

WINTER

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MAGAZINE



## HIGH HOPES

*Going for gold at the Paralympics*



UNH PHOTOGRAPHY CENTER

# HIGH HOPES

*World-class athletes recruited by  
UNH's Northeast Passage go for the gold.*

ON A LATE DECEMBER AFTERNOON, TAYLOR CHACE '10 FLIES ACROSS THE RINK AT UNH'S WHITTEMORE CENTER ARENA, carving long arcs in the fresh ice as he whoops and hollers toward the goal.



He is sitting down, just inches from the glistening surface, his legs supported in front of him. Beneath the molded plastic seat of his small metal sled, two knife-sharp blades carry

his weight, but it's his arms that propel him, pumping hard, digging into the ice with metal picks on the end of the cut-off hockey sticks he grips in each hand. Nearing the net, Chace shifts his weight, and, in a split-second move, flips his left stick and drives the puck hard into the goal. Whizzing straight for the wall, he careens into an ice-scraping turn and doubles back for another shot. Again and again he fires. Some shots go low. Some go high, sailing into the rink wall with an echoing thud. He's in constant motion. This is what he loves. This is what he lives for—ice time.

Chace used to play hockey standing up. As a little kid, he played on his family's backyard pond. When he was big enough, he played youth hockey. Then he was chosen to play select hockey with the Middlesex Islanders, a regional travel team. He practiced all the time, even off the ice. At home, he'd spend hours in the driveway on roller skates, using a tennis ball to take shots at the garage door. He had his eye on a hockey career. When he was 16, he took time off from high school to play with the New Hampshire Junior Monarchs. That's when Chace went to Canada and played in a game that changed his life. It happened fast.



He was knocked down hard, slamming into the boards. Falling was nothing new. But this time he couldn't get up. His legs felt like they were encased in cement. They didn't move. At all.

During the long months of rehab that followed his surgery, no one knew if Chace would walk again. But one thing was sure—his hockey dream, the

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*By Suki Casanave '86G*



## No Mountain Too High

Tyler Walker '08 grew up in northern New Hampshire at the foot of Cannon Mountain. Like every other kid in town, he wanted to ski. But he had been born with a spinal defect that required both legs to be amputated above the knee. When he begged to join his friends on the slopes, though,

his parents didn't bat an eye. They got creative. They tried attaching cross-country skis to a baby sled. They tried a snowboard and cut-off ski poles. "We'd modify anything we could think of," says Walker's mother, Carol. "People at the mountain were never too happy to see us coming. We didn't exactly fit the mold. All

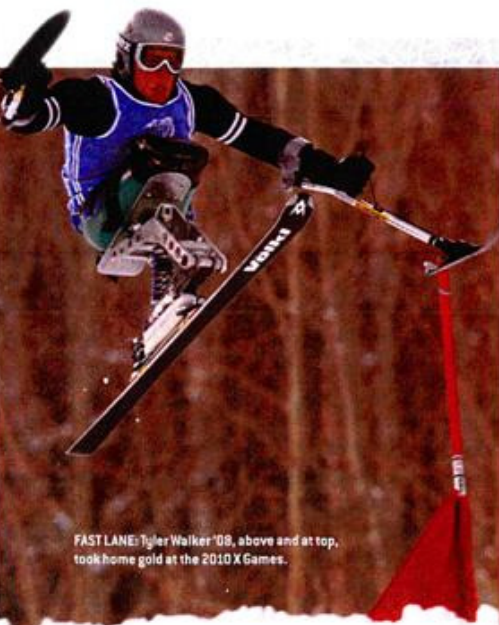
they could think about was that we might drop him off the chair lift!"

As Walker's skills improved, so did his equipment, as his parents discovered adaptive ski programs and, eventually, Northeast Passage, where creative solutions—and breaking the mold—were the driving force behind the organization's motto, "Explore the possibilities." Pretty soon the whole family was hooked. They attended every event the program offered: golf, kayaking, fencing, paintball,

snorkeling, scuba diving, hand cycling. Walker loved it all.

