

BACK TO PEAK FORM

When TV reporter **FRANK GARDNER** was paralysed in a terrorist attack, he had just one goal: to take his children skiing again. Here is how he did it...

FOR THE long months that I lay in hospital, recovering from my Saudi bullet wounds with tubes and catheters sprouting out of me like a porcupine, I harboured a dream: I would go skiing with my children.

They had been so young when we first took them with us to the Bavarian Alps just weeks before the terrorist attack that cost me the use of my legs. Melissa had been six and had charged undaunted down the nursery slopes of Garmisch; Sasha had been five and had never ventured out of the little snow garden.

But when I finally emerged from hospital, we decided we could not let what had happened to me prevent us from going skiing as a family. There was nothing for it, I would have to learn paraplegic or 'adaptive' skiing.

At first sight, it looked completely daunting. A picture in a disability magazine showed a young man squashed into a contraption shaped like a bucket balanced on a single ski. He seemed to be on the verge of toppling over on his side but in each of his hands he gripped an outrigger, a mini-ski on the end of a mini ski pole. These appeared to be keeping him upright but it was hard to tell; his smile looked a little forced.

So where to learn the art of legless skiing? The charity BackUp offered courses in Sweden and Colorado, while another, Disability Snowsport UK, suggested I join them in Andorra.

Instead, I opted for an obscure training course run by the British Army at its Adventure Training Centre at Sonthofen in Bavaria. Once a year, the centre runs a course for civilian disabled skiers, specifically for a dozen blind and partially blind Irish from both sides of the border.

BLIND skiing? Surely not, I thought, this must be a wind-up. In fact, it was an inspiration. After a cautious start, the blind Irish were throwing themselves down the blue slopes, guided only by the occasional shout from their guides who skied just behind them. 'Left! Turn left! Tree coming up on your right!'

The only time I saw one of them wipe out spectacularly in a snowdrift she was laughing so hard she couldn't get up. 'Will you just stop yakking and get me out of here!' she called out to her guide.

By night, they drank and sang until the small hours. I thought: well if they can ski without seeing where they're going, then my getting down the slope in a 'sit-ski' should be a walk in the park.

My instructor was Andrea, and she was blonde, Bavarian and paraplegic. An extreme ski enthusiast, she had broken her back on a near vertical slope a few years ago but had resumed her racing career without the use of her legs. Now she sat beside me on the snow, perched in her own sit-ski as the first snowflakes of an incoming blizzard blasted on to our cheeks.

'First you must find your balance,' Andrea said. I was feeling distinctly claustrophobic, strapped in as I was into this high-tech bucket. 'You must think of yourself as being in a giant ski boot,' she went on. 'The tighter the fit, the more control you will have.'

'It helps to be fit for this sport,' she added. Leaning on one of the outriggers, Andrea windmilled her other arm to get the muscles working.

'We call these outriggers "flik-flaks",' she explained. It was a clever device: her elbow slotted into a loose brace while her hand curled round a grip that had a string attached. When she tugged on the string, the mini-ski on the end folded up flush with the ski pole so she could then use it to propel herself up the slope.

'Are you ready to try out the slope?' she asked. I was. Off we went, slowly picking up speed as our monoskis slid unseen beneath us. I could hardly believe it: I was skiing again!

Before I knew it, I had reached the bottom of the slope and the drag-lift. But now came the hard part: negotiating the lift.

At the front of the sit-ski was a strap, which I now handed to the lift operator who hooked it over the T-bar on the lift. This way I could be pulled up the slope, using the flik-flaks on either side to keep me upright. All right, but what would happen at the top?

On the side of the sit-ski was a quick release catch. I had to reach forward and bang this catch hard, releasing the strap and allowing me to slide away.

It didn't always go smoothly. When the lift operator wasn't paying attention and failed to slow the draglift, I was seconds away from being dragged up the mountain had it not been for Pete May, the commandant of the Adventure Training Centre.

He rescued my dignity by launching himself in a flying rugby tackle and unhooking me.

AFTER a couple of runs down the slopes of Bavaria I made a welcome discovery. I could actually turn quite effectively with my body, by stretching out an arm, planting a pole then flicking my hips sideways to carve an edge with the ski.

As I had been given a very short ski — just 150cm long — I found I could turn quickly and my only problem was turning too far up the slope then sliding gracefully backwards downhill.

By the end of the week I had tackled the red slopes, encouraged by an ex-SAS sergeant with an infectious can-do attitude.

TRAVEL FACTS

FOR more information, contact:
Disability Snowsport UK (01479 861272;
disabilitysnowsport.org.uk);
Disabled ski hire bobgreig@
impossibledream.org.uk;
Swiss Ski School (00 41 814 102828; sssk.chn).

Frank Gardner's book, *Blood & Sand* — a personal account of his 25 years of Middle Eastern experiences, culminating in his being shot by Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia — is published by Transworld.

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Cool in Klosters: Frank Gardner (above with daughter Melissa) did not let disability prevent him from skiing

confirmed: despite the travel agents' assurances that there would be suitable transport on arrival, I now stared at a leviathan of a coach.

We asked the Swiss driver how I was supposed to get up the steep steps into it if I couldn't walk, but he just shrugged and strolled off for a cigarette. My two friends had to take either end of me and drag me up.

At the resort we were in for another surprise. The Hotel Alpina in Klosters is delightful but it is by no stretch of the imagination a ski-in, ski-out resort. To access the family ski slopes, we had to wait for a bus, which I had to be tipped up into in my wheelchair, then tipped up again into the cable car for the 750m ascent to the slopes.

It felt pretty odd to be in a wheelchair on a ski slope but we soon had me transferred into the sit-ski or 'bobski' as they called it in Switzerland. After just six days training, I felt like an old hand at this.

I threw myself at the slopes while our children went to ski school. Then, on the final day, it all came together. Under a cloudless Alpine sky, our family cruised down the slopes together.

To ski once more, with my daughters now on either side of me, was like a dream come true. It had been a long hard journey from intensive care to Klosters, but at that moment it was worth every ounce of effort. Life does go on after spinal injury.

I returned from Germany with a newfound confidence and a ridiculous Bavarian felt hat, awarded to me in the bar on the last night for demonstrating a degree of *cojones* on the slopes I didn't know I had.

'It's a tradition here,' said the instructor with a grin. 'You have to wear it all the way home, even through Stansted Airport.'

Now I was trained up, we were ready for our family ski holiday but where to hire the equipment? Having booked a last-minute week at Klosters with friends I found there was not a sit-ski to be found in the whole resort.

Through Mike Browne, the paraplegic founder of the outdoor clothing company Snow & Rock, I finally tracked down a source in Surrey. Bob Greig was an RAF parachute jump

instructor whose chute had failed to open properly back in 1988 and has been in a wheelchair ever since.

An avid paraplegic skier, he did not seem like a man who let his disability bother him. In his Guildford garage, he rented me a brand new Prashburger, a state-of-the-art Austrian sit-ski that fitted like a glove and which Swiss International Air accepted onboard as cargo without complaint.

I have to say that going skiing in a wheelchair is quite a business, and it is not something I would ever attempt without help. Just the simple business of hauling the sit-ski into the airport is not something you can manage from a wheelchair.

When we emerged from Zurich airport, my worst fears were