



First Swing Program Inspires Wounded Warriors

By Tim Hipps

FMWRC Public Affairs

SIX summers ago, Sgt. Roy Mitchell was a 2-handicap golfer who earned a tryout for the All-Army Golf Team.

Now he's a disabled golfer with an 8 handicap, striving to regain his form on a prosthetic leg and tinkering with a specialized golf cart.

In Nov. 2003, Mitchell was riding in the front passenger seat of a Humvee that drove over an anti-tank mine near the Pakistan border in Afghanistan.

Mitchell, 37, of Fort Drum, N.Y., survived the blast but lost three-quarters of his left leg, four teeth and some jawbone, suffered third-degree burns on his right leg, shattered his left elbow, caught shrapnel in his midsection and right eye, and sustained a concussion.

He spent 10 months rehabilitating at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

"As soon as I got out of the hos-



Sgt. Roy Mitchell as he hits golf balls from a Solorider, a specialized adaptive golf cart, during a First Swing clinic at Fort Belvoir, Va.

pital, I picked up a club and was trying to hit balls at the local MWR where they have an indoor net," Mitchell recalled. "But I got so discouraged with the way that I was hitting the ball that I just had to step away."

Four years later, thanks in part to the National Amputee Golf Association's First Swing program and the Army Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation Command, which partnered with the United States Golf Association, Mitchell is intent about getting back atop his game.

He wowed professional golf instructors, fellow wounded warriors and a film crew from The Golf Channel during a recent First Swing clinic at Fort Belvoir. Strapped into a Solorider – a specialized adaptive golf cart – Mitchell drove balls deep onto the driving range like a pro warming up for a PGA Tour event.

"I've never played a round of golf in the cart," said Mitchell, who two weeks earlier climbed aboard a Solorider for the first time. "Just by sitting here on the driving range and hitting the ball, I could see the cart possibly being a little bit of a hindrance, but ultimately it's going to make the game easier because I won't be as tired at the end of a round."

Helping servicemen and women enjoy life after injury is the primary purpose of the First Swing program designed to teach therapists and golf pros how to use golf as therapy and teach disabled people how to relearn the game.

Fort Belvoir Director of Golf Jeff Lychwick said his club was fortunate to host 14 military PGA instructors from Aberdeen Proving Ground, Md.; Carlisle Barracks, Pa.; Fort Eustis, Va.; Fort Leonard Wood, Mo.; Naval Air Station Patuxent River, Md.; Naval Station Mayport, Fla.; and Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va. They instructed 47 disabled servicemen and women from around the National Capital Region.

"Absolutely, it's an honor," Lychwick said. "There's a strong sense of responsibility to deal with these gentlemen and ladies that have lost a limb for us. This kind of instruction has more therapeutic value than anything else."

Physical therapists from Belvoir's DeWitt Army Hospital helped spread the word about the clinic, and 10 Soldiers came from Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

"I work in the Military Advanced Training Center at Walter Reed and they are extremely active in the recreational opportunities that have rehab potential for the vets," said Drew Breakey, a physical therapy student. "They go on kayaking trips, skiing trips and fishing trips all over the country."

Breakey was impressed with the way Mitchell adjusted to the Solorider.

"This is actually the first time I've got to see him hit the ball and he's whacking it pretty good," Breakey said. "I challenge

anybody to say, 'Hey, we're going to strap you into a chair and I want you to swing a club differently than you're accustomed to,' and first of all, even be able to make contact, or in this case, hit it 170 yards down the range."

Mitchell encourages all disabled Soldiers to get physically active as soon as possible.

"The Wounded Warrior Program should be high on every wounded Soldier's list of the people they should be getting in contact with," he said. "And, really, you don't even have to worry about searching them out – they're usually the first ones in your hospital room doing the grip-and-grin and dropping off paperwork and saying, 'Hey, we've got this going, and we've got that going, as soon as you get healthy and the doctors will let you go, we want to start taking you out.' And they have a full spectrum of sports available. Anything that you want to do, they've got it."

Four World War II veterans, who lost limbs but not their love of the game of golf, founded the National Amputee Golf Association in 1954. The association, which today has more than 4,000 members, is administered by amputees, all of whom are volunteers.

Mitchell, a native of Sunman, Ind., thinks the program should be even easier for first-time golfers.

"I never skied before – had never tried it," he explained. "But they took me to a ski clinic and taught me how to ski, and I loved it. I think it's harder for people like me, who had played golf before, to come back and try to play now because there is a lot about the golf swing that has changed because of our situation. I think it's easier for people that have never played the game before to come out and try it for the first time."

Mitchell's father Roy, who did two stints in the Vietnam War while serving in the Army from 1963 through '70, is proud of his son's resilience and of the Army for giving him a chance to stay enlisted.

"I think this is one of the best programs the Army has come up with as far dealing with Soldiers' physical and psychological injuries," he said. "It was neglected for a while. When I was in the Army, we didn't have anything like this."

The younger Mitchell is glad that he

gave golf another chance.

"I got home and I tried to swing the golf club with my prosthetic arm, and for some reason, I just couldn't make contact," he recalled. "I was always topping the ball and I just couldn't stay down on it, so I got discouraged, put the golf clubs away, and didn't pick them up for about two years.

"I got them back out and told myself,

'Listen, I am going to learn how to play with a standard set of clubs.'" Now Mitchell is intent on scoring in the low 70s.

"A lot of us have the mentality that the things that we take on, we're going to dedicate 100 percent to it," he said. "I think that's what kind of separates us from other people.

"I'm happy I'm back in the game." **AF**

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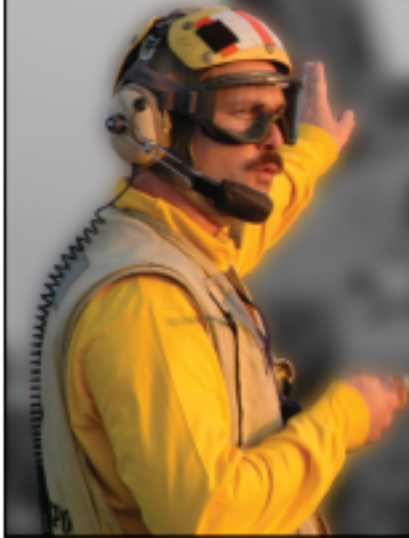


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