

Making sports available to all

By **MARY-JUSTINE LANYON**
Editor

Empower: That is the key word behind all the activities offered by the Rim of the World Special Athletes Foundation (RSA).

“People forget when they see someone with a disability that we’re all the same,” said Jack Cooperman, president of RSA. “They may not be able to express it or physically do it, but they develop the same way. They have the same wants and needs as all of us.”

It is with that in mind that RSA has developed its year-round adaptive sports programs. They serve individuals, including veterans, with visual and hearing impairments, amputations, spinal cord injuries, traumatic brain injuries, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Down Syndrome, autism, as well as many other cognitive and physical disabilities.

Cooperman started RSA five-and-a-half years ago because, he said, “I saw the need for a sports program for our mountain communities’ special athletes and their families.”

RSA was gifted with the use of a dock on Lake Arrowhead for their summer activities. In years past, about 30 athletes, their families and volunteers would gather one day a week to go out on the water in kayaks and other watercraft. This year, because of COVID-19 restrictions, Cooperman had to do things differently.

“We modified the program so that one household that lives together participated at one time,” he said. “We scheduled a day and a time for them – whatever worked for them. I would get there ahead of time and pull out a variety of equipment that would work for that individual and family. When they arrived, I asked some basic questions about their health and took their temperatures. Everyone wore masks.

“The athletes missed their friends,” Cooperman said, “but now were spending time recreating with their families.”

Another change this summer was the



Jan Smith enjoyed kayaking with her son, Ray, this summer. (Photos courtesy of Rim Special Athletes)

owner of the dock sold the house and the dock. Cooperman gave the new owners newspapers articles about RSA. “They told the seller to tell me that they would like us to continue the program on their dock. They are



Madison Meares, one of the more avid golfers who participates through Rim Special Athletes, gets ready to swing as his father, Fred, looks on.

what Lake Arrowhead is all about.”

Also taking place over the summer were golf lessons at Lake Arrowhead Country Club. “The members come and help the athletes,” Cooperman said, adding that usually the same member works with the same athlete, developing a relationship.

Golf provides more than an activity to the participants. Cooperman said he has seen an athlete try to hit 10 golf balls and miss every one. Two to three weeks later, he said, “they hit eight out of 10. In addition to providing them with enjoyment, think about how much it is doing for their hand-eye coordination and their sense of self-esteem.”

With winter fast approaching and Snow Valley having opened for the season, adaptive skiing will soon begin for the athletes. Because the athletes are more comfortable in a less-crowded environment, Cooperman hopes to conduct most of the lessons by reservation during the week. “We match the proper instructor with the individual,” he said, adding it’s important the instructor have knowledge of that person’s disability.

Cooperman chuckled as he recalled a girl he had worked with for several years. When she turned 13, he changed her instructor to a 30-year-old woman. “The conversation had turned to boys,” he said, “and I didn’t have the answers for her.”

Cooperman said they are still figuring out what they can and can’t do at Snow Valley this year. The stand-up skiers will be able to keep proper social distancing and wear masks. The issue that has him most worried are the individuals he and the other instructors put into sit skis. “That puts us extremely close to them, face to face. We’re still working on how to resolve that.”

In addition to the physical benefits



Jack Cooperman with one of his special athletes, Carl Blank of Twin Peaks. (Photo courtesy of Rim Special Athletes)

of taking an adaptive ski class, there is the enjoyment the athletes get out of recreating in the snow. “Most important is their sense of empowerment. At the end of the day, they can say, ‘I came down the hill and I stopped by myself.’”

Snow Valley Mountain Resort has been very helpful, Cooperman said, to the point of letting them check out two sizes of boots if someone wants to ski with a prosthetic. The same size boot won’t fit each foot.

RSA has a lot of clothing – ski pants, jackets, gloves – and helmets so they can outfit the skiers.

For a first-time skier, Cooperman said, “we will sit down with them and talk about what we want to accomplish that day. Then we do drills on flat land, rather than on a slope. They learn how to balance, how to move forward, how to stop, how to use their poles and they do a little turning.

“We have students who five or six years ago had never skied and today there’s no place on the mountain they can’t go,” Cooperman said. The parents, he said, often can’t believe it when they see their child coming down the hill. “So many times, I’ve seen them with tears streaming down their faces.”

RSA had been offering year-round yoga classes live at the Lake Arrowhead Community Presbyterian Church. With the COVID-19 restrictions, those classes were switched to a virtual platform. They are taught by Bobiane, a certified therapeutic yoga instructor, with Kim Meares and her

son, Madison, as assistants.

With the stress that can come from the Coronavirus, this is the perfect time for folks to join the classes. They have had folks log in from all over the state, as well as from out of state. Yoga, Bobiane notes on the RSA website, “will help you experience increased energy, improved balance and flexibility, decreased anxiety and depression, better stress management, greater sense of peace and improved overall fitness.”

In the hourlong class, Bobiane takes her students through a variety of poses, both on the mat and standing up. Kim Meares watches on a monitor for any students who are in wheelchairs; to guide them, she does the poses seated in a chair. The focus of this practice, Bobiane said, is on stretch and balance. She ends the session with a period of meditation, urging the participants to “allow yourself to be present.”

RSA was unable to hold their Top of the Mountain fundraiser at Snow Valley this year so Cooperman invites people to visit their website – www.rimspecialathletes.org – and become a sponsor or make a donation. They are offering sponsorships of adaptive ski lessons for \$129, which includes all the necessary adaptive equipment.

The vast majority of athletes RSA works with are from the mountain communities, Cooperman said. Last year, they were able to give more than a dozen lessons at no charge to veterans.

“We’ve never charged for a lesson and we don’t plan to,” he noted.