

Ted O'Meara

Just by happenstance and coincidence, on my vacation this past February, I ended up staying with a paraplegic athlete in Winter Park, Colorado. He was a good friend of my friend Frank, whom I had gone out to see and snowboard with. His name was Doug and I did not know much about him from Frank other than he was a winter sports athlete. I did know that Frank had worked with him as his assistant during the X-Games, but I figured that since Frank was an avid snowboarder, that his friend was as well.

Frank didn't say anything about Doug having a disability until about an hour before we embarked on Doug's house – where we were staying. Upon hearing that Doug was in a wheelchair I started contemplating whether it was a good idea that 3 other grown men would be staying at his modest studio condo. Would he be able to get around? Did I have to watch what I said, as to not make any offensive remarks? I just was not sure if everything would mesh well.

I would say that the time getting acquainted was just slightly longer than most other people that I connect with. I would also venture to say that I was the cause of the lag in that time. Eventually, I got over the fact that Doug was in a wheelchair and the initial notion of making extra accommodations for him. It didn't seem that he wanted to be "babied" or made a special case – except getting a push up a hill, and I can't imagine anyone in a wheelchair not taking that offer.

Doug's wheelchair had many more features than I would have thought it would have. He owned two wheelsets that he would switch depending on going out or staying in the condo; everyone took off their shoes, Doug switched his wheels. The quick Dr. release for the wheels were easy to control. In a matter of 3 times I had gotten comfortable setting up his wheelchair for him when getting in and out of the car.

As noted earlier, Doug is a winter sports athlete and he competes the Mono-cross competitions throughout North America. Winter Park specializes in mono skiers and disabled winter athletes, which is one of the reasons that Doug lives there. During my stay I had gotten to meet other mono skiers and see their specialized skis. The mono ski exists of a bucket where the individual sits, and a shock absorber that connects the bucket to the ski. The ski locks in much like a regular ski would to a boot. The rider then has two outriggers (they look like mini skis on poles) that are used to help control and balance. The mono skis are designed to have a chairlift slide right underneath of the bucket and the rider does not have to get out of the bucket to ride the lift.

There was a wide range of mono skis at Winter Park. The higher-end skis had buckets that were made of carbon fiber and molded to fit the rider's contour of his/her lower body. Buckles and straps were also made of better materials. Doug's ski did not have all of the expensive features that some of the skis had, but he still seemed to have a pretty good setup. The biggest issue that he seemed to face was

keeping the buckles and straps tight enough and adequately positioned. Doug still has to rely on others to enter in and out of the seat, as well as getting righted when a crash or a fall happens. However, Doug was still able to launch off of some huge jumps when riding through the terrain park and other advanced areas. The mono ski's shock absorber would sometimes take landings better than regular skiers or snowboarders. Although, sometimes the spring rebound would provide a hiccup and slightly through him back in the air.