By 15, Walker was racing down mountains, dazzling fans with his speed. In 2004, the year he started at UNH, he captured his first World Cup win in the giant slalom. That was only the beginning. World Cup wins followed in 2005 and 2006, and he placed an impressive sixth in the giant slalom in the 2006 Winter Paralympics in Italy. And then there are the X Games, where Walker ramps his passion for speed and air time into overdrive—taking jumps that send him 20 feet high and 100 feet out before landing. Featured on ESPN, the X Games give athletes with disabilities fantastic exposure. "It's a great chance to teach the world to focus on abilities, rather than disabilities," says Walker. "It's pretty dangerous. You've gotta be able to handle a monoski off a jump. Plus, you're going down four skiers at a time, so you're trying not to crash into each other. It's the kind of

SEBASTIAN ALLEN/GETTY IMAGES



FAST LANE: Tyler Walker '08, above and at top, took home gold at the 2010 X Games.

thing he had worked for so single mindedly for so long, had been shattered along with his spine. "It was unbelievably frustrating," says Chace, who watched his buddies move on to big-name hockey schools and successful skating careers. Chace, meanwhile, was learning to put on his socks again. And mastering the art of maneuvering in a wheelchair. He was a fighter, though. He tackled his rehab the same way he went after his hockey game, pushing himself relentlessly. "I was also incredibly lucky," says Chace, whose injury was low on his spinal cord. About a year after the accident, he had discarded his wheelchair and was using a walker. Ecstatic with his progress, he still felt a long way from the life he had once known. "Being an able-bodied athlete for so long and then having to confront this idea that I'm disabled, crippled, weak—it was tough," says Chace. "I didn't want to define myself this way."

Then he discovered Northeast Passage. Founded in 1990, the adaptive recreation program quickly gained a reputation for being incredibly good at getting people with disabilities up mountains, into kayaks, onto bikes, out on the ski slopes—the list goes on. "It's all about creative problem-solving and collaboration," says program founder Jill Gravink '86, who grew up playing with two cousins who had muscular dystrophy. She and her siblings rigged up all kinds of contraptions for their adventures—hauling their cousins through the woods, suspending them from harnesses in trees. "We collected a lot of bruises," says Gravink, laughing. "But my aunt loved that their lives were so normal."

JACK BISHOP/GETTY IMAGES

stuff that makes my mother nervous." But fans go wild over it. When Walker's extreme skiing was featured in a recent Warren Miller film, he became something of a celebrity. "I don't have my legs," he explained to the camera, "but when I strap on a monoski, it's like strapping on a pair of legs."

Walker, who took two semesters off to focus on skiing, still graduated in four years with a dual major in geography and international studies and minors in German and political science. He also found time to meet and mentor a young boy in Qatar who has the same disability. He credits Northeast Passage with supporting him all the way. "They got me motivated to get to the gym," he says. But there was always an emphasis on academics, too. "They helped me juggle my courses and the semesters I took off." There was even a small Northeast Passage scholarship, provided by the Homer family, that helped with some expenses.

Recently, Walker and his family estab-

lished a new scholarship in hopes of helping future athletes with disabilities. "The Northeast Passage Athletic Excellence Scholarship fund makes it possible for us to recruit and retain student-athletes," says Tom Carr '97, director of athletics for Northeast Passage, noting that the scholarship promotes an integrated culture of equality, where high-level athletes with disabilities can train and study alongside NCAA athletes.

"Our family is committed to advancing the dreams of other student-athletes," says Walker's father, James, who knows a thing or two about making dreams come true. His own son, now a celebrity on the slopes, got his start with a homemade sled, a spirit of determination—and a family who believed anything was possible.

For more about the Athletic Excellence Scholarship fund, contact Ray Goodman at (603) 862-4038 or ray.goodman@unh.edu.



**PROMOTED:** After winning the World Cup downhill title in 2009, Tyler Walker '08 moved up to the A team on the U.S. Adaptive Alpine Ski Team roster.

Gravink started her nonprofit with that same can-do philosophy. "Every one of our programs began with people coming to me and saying, 'This is what I want to do. Can you help?'" says Gravink, who moved Northeast Passage into borrowed office space at UNH in 1995. Soon the program was attracting federal funding. It was also expanding to include clinical therapy for disabled students in elementary schools and adults in their homes. In 2000, after years of collaboration, Northeast Passage officially merged with UNH as the service branch of the recreation management and policy department. Today, it's one of the biggest adaptive sports programs in the country. The reason, of course, is their philosophy: *No matter what you want to try, we're here to help. Now, let's get moving!*

The gigantic storage room behind Northeast Passage's office is evidence of that philosophy—and its success. Early on, the program had about 12 pieces of adaptive sports equipment. Now there are more than 250—hand bikes, monoskis, hockey sleds and specialized wheelchairs for tennis, basketball, and rugby. Things are stacked floor to ceiling—the ultimate garage. In one corner, spare wheels, tools and extra parts are scattered on a workbench. If they don't have what someone needs, they create it, sometimes getting help from UNH engineering students. "There's an important mindset involved in looking at a person and seeing their potential," says Gravink, who is passing this mindset along to every UNH student who interns or volunteers with the program. "You can't look at someone and see the disability."

