

GoHawkeye



A Non-Profit Foundation: Travel... Adventure... Fundraising

For those of you that know Telluride, you may have spotted the distinctive hat and skiing style of Michael 'Hawkeye' Johnson. The nickname? It comes, naturally, from the original MASH movie - people saw Johnson as a dead-ringer for the inimitable Hawkeye Pierce, as played by Donald Sutherland.

In 1999, after putting all his belongings in a van and hiking the Colorado Trail, Hawkeye decided he had to relocate somewhere on the Western Slope. He chose Telluride for the aesthetic and the skiing. Once he made the move, Hawkeye quickly met and became roommates with TREC broker Rube Felicelli. "We met on the mountain," Felicelli said. "He was one of the first ticket checkers on Lift 9 because they had been stacking the numbers."

Hawkeye smiled, "That first season I did 100 days without even trying, and discovered the Telluride Adaptive Sports Program [TASP]. I went in and signed up to volunteer after my first season."

"Before I moved here, I was a prison guard, and I watched a lot of people squander their freedom," Hawkeye said.

"I got the prison guard job by accident and learned I was pretty good at working with people and dealing with people. Ten years rolled around before I knew it - it was a good work schedule that allowed for a lot of skiing. Then I was able to retire."

But Hawkeye's retirement doesn't look like just anybody's retirement. He's just finished his seventh year at the helm of, and as the namesake of, the GoHawkeye Foundation, a non-profit that has so far given away \$200K in grants to 66 athletes and 10 organizations nationwide. His goal? "To live in the best ski town in the lower 48 and ski 100 days," Hawkeye laughed. "I've only ever aspired to being a ski bum."

After a few years of volunteering and being an assistant with TASP, Hawkeye completed ski school college in 2003, and started sharing his love of skiing with eager students. By 2007 Hawkeye was even more involved in the Telluride community, volunteering at festivals. "I knew I was doing good because I was helping people learn to ski, then I thought, what else can I do?" Hawkeye said. Inspiration struck in the form of MountainFilm.

“I’ve been involved in long distance hiking most of my life, having grown up in Maine on the Appalachian Trail. That whole ‘pack-on-your-back self-sustaining camping’ thing really appealed to me. I’ve gone on to hike the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail – a lot of long-distance hiking. When you spend that much time on the trail you do a lot of introspection and looking inside your head,” Hawkeye mused. “I decided to combine long-distance hiking and fundraising for TASP, and began planning how to do it in 2006 with Colleen Trout. My new main mission is encouraging other adventurers to raise money while they’re out there exploring.”

“We became GoHawkeye around the time I broke my leg in 2008 and, after recovering, hiked the Pacific Crest Trail a second time. We started spending the fundraising on specific TASP-earmarked projects. I was coaching a sit-skier named Steve Hodges when Craig Stein walked through the doors as a volunteer. These guys had film and editing experience. I wanted to keep it in-house and wanted to make it our own, which we did.”

Hawkeye, Hodges and Stein began getting creative – hooking cameras up to Hodges’ sit-ski and making promo films and Veterans’ programming, and even instructional films.

“MountainFilm got me interested in making film-festival-style movies. We created one called ‘Loadbearing’ with TASP backing. All this time I’d been getting people hooked on outdoor sports, and then watched as some struggled to afford it. I had to do a lot of soul-searching about it and realized that people were willing to give us money and I saw a need that I could fill,” Hawkeye said. Another of those films is ‘Falling Into Place’ with Danielle Watson, who survived a 300-foot fall near Crested Butte, and is now a racer with Paralympian potential.

Needing a board of directors, Hawkeye turned to Felicelli.

“Rube is a community-oriented guy who’s been in political office and served on many boards. He is actually the one who came up with the name ‘GoHawkeye’. When I was doing these hikes he was like, ‘Go Hawkeye! Get out there and hike!’ as encouragement, and the name stuck.”

Felicelli added, “Our first year we raised \$17K. We were able to build on the great work TASP is doing and provide the next step for people who have come here and gotten their training and reintroduce them to outdoor sports. We now have prospective Paralympians in the program. We only average \$25K-\$30K per year, but it makes a huge impact on people’s lives.”

“One of our requirements is that our recipients send us a follow-up essay on how they are using the equipment,” Hawkeye said. “We like athletes. Sometimes we take people under our wing, but we want to see follow up and a current picture, like ‘where are you taking this in your life?’ Are you carrying the legacy of our mission and focus? We are always looking for candidates that are going to advance the message of adaptive sports. Our mission is to help people and organizations.”

He added, “When we plug them into the Telluride community, it blows their mind. There is a lot of support here and it is very accepting of people with disabilities. Even if they grew up here, like Logan Fuller, a Dolores kid we helped out, our reach is across the nation, all genders, all abilities and disabilities.”

Felicelli said, “We can’t support all 100%, word of mouth and vendors we work with spread the word. We get applications from all over the country, and we have certain athletes we don’t have enough funds for their project or equipment, like Hilary Griffin in Crested Butte. She grew up in Ridgway and learned to ski in Telluride. A car accident two years ago left her a paraplegic. So, Hawkeye comes up with this fundraiser idea, The Pirate Party at the Distillery. We went out and got donations for a silent auction for Hilary and she came, her parents came, her friends came – it was awesome to see the different connections. We made more than enough money to buy her sit-ski and even put money into the general fund.”

Hawkeye added, “Another thing we look for is people who have skin in the game, like other funds they’ve raised, and how we can help them with their fundraising through their church, school, civic or community organization.”



Corey Lovato, a snowboarder in Colorado, broke his neck 14 years ago, and became quadriplegic. He put himself through law school and learned all about ADA compliance, issues involving public transit, and living with disabilities in a city. Lovato is now a disabilities advocate lawyer in Phoenix.

“It had been 14 years since Lovato had been on snow,” Felicelli said. “We put him up in Telluride, and got him on the snow. We invited a bunch of community members to do a ski around with him. It was really rewarding to make something like that happen. The look on his face was priceless. By the third day he was just ripping it. You see how all of a sudden he got reconnected to the experience of being on the snow, that he hadn’t had since his accident.”

“It’s not just skiers and bikers, we’ve helped with fishing, hockey, basketball, archery, a surfer in NYC, hippotherapy with horseback riding. Diversity is important,” he added.

Hawkeye said, “Many people with disabilities are just trying to find some freedom from their restriction and be on the same playing field as everyone else. Families love adaptive sports because it changes lives, but on another level, it gives them an outlet where they escape the disability for a while. Your loved one is out and you’re

not in a caregiving role because they are independent. You know, everyone’s got to get away for a little bit.”

The GoHawkeye Youth Development Fund, inspired by 9-year-old Anika Parr, is a program that raises money by hiking. Each year Ani and her friends Caroline Didden, Taylor Danielson or Helena Burger have taken time out of their vacation to do a fundraiser hike.

“I go with them and raise money hiking,” Hawkeye says. “They’ve raised more than \$20K since they started, for adaptive equipment and experience grants for youth. This year we did top of the Gondola to top of Bridal Veil Power Station – 11 miles in the backcountry - and raised \$7K. A lot of community support comes through the Pirate Parties and some regular donors, anywhere from \$10 to \$20K.”

“It’s all about relationships,” Hawkeye continued. “Don’t you want to leave a mark while you’re here? What are you going to do with your life? I’m not trying to set any records or anything, I’m just trying to be happy – and I’ve stayed busy. Self-perpetuating in the way it’s designed. You’d be amazed how motivated someone can be when you invest in their success.”

For more information, to volunteer, or to donate visit GoHawkeye.org. And get out there and hike!

