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The *Healing* GAME

With the help of PGA professionals, Wounded Warriors are getting a fresh start at life through their connection to golf

by JERRY POTTER



As a whole, golf instructors teach because they like to help people learn a game that can be played for a lifetime. It's a difficult challenge, for sure, but that adds to the joy that comes from seeing the progress of their students.

At the fall meeting of the Middle Atlantic Section of The PGA of America in Fredericksburg, Peter Hodson, a PGA Life Member, stepped to the microphone to tell his fellow professionals about an experience he had that reminded him of why he became a PGA club professional more than 50 years ago.

Hodson, 76, of Richmond, was one of a group of Virginia-based professionals who volunteered their time each Saturday morning from late August until early October to participate in the Wounded Warrior Golf Program at Fort Belvoir.

"I encourage each of you to volunteer," Hodson told his audience, "because the experience will give you a sense of satisfaction you have never felt before."

The satisfaction, he said recently, comes from the appreciation of the students, all injured while serving in the military.

"The professionals felt like they were in Seventh Heaven," he adds.

The series of eight lessons is a unique program that is part of the Wounded Warrior Transition Battalion at Fort Belvoir, an Army post in Fairfax County about eight miles south of the Pentagon.

"We're not the only real deal," says Steve Greiner, the head PGA professional at Fort Belvoir Golf Club, who created the program, "but we are an Army golf course, on an Army post, that serves active Wounded Warriors just returning from the battlefield."

Fort Belvoir dates back to World War I, and its current golf facility opened in 1962. It has 36 holes, which have been played by everyone from the current president of the United States to the secretary of defense to every rank of military personnel. It has

Golf programs at Fort Belvoir provide a holistic approach to nurture the mind and body of military men and women who've returned from the battlefield. Additionally, the programs work to restore the emotional and mental reconnection of Wounded Warriors to their family members.

MAPGA

long had a hospital, but in 2005 Congress dictated that the military medical facilities be reorganized. It merged Walter Reed Army Hospital with Bethesda Naval Hospital and created the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

A new state-of-the-art hospital was also built at Fort Belvoir. The hospital includes the Warrior Transition Complex, designed to treat military personnel returning from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ironically, the hospital was built on land that was a nine-hole golf course, separate from the main golf facility.

"It would have been the perfect place to teach the Wounded Warriors," says Greiner, but he adds the new hospital and barracks created a need that is being partly filled by golf.

'I DON'T HAVE BAD DAYS ANYMORE'

The hospital treats a variety of injuries and illnesses, but many of the patients are suffering from emotional problems – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or traumatic brain injury – brought on by their experiences in combat. The goal is to help them transition, either to the next stage of their military career or into civilian life.

The students in last fall's school were a cross section. Many of them knew so little about golf that the instructors had to explain the difference between a 5-iron and a 9-iron. A few had experience in golf, but they wanted formal instruction, not just for themselves but for other members of their family.

All struggled with the game, but they exhibited a grace and determination that was difficult to explain, until Maj. Arthur Rizer, a reservist and attorney for the Department of Justice, said, "I don't have bad days anymore."

He explained the frustrations of golf were minor distractions once he experienced the horrors of war.

In 2005, while stationed in Fallujah, Iraq, he suffered a concussion when a vehicle in which he was riding hit an improvised explosive device. Many others in the group were killed by the explosion and fire that followed.

"The point is when you have lost 16 friends and had to pick up the pieces of children who have been killed," says Rizer, 36, "you can't get upset about an ugly golf shot."

Sgt. Maj. Adam Smith is recovering from back injuries he suffered in Iraq. He has had two back surgeries, but his goal is to be

redeployed, this time to Afghanistan.

"I know that sounds crazy," says Smith, who has 23 years in the Army, "but I still have my arms and my legs. I think I can contribute to a fighting force."

HELPING HANDS OFFER HOPE

If Greiner had a poster child for his program it would be Lt. Col. Carolyn Fota, who was injured twice while on a humanitarian mission to Haiti in 1995. She was a medical service officer, deployed to Haiti for 180 days.

During that time she suffered two head injuries; one when her skull hit the windshield of a vehicle in which she was traveling in, and another when a prisoner hit her in the head with the butt of his rifle.

"I fell down, got up and kept going," she says of the rifle blow. "I just saw stars for a moment."

As time passed, it was apparent that she had suffered serious injuries. Fota couldn't remember the words she wanted to say; she couldn't hear well and she was having epileptic seizures.

By the time she was sent to Fort Belvoir she was withdrawn, had little self-confidence and didn't talk much. The doctors thought physical activity would help, but due to her condition she couldn't participate in some of the other activities like water sports or hunting. Fota was sent to Greiner with the hope that he could reach her through golf.

"He gave me everything from clubs to golf balls and even a hat to wear," she says. "Then he told me he wanted me out at the course as often as I could play."

Fota, who plans to retire from the Army in February, struggles with the game, but she notes, "Golf has helped me reclaim my life."

Such stories of success convinced Greiner that he was on the right track with his program. He taught a small group of students in 2008, but for the next three years, he and Dr. Kendy Vierling, an LPGA professional, averaged 25 students. It took a big step in 2012 with eight sessions of 42 students in the spring and eight with 46 in the fall.

Retired Army Col. Dick Johns came on board in January 2012 after retiring as the executive director of the Middle Atlantic PGA.

His background in the military and in golf makes him uniquely qualified for the role he plays in the program. He recruits PGA professionals, the Wounded Warriors and their family members. The program is regularly supported by five to seven



Instructors offer tips to aid Wounded Warriors as they get acclimated to the game.

volunteers from a pool of more than 50 individuals. They're led and coordinated by volunteers Mike Lauler and Sarah Koon.

The instructors come from the Middle Atlantic PGA Section. They drive from as far away as Richmond and Virginia Beach, leaving in the early morning to deal with the whims of Interstate 95 traffic and start class at 10 a.m. They are reimbursed for their travel expenses, but their real reimbursement is in teaching golf to those who serve our country.

"We get more out of this than they do," says PGA professional Rick Zarlengo, who teaches at multiple golf facilities in northern Virginia. "The Wounded Warriors are having a good time just by being out there learning. It reminds me as a teacher that golf is still a game."

During the winter months, Col. Johns is in the process of recruiting for next spring's class. He gets the students by meeting Wounded Warriors in the early morning after their formations at the post.

He estimates the program costs about \$1,900 a week or about \$30,000 a year. The money comes from donations and sponsors, like the Salute Military Golf Association, as well as Disabled Sports USA and The PGA Foundation. Army regulations prohibit them from soliciting donations, but they may accept sponsors and unsolicited donations.

"We're not trying to grow beyond our capabilities," says Greiner, who came to Fort Belvoir in 1999. "We would like to become a state-of-the-art facility for adaptive golf." ♣

Author Jerry Potter is a writer from Alexandria, Va., and a contributor to Virginia Golfer.