The program works to instill this mindset in its athletes, too. "When disability enters your life, one of the biggest hurdles to overcome is your own stereotypes," says Gravink, "this feeling that you can't do things anymore." This was exactly what Chace was facing. After two years of rehab, he was bored, restless and fighting depression. He craved a new outlet. When his older sister, Meredith '04, a Northeast Passage volunteer, took him to his first sled-hockey event and introduced him to coach Tom Carr '97, the program's director of athletics, Chace found his answer. "Everyone on that team had such a positive attitude," he says. "Suddenly I realized how lucky I was. I was so excited to be back on the ice," he says. "I loved being in the locker room again, having teammates." He loved having a coach, too, someone to challenge him. "Tom helped me set goals," says Chace, who started training again. And he enrolled at UNH. The timing was perfect. Northeast Passage had recently developed a new focus—on elite athletes.

"At some point," says Carr, "we realized that really serious athletes with disabilities, including some younger kids we'd been mentoring, were all going to other schools." Carr cites the University of Illinois as an example. Nationally known for its wheelchair sports, the school draws athletes from all over the country. "We sat down and said we need to find a way to solve this," says Carr.

In 2002, Carr met with Laurie Stephens '07, who uses a wheelchair—and who was considering Illinois. "She's an incredible athlete. She could excel at any sport," says Carr, who asked her what she'd do if she could choose. She didn't hesitate. Skiing



**THREE'S THE CHARM:** Laurie Stephens '07, above and below, won two gold medals and one silver at the 2006 Winter Paralympics. She hopes to defend those medals at the 2010 games in Vancouver.

was her passion. Carr promised he'd work with her and figure out a way for her to be a high-level ski athlete at UNH. "Laurie gets credit for being our test case," says Carr. "She was the ground-breaker—and there were definitely bumps along the road." But Stephens, who was born with spina bifida, did, in fact, enroll at UNH and earned a degree in therapeutic recreation. Along the way, she also won three medals at the 2006 Paralympic Winter Games in Torino, Italy, plus a slew of World Cup medals. And her experience helped Northeast Passage create an elite disabled athlete program—the only one of its kind in the country.

Carr started by talking with Marty Scarano, UNH athletic director, explaining that athletes who happen to be disabled need pretty much the same thing able-bodied athletes need: use of high-quality facilities for training, superior coaching and academic support. "We didn't want to establish a separate program," says Carr, who learned that some schools with established programs for disabled athletes wished they had done it differently—wished their programs were not completely separate from the regular varsity athletics program. "Why have this facility that disabled athletes don't have access to?" says Carr, who praises the

UNH athletics department for its support.

"We consider these elite, national-caliber athletes part of our 'family,'" says Scarano. "We hope to create a one-of-a-kind partnership with Northeast Passage and to offer the very best training facilities for winter-sport athletes who aspire to compete in the disabled national programs and ultimately the Paralympics." In 2008, that goal became even more tangible when Northeast Passage secured a contract with U.S. Paralympics, a division of the U.S. Olympic Committee, to develop Nordic skiers with physical disabilities or visual impairments for elite-level competition.

Carr was recruiting in earnest now, keeping his eye out for promising skiers, as well as hockey players, who could come to UNH to train—and to get an education at the same time. "I was at a ski race at Waterville Valley," says Ted Broderick '12, one of Carr's most recent recruits. "Tom approached me after one of

the races and told me he thought I could take it to the next level." A high school junior at the time, Broderick had always competed against able-bodied skiers. But at the college level, he knew this would be impossible.

A congenital amputee born without his left forearm, Broderick figured he'd have to settle for



NEORIGHTS/PASSAGE LLC


skiing at the club level. Thanks to Northeast Passage, though, Broderick is moving full steam ahead on his competitive skiing and also working on a business degree. He trains with the UNH ski team, competes in the U.S. Disabled National Championships—and is preparing for the 2014 Paralympics, where he will compete in the stand-up division. “The field house, the strength and conditioning coaches, the full training staff—it’s changed entirely how I am as a skier,” says Broderick. “I’m really supported as an athlete and a student here. I’ve found the perfect blend of skiing and business.”

