

nz scene



GOLF IS A GAME OF CHALLENGES, MOST OF THEM BY DESIGN. FOR SOME, HOWEVER, THE REAL CHALLENGE COMES WHEN AN ACCIDENT OR AN ILLNESS LEAVES THEM PHYSICALLY INCAPACITATED. **KATE TAYLOR** PRESENTS THE STORIES OF SEVERAL OF THESE INSPIRATIONAL PLAYERS

Winning the physical battle

THE BALL, THE CLUBS, YOUR SWING, the course, the weather – there are many possible excuses why your golf isn't as good as it could be.

But there are many people who have other outside factors affecting their game – missing limbs, missing digits, broken bones or health conditions like arthritis. Some have had to rethink their golfing strategies while others have taken on the game as a result of these physical setbacks.

The loss of two limbs hasn't stopped Kevin Mott of Dannevirke from taking on golf and loving it. He lost his left arm above the elbow and his left leg above the knee in a motorcycle accident in 1985.

He knew about golf, having caddied for his father and played the occasional social game on a Friday afternoon. But it wasn't until about seven years ago that he started playing the game on a regular basis and he has brought his handicap down to 23.

Playing nine-hole twilight golf on warm summer days is his favourite, when he's not driving tractors for a local contractor, which he has done for the past 15 seasons. Many players don't like playing in the rain, and a dry grip is even more important when you only have one hand on the club.

Mott makes his way around the course on a second-hand four wheeler. To propel the ball, he uses a backswing and a follow through, but it's swing only as he can't use any body rotation.

"If I transfer my weight, this leg (the prosthesis) just flicks out and I end up on my back looking at the sky," he explains. "It happened a few times early on, but I learnt that one. Sometimes I have to hop backwards when I really go for it. That's, like, when I get to the eighteenth hole and think, yeah, I'll just smash this one!"

There's at least one bonus to playing with one arm.

"I haven't got a left hand that will cause the ball to slice or hook. I've got fewer moving parts to worry about than everyone else."

And playing the course is just as important as playing the opposition, he says, able bodied or not.

His best performance was produced when he was on a 34 handicap. He shot a remarkable 93 off the stick, giving him an impressive 44 stableford points and a net 59. He says he hasn't come close to that again. "It was one of those days when everything just clicked."

Mott encountered another player with one arm, Paul Williams of Christchurch, while competing at a quadrangular club tournament involving teams from Dannevirke, Patea, Raurangi of Blenheim and Weedon from Rolleston near Christchurch (Williams' club).

Williams was delighted to be associated with Mott. "Because I have only one arm, I'm usually the player people are looking at," he says, "but suddenly along comes a guy with one arm and one leg. It was great – I was no longer the centre of attention!"

Williams, who confesses he was playing so badly this year his handicap jumped from 13 to 16 in one week, says he is fiercely competitive and loves to beat able-bodied players.

"No opponent ever wants to go home and admit to losing to a cripple," he says. "You take the joke out of the fact you're playing with one arm and use it to your advantage. I'm competitive and love to beat people who think they can beat me just because of my handicap."

Williams was born his right arm ending at the elbow. That didn't prevent him playing competitive soccer and when he gave that away in 1995, at the age of 33, he took up golf, benefitting from lessons from his brother. ▶



Losing an arm and a leg hasn't diminished Kevin Mott's passion for golf.

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“I started as a bit of a hacker,” he admits, “and moved through the ranks and slowly got my handicap down.”

He swings open-handed, solely with his left arm, and credits his good golf to practice, practice and more practice. He plays twice a week in winter and as much as four or five times a week in summer. His greatest claim to fame is a hole in one at Weedon's eighth hole in 2000.

Otago golfer Ruth Rivett has been about three inches away from a hole in one, even though she has to compete without a finger.

She joined her husband on the golf course just before her youngest child started school and within a few years had her handicap down to 15. But when the ladder she was standing on at home gave way and her rings caught on old spouting she was left with a one-centimetre stump where her ring finger used to be.

Although she knew life would be difficult minus a finger, the greater challenge when she returned to golf turned out to be psychological. Practising in her paddock, only a matter of months after the accident, she found she was pulling everything to the left, as a consequence of which she was blaming her grip.

She asked a visiting golf pro how she should alter the grip to compensate for the loss of finger. “He told me it was all in my head, that I was allowing

the right hand to dominate. I had to work hard to get the left hand functioning again. He also said to wear a glove and I have ever since.”

Rivett ended up with arthritis in her little finger, which stuck out after its neighbour disappeared. “I couldn't get it on the club for a long time,” she says.

When she returned to golf, her handicap ballooned out to 26 (on the old system) although she got it back down to 19. Accepting she would never play to a low handicap again, she has continued to enjoy her games, and she's managed to fashion some good wins.

She had played most of her golf at Heriot in West Otago but after retiring and moving to Dunedin, she took up a membership at the Taieri Golf Club. She'll be without a handicap until October as she waits for a non golf related shoulder injury to heal.

Rivett makes a point of speaking to other people she notices are missing fingers, but she says only a small percentage of golfers at Taieri have noticed hers.

