulates a buoy. Skiers must successfully navigate six buoys to advance to a faster speed or a shorter tow. "It's a close similarity to the slalom a sighted person sees," says Zeisler.

Leaps of Faith to Host Wounded Warrior Event in August 2009

On August 12, 2009, Leaps of Faith will host a weekend-long Wounded Warrior Project program to introduce injured US Veterans (and their families) to waterskiing and other recreational activities such as kayaking. The

program takes place in Middlebury, Connecticut.

The changing face of war is driving a need for adaptive recreation programs, says Zeisler. "While body armor saves lives, the use of roadside bombs is increasing the number of amputees among returning veterans," Zeisler says.

What drives Zeisler to partner with the Wounded Warriors or the renowned physical therapy programs at Gaylord Hospital is seeing how recreation can move people forward in other areas of their lives.

One man, an accident victim suffering from severe depression, came through a Leaps of Faith program and saw that he still had much to offer others, and much to look forward to.

His experience helped him learn a sport, land a job through a Leaps of Faith volunteer, and find girlfriend.

"Of everything I've done with waterskiing, the work with the disabled has been the most satisfying," says Zeisler.

"Each year, with the help of our 35 volunteers, we expand our program."

Clinics and Events

The goal of Leaps of Faith is to build lasting confidence and fulfillment through exposure and professional training in recreational and competitive water skiing to both disabled children and adults.

- No prior experience is necessary to participate in a clinic
- All of the latest equipment is supplied including:
- A 2009 Ski Nautique tournament ski boat,
- Skis of all sizes,
- Wakeboards,
- Audio slalom equipment,
- Regulation waterski jump and
- Onsite slalom course.
- Affiliated with USA Waterski Association
- Instructors, drivers and safety personnel have been trained by the USA Water Ski Association
- All of our programs are fully insured

For more information on the club's programs, visit the Leaps of Faith website <http://leapsofffaithwaterskiers.com> or call 203.426.0666.

This article was rewritten with permission from Andrew Leibs. Andrew Leibs is Suite101's Feature Writer for Accessible Recreation. He is a longtime chronicler of the disability movement with particular interests in adaptive sports, blind literacy, and perceptions of the disabled in culture.

Other Resources:

<http://www.usawaterski.org>

<http://skicentral.com/adaptive.html>

<http://www.adaptiveaquatics.org/>

<http://www.dsusa.org>

<http://www.infinitec.org/play/water/waterskiing.htm>