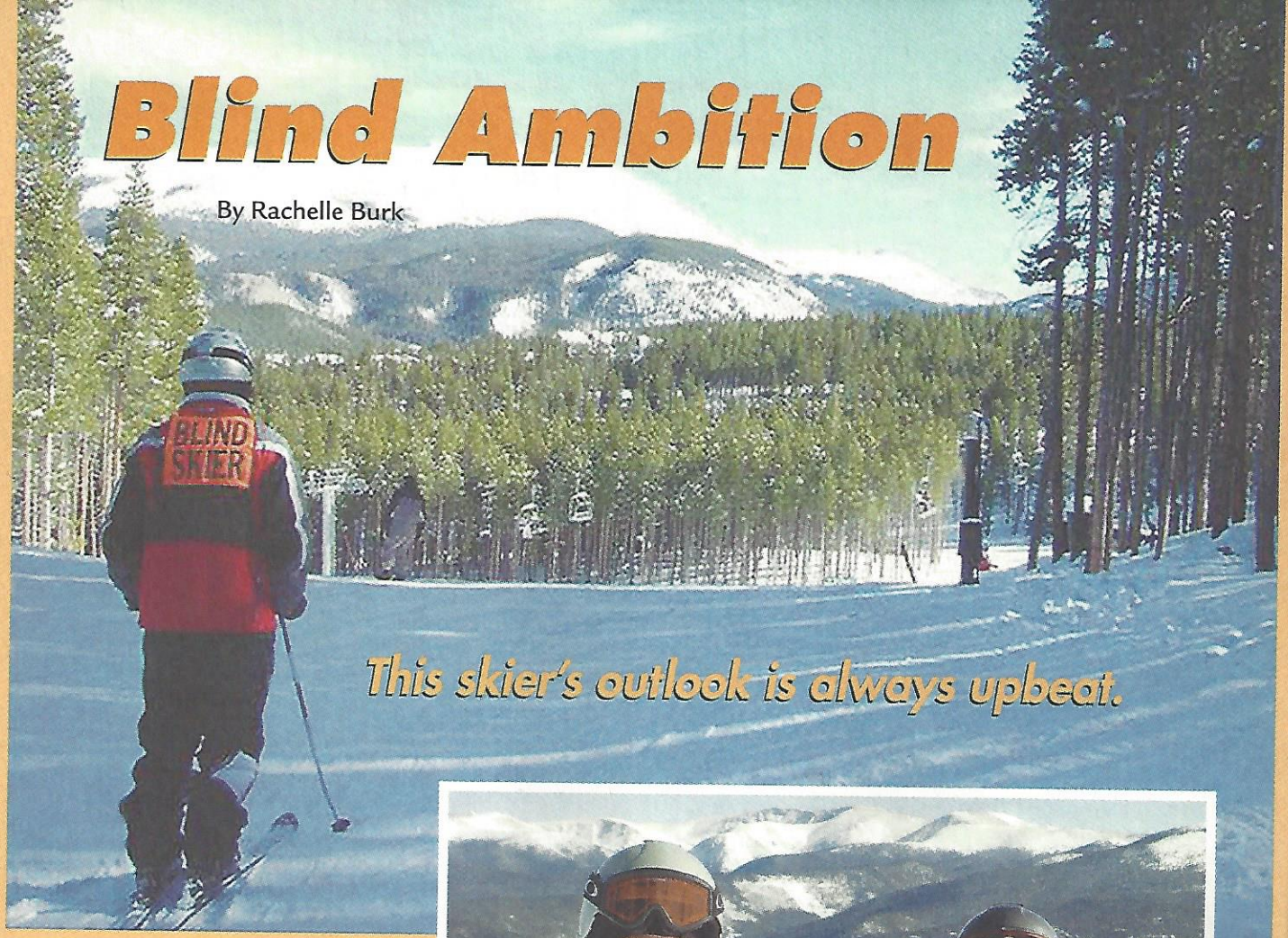
Blind Ambition

By Rachelle Burk



This skier's outlook is always upbeat.

Ben Vercellone zigzags gracefully down the snowy slope. Other skiers watch him with wide-eyed amazement.

"Never seen anything like it," whispers one woman.

It isn't daring stunts and high speed that draw their attention and earn their respect. Instead, it's the neon-orange sign on his jacket: BLIND SKIER.

The frigid air stings Ben's face, but he barely notices. The thrill of the descent keeps him warm and energized.

"Skiing is the one thing I like about winter," he says. After more than a decade on the slopes, he displays a confidence that matches that of any expert skier.

Ben and his dad take a break during a ski trip in Colorado.

Ben lost his sight at age four in a tragic accident that took the lives of his mother and older sister. His father, Jeff, was determined that Ben would not be limited by his blindness. So when Ben was six, Jeff took him skiing for the first time, holding Ben between his legs as they glided down the slope.

"Then my dad heard about an adaptive ski program in Pennsylvania," Ben says. There he learned to ski from certified instructors who were specially

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Photos courtesy of the Vercellone family and Katrina Mojzesz/Top Kat Photography.

trained to teach the sport to people with disabilities.

"For the first couple of years I used a special bamboo pole," Ben says. "Two guides each held an end of the pole, and I grabbed the center. The three of us skied down the slope together, while the guides directed and controlled the turns."

That device helped Ben feel changes in direction and become comfortable with the moves. As his skill increased, he gained confidence. "Then the pole began to feel too restrictive," he says. "I wanted more independence."

By the time he was ten, Ben was ready to challenge the mountain with the aid of voice instructions only. He traded the bamboo pole for regular ski poles.

Blind skiers can be guided verbally by several techniques. Ben prefers a "grid" system. The width of the slope is divided into imaginary sections, with 0 being the left edge, 10 the right edge, and 5 the middle. A guide, skiing behind Ben, calls out his moment-by-moment location.

If Ben hears "two" or "eight," he knows he is getting close to the edge, so he turns the other way. The guide uses "left, right" commands to direct Ben around other skiers and obstacles.

A few years ago, Ben's father devised a communications system consisting of a set of helmets with two-way radios. Ben listens through the receivers in his helmet as his dad skis nearby and guides him down the mountain. Now Ben zips freely down "black-diamond" slopes—the most challenging—as his father transmits commands. "Hard right!" "Hard left!" "Smidge right!" "Slight left!"

"We've worked out our own codes," Ben says with a laugh as he describes the lingo they've created. "A 'slight' right is sort of between a 'smidge' and a 'half' right."

Recently, Ben's father built a new gadget similar to one he'd seen used to guide a blind ski champion from New Zealand.

"The freedom" is what Ben likes most about skiing.

"Dad connects a loudspeaker to the back of his belt, plus a mirror on the side so he can see me behind him," Ben explains. "Then I ski behind him while he talks to me."

By following the continuous sound of his father's voice, Ben knows where he is on the slope and when he can turn. This provides a greater challenge and more independence because it eliminates the need for constant directions from behind.

What does Ben like most about skiing?

"The freedom," he says.

When the snow has melted and the ski lifts are grounded, Ben stays busy. He participates in other sports, such as fishing, swimming, tandem cycling, and even archery. He recently started college and plans to study English and music.

His stepmom, Elaine, says with pride, "Ben has always been told he can do anything . . . so he does."

Ben's guide calls commands from behind as they zip down the slope, above. At right, a skier is guided with the help of a bamboo pole.