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By JOHN PAUL NEWPORT



## In War's Aftermath, A Game Becomes a Lifeline

How one program uses golf to give soldiers confidence; a triple-amputee's victory

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Olney, Md.

Until recently, Jim Estes, 43, had no particular connection to things military. He grew up single-mindedly devoted to golf in the suburbs of Washington and got good enough to compete professionally for most of the 1990s, including a stint on the PGA Tour. But a chance conversation two years ago with a customer at the practice center here where he teaches brought a new focus to his work. He now spends several hours a week providing a golf lifeline to combat-wounded soldiers from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The customer, Billy Bartlett, was a Vietnam veteran who took rehabilitating patients from the nearby Walter Reed Army Hospital out to dinner once a week. Mr. Estes met some of the soldiers at a restaurant and said that if they came out to the range, he'd see what he could do to set them up with clubs and some instruction.

"Originally the idea was just to help them get out of the hospital setting and give them something to think about besides their injuries," Mr. Estes says. "But a few of the guys that came found something in golf that they really seemed to need."

One of those early pupils was Sean Lewis, now 23, an Army sergeant whose right leg was blown off by a mortar in the Sunni triangle northeast of Baghdad on Jan. 21, 2004. Mr. Lewis had played football and rugby growing up but was most addicted to running; whenever possible he ran for hours at a stretch, on weekends sometimes as far as 30 miles. In golf -- at the lowest point in his life (his marriage had also broken up) -- he found a substitute.

At first he missed almost as many balls as he hit, balancing precariously on his only leg without a prosthesis, but soon he was spending six hours or more a day at the range. The owner of the upscale Olney Golf Park offered free balls and free access to the short-game practice area to all of the wounded soldiers that Mr. Estes works with.

"Jim would walk by and help me enough so that I could figure things out for myself, and the next thing I knew I was hitting good shots. It was a confidence booster, let me tell you," Mr. Lewis says. On a golf course, using a cart, he can now sometimes break 90. He also recently remarried, is helping raise his stepson and has a job with a military contractor.

The physical trauma for severely wounded combat veterans like Mr. Lewis is often exceeded by the psychological complications. "Before their injuries, many of these soldiers were extremely strong, athletic individuals with highly trained skills. The impact on their sense of self-identity is profound," says Barbara Romberg, a clinical psychologist in the Washington area who works extensively with wounded veterans and who founded a national network of mental health volunteers, called Give an Hour ([giveanhour.org](http://giveanhour.org)), who do the same.

About 1.5 million Americans have served in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. More than 4,000 have died and nearly 29,000 have returned home with injuries -- by far the highest ratio of wounded-to-dead of any U.S. war, thanks to superior in-field medical treatment. There are probably more survivors with amputated limbs than in any conflict since the Civil War.

"Anything that can motivate these people to work again at developing skills is a potent rehabilitative tool," Dr. Romberg says. "It doesn't have to be golf -- for some people it can be something computer-based, or something like painting -- but golf has proven to be a very effective medium. And when they do actually achieve some level of mastery, that's powerful medicine. It opens the door."



Lifeline on the Links: Dennis Walburn leaves Olney Golf Park in Maryland after a lesson.

Dennis Walburn, 48, a retired lieutenant colonel, lost a leg in Mosul two years ago. Previously his interest in golf was meager, but now the game looms large as he thinks about his future. "To lead a normal life -- that's what you want, and golf provides hope. You recognize that things are going to be different, yes, but maybe a whole lot better than what we first thought when we were lying in that hospital room. And that's a big important thing."

One of Mr. Estes's most impressive students, now relocated to California, was a triple amputee. Grasping the club with his one good hand and a prosthesis, he learned to hit shots with remarkable consistency while leaning against a cart.

Not all of the soldiers are amputees. Many suffer from what is emerging as the signature wound of these wars, traumatic brain injury, essentially severe concussions (often many of them during a tour of duty) caused by roadside-bomb explosions. Symptoms range from frequent headaches, hearing loss and concentration issues to memory lapses and the inability to grasp complex materials.

But here again, golf is proving therapeutic. The soldiers can focus on mastering skills at their own pace while reconstructing their sense of self. The game is a haven -- in some ways not that much different than it is for the rest of us.



Sean Lewis, who lost his leg in Iraq in 2004, works on his putting stroke.

This spring Mr. Estes and several other area pros, aided by sponsorship from the PGA of America and Disabled Sports USA, started formalized, eight-week golf clinics for wounded soldiers, some still in rehab at Walter Reed and others recently discharged. (Similar clinics are slated for this fall near the major Army hospitals in San Antonio and San Diego.) In addition, Mr. Estes and a childhood golf buddy, Jamie Winslow, the Washington representative for Japanese trading company Sumitomo, have created a nonprofit organization of their own, called Salute Military Golf Association, to provide free clubs, green fees, instruction and access to practice facilities for those injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Our purpose is not just to get soldiers out for a one-time event or to raise money for them, but to actively incorporate golf into their rehabilitation. Then, once they get going, to help set them up with golf for life," says Mr. Winslow.

For David Cook, a 21-year Army veteran who lost his right leg in Afghanistan in March, the injury is still too fresh to talk about. But at last Saturday's golf clinic in Olney he seemed at peace, off in a world by himself, pitching balls into a practice green. "The hardest part is the mental" part, he told me. "The things I used to be able to do, I can't do any more. It's a tough adjustment." But this was his fourth session and he said he has no intention of quitting.



Instructor Jim Estes (in blue) watches David Cook, who served in Afghanistan, take a swing.