

# Recovery Shots

Severely wounded veterans return to the States and find healing, hope in the game of golf

By Leonard Shapiro

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Hitting 275-yard drives isn't out of the ordinary for Nevins, practicing at Olney (Md.) Golf Park.

PGA TOUR EXECUTIVE DAVID Pillsbury will not soon forget the first round of golf he played with Dan Nevins, a severely injured Iraq war veteran who had lost his left leg below the knee—and very nearly his life—when the armored vehicle he was riding in during a routine patrol Nov. 10, 2004, was blown up by an improvised explosive device (IED).

Less than a year later, Pillsbury met Nevins at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. The Baltimore native, now 35, was still in the midst of an 18-month rehabilitation from the amputation in the summer of 2005. Pillsbury toured the hospital one day bearing gifts of tour paraphernalia, hoping to put a smile on a few faces of so many catastrophically wounded warriors.

“You’re thinking you’ll go there with hats and try to make them all feel a little bit better,” recalls Pillsbury, president of PGA Tour golf course properties and championship management. “The exact opposite occurs. By the time you leave, you feel so energized by their outlook, by their positive attitude.”

Pillsbury met Nevins, a former high school lacrosse player, for the first time that day and learned he had played golf as a younger man and was using the game in his rehabilitation, often leaving Walter Reed to hit golf balls at Olney Golf Park. Mostly due to the efforts of head professional Jim Estes, the suburban Maryland practice facility already had begun opening its doors to wounded veterans. Range balls and swing tips were always on the house.

Pillsbury also learned that Nevins, an eight-year Army veteran and retired National Guardsman working as a pharmaceutical salesman, had relocated with his wife, Nicole, and 14-year-old daughter, Karyssa, to Jacksonville, not far from tour headquarters. Particularly taken with Nevins’ bubbly personality and enthusiasm for the game, he arranged to play with Nevins at a fundraising golf tournament a few weeks later to benefit injured soldiers at the TPC Avenel in Potomac, Md.

“It was a very hot day, and we were having a blast,” Pillsbury says. “We’re out there telling stories, betting and pressing. Now we’ve played 15, 16 holes, and I’m getting a little tired in the heat, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘You’re such a wimp. You’re playing with a guy using a prosthesis, and you’re tired?’

“I’m drinking a beer, and Dan says, ‘I think I’ll have something, too.’ He pulls out this lollipop, and not just any old lollipop. He tells me it’s a narcotic and points to his good ankle. He says, ‘I’m in such excruciating pain, I can’t stand it.’ Then he tells me it’s been like that since the first hole. I asked him how bad

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the pain was on a scale of one to 10, 10 being the worst. 'Ten,' he says. 'How often is it a 10?' 'Most of the time.' When we finished, I'm saying to myself, 'Wow, this is really a special guy.'"

The two men stayed in touch. At about the same time, the tour was getting more involved with military outreach programs designed to provide support for the more than 39,000 injured veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, including its own Birdies for The Brave initiative. At one point it became obvious that coordinating those efforts was becoming a full-time job, and Pillsbury asked Nevins if he might be interested. Though it meant taking a pay cut, Nevins never hesitated.

"It was a dream job," Nevins says. "How could you say no?"

Still, even as he commuted to his new office, the nightmarish after-effects were still continuing for Nevins years after the massive injuries he suffered that fateful night in Balad, Iraq. A sergeant in the National Guard deployed in Iraq for 18 months, Nevins was on a pre-dawn patrol riding in a Humvee protected by armor on the sides, but with none underneath. The vehicle was struck by an IED less than a kilometer from the troops' home base; the explosion killed the driver, Nevins' best friend, Sgt. Mike Ottolini, and left Nevins on his back, with both of his badly bleeding legs still trapped in the smoldering wreckage.

Nevins actually helped save his own life in the frantic seconds after the blast by sticking his hand in one of his leg wounds to put pressure on a blood-spurting artery he knew could cause him to bleed to death before medics arrived.

Once he had been evacuated to a nearby hospital, there was no choice but to amputate, but doctors initially were able to save his mangled right leg. He had a badly dislocated ankle and scads of shrapnel wounds, but the ankle continued to pain him over the next few years. There were times he wondered if he might actually be better off without it. Last November the ankle developed a bone infection and resulted in what he describes as "an easy decision" to have a second amputation Jan. 23 at Walter Reed.

"I'd actually been making the decision for three years—should it stay or should it go?" Nevins says. "It was absolutely the right decision. When I woke up from surgery, it was the first time I'd been pain-free in more than three years."

