

Nonprofit brings biathlon, orienteering to Albany after-school program

By Jason Franchuk
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Is there a place for guns in schools?

Russ Myer says there is – in biathlon training.

Myer, an Albany resident, runs a non-profit organization called Capital Region Nordic Alliance. He provides after-school training in biathlon (skiing and target shooting) as well as orienteering (think scavenger hunt meets relay race) at Hackett Middle School in the Albany City School District. This winter he plans lessons on snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

His biathlon course uses a bright orange, electronic gun. It uses infrared light, like a remote control for a TV.

In a nation wracked by gun violence, getting approval for class using a gun – even one with no bullets – was not an easy sell. It took a couple of years of “no’s” before Myer won approval and a small stipend for his organization.

Myer shows up almost every Thursday from about 3:30 to 5:15 p.m. for weekly extended-day programs at Hackett. Other offerings include a yearbook program, a cooking class and various sports-related activities.

Although there are no bullets, Myer trains students to handle the biathlon gun like a real one. He constantly preaches gun safety, including how to point and aim the gun, as well as how bystanders should stay out of the way.

Myer conducts target practice outdoors or indoors, depending on the weather. Have teachers and parents gotten curious when they see students holding a long, narrow, bright orange gun? You bet. Myer is eager to explain the program to onlookers and is quick to offer visitors a chance to shoot for themselves.

“This is what it is,” he said. “This is what we’re doing.”

He gets a turnout of about 10 students per week. Girls are just as interested as boys.

During a recent class held in Hackett’s cafeteria, Myer carefully watched sixth-grader Jordan Johnson as she did target practice. He simultaneously told a story about Lowell Bailey, who was the first biathlon gold medalist from the United States. Referencing various video clips available on YouTube, Myer praised not only Bailey’s tenacity in a race this year in Austria but also the values of sportsmanship and humility Bailey showed afterward.

The anecdote wound up just as Johnson went 5-for-5 hitting targets. As she rose off the floor, Myer raised his arms as if the victory were his own.

Johnson and a classmate, sixth-grader Brenny Martinez, are regulars. They typically shoot a few practice rounds, then run quick sprints before returning to fire the gun. That mimics the accelerated heart rates biathletes must contend with.

Martinez has become adept at settling her heart rate before shooting and has impressed Myer with her ability to shoot with rhythm and timing.

Later, Myer taught the group about orienteering – a footrace through a terrain while using a map to locate checkpoints in a specific order.

“These are thinking sports,” Myer said. “Your (athletic) ability, and your gender, have little to do with the outcome.” He noted that men and women can compete together in events in both orienteering and biathlon.

A physical therapist by trade, Myer also teaches biathlon to veterans, amputees and others with special needs. He is in the process of turning a local golf



Russ Myer watches the target as sixth-grader Yasmily Sullie shoots an electronic gun during after-school biathlon training in Hackett Middle School’s cafeteria. At right, Jordan Johnson gets five out of five targets at a distance of 10 yards. Below, Myer, Sullie, Johnson and Brenny Martinez wait for the results of their orienteering runs.

❖ Photos by Barbara Bennett

course into a winter wonderland for Nordic skiing.

“There are a lot of non-traditional ways to learn and grow,” he said.

As students advance with their marksmanship, he’s given them freedom to handle more delicate (read: expensive) equipment. Students like Johnson and Martinez say they’ve gone from starting out hitting three of five targets to regularly hitting all five. Within each target, there are points that can be gained by hitting closer to the center. Scores have increased and become more consistent since the start of the school year.

Myer figures that confidence built from practice and routine are a form of student development that can help students when they tackle homework or exams.

“A sport like biathlon can also be very humbling,

very fast,” he said. “You

can miss a target and be done. In orienteering, you can get the map turned around, or look at the wrong feature ... it only takes one mistake. So these (activities) keep the ego in check. If you really have the humility and appreciation for the intrinsic attributes of the sport, that usually provides an environment that is really wholesome and beneficial to everybody.”