As word of the program has spread in the past couple of years, Northeast Passage has recruited nearly a dozen new athletes. Like Broderick, many of them have their eye on the 2014 Paralympics, including alpine skier Jon Parker '12 from New Hampshire and Nordic skier Marlon Shepard '12 from Maine. Josh Moran '11 and Bryan Genovese '11, both from New York, hope to try out for the national sled hockey team. With all his athletes, Carr is just as insistent on the academics as he is on the training. “These athletes need a plan, and education is a huge part of it,” he says. “In our world, you can’t make a career out of sled hockey or skiing.”

Along with the guidance and advice they receive, athletes with disabilities at UNH thrive on the camaraderie they find in the Northeast Passage community. They’ve all had to navigate the rugged mental and physical terrain of life with a disability. They know humor is a key survival strategy—and it’s something they love to capitalize on whenever they get a chance. Broderick tells stories about coming home from grade school with an arm sticking out of his backpack. “It was always such a pain,” he says of his prosthetic, which he finally quit using. And he caused a stir last year when at Halloween he was (a very realistic) Captain Hook.

And then there’s the time the guys were traveling together. A bunch of them loaded their ski champion buddy Tyler Walker '08 into an overhead airplane compartment during early boarding. Walker was born without a complete spine and both legs were amputated when he was 4. “He’s pretty compact,” says Chace, chuckling as he recalls the prank. “He gave the flight attendant quite a shock when she walked down the aisle doing a final check of the overhead compartments!” (For more about Walker, see story on Page 34.)

The road back to competitive hockey was a rough one for Chace, but it was what he wanted to do. He knew the game, so he had a head start. But he had to learn to play all over again. “Sled hockey is so much harder than stand-up hockey,” Chace says. “You have to pull your whole



**HIS TURN: Ted Broderick '12 is hoping to compete in the 2014 Paralympic Games in the stand-up division.**

body with your arms—and your upper body isn’t made to exert that kind of force. I had to really train my upper body. I had to learn to use two sticks instead of one, how to shoot left-handed as well as right-handed. You can’t skate backwards, either, which is really tough.” Chace had to work especially hard on turning, since one of his ribs on the left side had been removed to repair his spine, compromising his strength and balance. “Plus, you get knocked over all the time!” he says.

But Carr saw Chace’s potential. He encouraged him to think big. About a year into their training together, Carr suggested he try out for the national team. “I was really nervous,” says Chace. “I didn’t think I was ready.” But he went anyway. He competed for one of 20 available slots against more than 60 athletes—and wound up with a place on the team. In 2006, just four years after his accident, Chace was off to the Paralympics in Torino, Italy, with the U.S. Sled Hockey team. And his whole family was there in the stands, cheering like crazy, when he scored the winning goal against Germany in the bronze-medal game.

These days, Chace’s disability is nearly invisible when he’s off the ice. He walks without assistance for the most part, although he occasionally wears a leg brace. “My balance is terrible,” he says. He still has severe numbness in parts of his legs and feet. His hips don’t work too well. He gets around slowly and carefully. Put him on the ice, though, and the guy can fly. The exhilaration, the competitive drive, the thrill of success—it’s all back. The irony of his experience isn’t lost on Chace, who is training hard for the upcoming Paralympic Games in Vancouver and also looking ahead to a career in disabled sports and coaching. The same ice that threatened to steal his future has given him back his focus and sense of purpose.

Northeast Passage made it all possible, Chace says. “I had my eye on other schools, but Northeast Passage is unique in what they do. That was a major attraction, plus the sports studies major, the internship possibilities—UNH has given me a lot of direction and different ideas for how to approach my career.” Like Chace, all the Northeast Passage recruits find more than support for their athletic talents and ambitions. As much as they love their sport—the thrill of catching air over a ski jump, the rush of streaking across the ice—these athletes discover something even more important, something that will carry them forward whether or not they bring home a medal. They discover they have a future ahead of them that is full of promise. They’re ready for takeoff. They can fly. —

### Vancouver Bound!

UNH will be well-represented at the 2010 Paralympics in Vancouver on March 12–21. Hockey player Taylor Chace '10, along with skiers Laurie Stephens '07 and Tyler Walker '08, will all be competing in this year’s games. For more information, visit the Paralympics site: [www.usparalympics.org/](http://www.usparalympics.org/). To see them in action, tune in to Paralympic Sport TV: [www.paralympicsport.tv/](http://www.paralympicsport.tv/).