

Accessible golf: Lessons given so pros can teach

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Deseret News

Published: Wednesday, June 24, 2009 9:38 p.m. MDT

For years, Stan Haacke enjoyed golf and played to a 15 handicap when he was struck with bone cancer in his left leg six years ago.

After having a large part of his left hip removed, Haacke couldn't walk normally, with his left leg basically reduced to a weak limb with an inability to support his weight. He figured that, at that point, his golfing days were over.

These days, though, you might see Haacke out on the golf course riding in a cart and hopping over to his ball with the aid of crutches. Once he gets to the ball, he puts his feet close together and it takes him several seconds to set up. His swing is unorthodox, with all of his weight on his right foot. But he makes solid contact and, once the ball is in the air, it looks like your typical golf shot.

The 49-year-old from Bountiful is actually playing the best golf of his life these days with his handicap down to a 12.9. He has more time to play golf and he makes the most of it.

"I can't hit it as far, but my short game is better," said Haacke.

Bob Wassom is a 59-year-old from Salt Lake who broke his neck when he dove head-first into a shallow reservoir at age 22.

He looks able-bodied but, with a fused spine and a fused right ankle, he can't make the proper moves for a golf swing.

Wassom is constantly on medication and says "everything works, but nothing very well."

But watch his shots on the golf course, and they go straight down the fairway.

Haacke and Wassom are among the many golfers with disabilities who are beneficiaries of Adaptive Open Golf Classes, which are available at Mick Riley Golf Course throughout the summer.

Classes are taught by trained professionals in the Salt Lake County golf system for individuals ages 8 and up with a variety of disabilities. They participate in group or individual lessons and are allowed to bring an assistant or mentor along with them.

Salt Lake is one of five areas of the country where these classes are available, thanks to the National Alliance for Accessible Golf, along with Portland, Ore.; Toledo, Ohio; Hattiesburg, Miss.; and Wilmington, N.C.

Gary Robb and Judy Alvarez, who work for the NAAG, came to Salt Lake's Meadow Brook Golf Course last month to teach a couple of dozen golf pros how to teach golfers with disabilities and show off some of the golfing aids available.

"We've developed a program to integrate people with disabilities into golf," said Robb, who formerly lived in Utah and now lives in Indiana. "The outcome we hope for is inclusion. People with disabilities haven't had that accessibility because they haven't felt welcome and comfortable trying to play golf."

Alvarez has been a teaching pro for a couple of decades and involved with the NAAG since 2001. She spent much of the day at Meadow Brook, showing the golf pros what it's like for golfers with disabilities to try to learn the game and how to instruct them. She used a variety of examples, such as teaching without talking to the student or putting blindfolds on some and using special golf carts with seats for golfers who can't walk.

"When you're working with golfers with disabilities, we truly don't know what they're going through," she said.

Alvarez said she's seen what a difference it can make in people's lives and that people with disabilities just need opportunities.

"Golf should be available to anybody regardless of ability or disability," she said. "There's more to it than just hitting the ball. There's the social aspect of it, the family orientation and building self-esteem and self-confidence. It doesn't matter what your skill level is. You can hit balls on the range or play three holes or nine holes or 18 holes."

Robb added, "We believe golf is a great vehicle to get people with disabilities more active with something they can do for the rest of their lives with family and friends. Success to us is not necessarily in numbers, but that people with disabilities feel more included."

Haacke said playing golf has made a big difference in his life since he saw a notice on a bulletin board for golfers with disabilities.

"There are all kinds of guys like me in the same situation who don't know where to turn," he said. "I know there are others out there sitting on their couch, not knowing what's available to them. You have no idea what your new life will allow."

The Adaptive Open Golf Classes, under the direction of Jeff Burley of the Salt Lake County Recreation Department, have been going since May, with weekly sessions at Mick Riley Golf Course from 6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. on Tuesdays or on Saturday mornings from 9 to 10.

Private golf classes are also available at Mick Riley, which has two special golf carts, worth \$5,500 apiece, available for golfers with disabilities.

For questions, call Copperview Recreation Center (801-561-0075) or Mick Riley Golf Course (801-266-8185).

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