“I played a round with someone for the first time earlier this year,” she says. “We were sitting down after the game and she suddenly looked at my hand in amazement. She hadn't noticed while we were playing that I was minus a finger.”

It was a motorcycle accident that almost ended the golfing career of Alistair Ford of Napier. A talented golfer, he had represented Hawke's Bay for almost 20 years, finally settling for playing club golf at the Takapau and Onga Onga clubs in Central Hawke's Bay. However, the accident in February 2006 left him with a shattered ankle and three breaks in his left leg including two compound fractures.

He optimistically believed he would be back playing within months. Forced to re-assess his situation, he was still confident of getting back into action within a year. But it was only after an operation in January this year that he finally made it back on to the course.

"I've lost about ten degrees of flexibility in my ankle," he says. "That's quite painful when you're trying to swing a golf club. Once I get warmed up I'm okay, although I hobble around after a game."

Ford finds himself bailing out of some shots because he knows the rod in his leg sometimes impacts on his kneecap and he can't help but anticipate the pain. Despite that, within eight weeks he was back playing to his handicap, which is now "up a bit" at two. Which, you'd have to say, is not bad after an enforced two-and-a-half-year layoff.

He says he's managed to manufacture some shots to keep him going down the middle of the fairway.

"I'm still grappling with the game, but how good I can play isn't a priority right now. I just want to walk eighteen holes and have a laugh. Having wondered if I would ever play again, it's gratifying just to get out on the course, let alone play well."

(Since the interview, Ford has shot a 71).

He plays most Sundays at Onga Onga, despite living an hour away in Napier. "There's a really good club spirit there which has been really beneficial for me. And the exercise is wonderful after being inactive for so long."

A competitive nature and deep love of golf has deepened Napier golfer Kim Southerden's desire to break par after two decades fighting arthritis in his feet, wrists and, more recently, his back.

His best round during the past year, since a back operation to decompress his spine and fuse three vertebrae, has been 74, on a par 72 course. He remains determined to shoot in the sixties.

It will take time and practice, something that's not always on tap because of the commitment to his business, Kim's Golf Connection, where he works with wife Julianne.

Southerden played amateur golf for the Hawke's Bay's Freyberg Rose Bowl team for six years, turning pro in 1976 after an apprenticeship with his father Ernie at the Napier Golf Club. He played the Australasian and South Seas tours and managed one season on the European tour in 1980. His two most notable achievements were winning the Pacific Harbour Open in Fiji and representing New Zealand at the 1978 World Cup.

He played the Pro-am circuit in New Zealand as well as working at the NGC.

Focal rheumatoid arthritis became a problem in his feet in 1982. "I had trouble driving the weight through using the right foot," he explains, "because the pain I got from it naturally affected my swing."

Arthritis then began to develop in his left wrist, which he broke as a child. He underwent surgery to freeze the wrist, at the right angle for golf too, Southerden joking that he took a five iron into theatre with him. He expects his right wrist to seize on its own, sooner or later.

When arthritis worked its way into Southerden's spine in 2006, he required decompression surgery to fuse three vertebrae. He also required an upgrade in medication. Prior to the surgery he could not stand up for longer than five minutes, but he's been back on the golf course now since the middle of last year.

Southerden says because he's not a long hitter any more, his short game has become more important. "Now a long par four is a real challenge for me and I'm pulling out the hybrids to get there."

Giving up isn't an option. He says golf is a game for life and he loves it. ©

The endorphin buzz

Following a little white ball around a golf course is a great way to remain active, meet people and improve your outlook on life in general, according to Napier GP Paul Hendy.

Hendy, a golfer himself, says many of his patients are fellow members of the nearby Napier Golf Club.

"You get a buzz from the endorphins from being outside in the sunshine, even just the walking," he says. "Many people are nine-hole members. Even if they're carrying injuries, they can go out with friends and engage in chipping and putting rather and still be involved. They don't have to attempt big slogs."

Some people use the saying "move it or lose it" and golf is a good way to safely move many of your body's muscles, although Hendy recommends people should practise swinging a club at home throughout the week so the body doesn't get too much of a surprise on game day.

He says golf is often recommended for people with arthritic conditions or other mobility issues as it keeps them moving. This is particularly sound advice for people in areas with good quality weather conditions, like Hawke's Bay. Golf is also good for gradual weight reduction.

Hendy started playing golf as a young lad with his father, who had emphysema, and remembers well the family time on the golf course. He was encouraged to take professional lessons when he was young, for which he is grateful now, saying correct technique is one of the best ways of avoiding injuries on the golf course.

Newton an inspiration

Australian golfer Jack Newton lost his right arm and eye and suffered life-threatening damage to his abdomen after straying into the moving propeller of a light aircraft when he was 33 and at the height of his game. The injuries were catastrophic and should have been career-ending, but the runner-up in the 1975 British Open and 1980 US Masters and a winner of 13 tournaments on the Australasian, European and PGA tours returned to golf, first as a one-armed player – who became good enough to play to a 12-handicap – and later as a course designer and television commentator.