Within three weeks Nevins was fitted for a second prosthesis. Within two months he was back at Olney Golf Park on two prosthetic legs trying to swing a club under Jim Estes' watchful eye.

The previous spring, Estes had begun an eight-week golf clinic at Olney Park for patients at Walter Reed that served as the launch



**Nevins at Walter Reed learning how to swing with his second prosthetic leg and (below) at the range.**



of the non-profit Salute to Military Golf Association. The SMGA, in conjunction with groups such as Disabled Sports USA, also was raising funds to secure reduced or free green fees and access to public and private facilities around the country, to fit wounded veterans with specialized clubs and to purchase state-of-the-art golf carts that would even enable injured players to swing from a seated position, if necessary.

Estes has taught the game to wounded soldiers with a wide variety of injuries, including a triple amputee. Another veteran, once a powerlifter before losing nearly half his frontal lobe, came to the clinic last year wearing a bicycle helmet to protect his swollen brain.

"You name it, and we've seen it," says Estes, a 43-year-old Maryland native and former PGA Tour player. "We've had shrapnel injuries, spinal-cord injuries, brain injuries, neurological deficits so that their wrists, their arms, their fingers don't work properly. But we find a way to help them hit the ball. When they actually play, they get even better. You'll see them get frustrated, but it's a positive frustration. A lot of the rehabilitation is from an emotional standpoint. And it gets them away from Walter Reed into a totally different environment, and that's a good thing, too."

Over the last two years the SMGA estimates it has worked with more than 300 injured soldiers around the country. Many, such as Nevins, have taken up the game as a life sport after they returned to civilian life. The PGA of America also has embraced Estes' efforts, offering financial support, running a public-service announcement featuring Estes during last year's PGA Championship and encouraging members around the country to become involved. Similar clinics have started for wounded veterans at military hospitals in San

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Antonio and San Diego, with more likely to come at other locations.

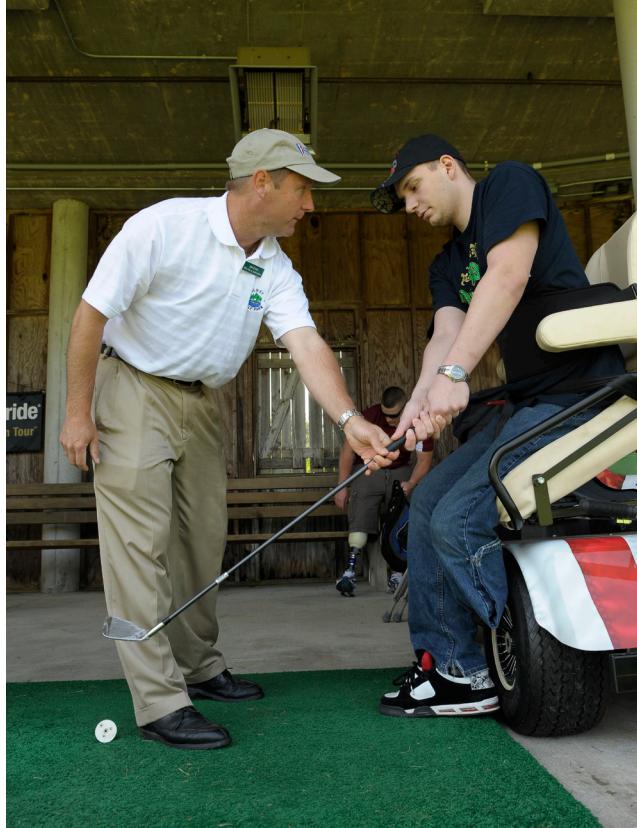
“Anything that can motivate these people to work again at developing skills is a potent rehabilitative tool,” Barbara Romberg, a clinical psychologist in Washington who works with wounded veterans, told *The Wall Street Journal* last year. “The impact on their self-identity is profound. ... Golf has proven to be a very effective medium, and when they do achieve some level of mastery, that’s powerful medicine. It opens the door.”

That’s precisely what the game did for Dennis Walburn, a 49-year-old retired National Guard lieutenant colonel who lost a leg just above the knee in a car-bomb explosion in Mosul, Iraq, in 2005. He was not a golfer before the injury, but after attending Estes’ first clinic last year, he has become addicted to the game and was back for more as a weekly regular this spring.

“I went out there and got world-class professional coaching,” says Walburn, who lives in Woodbridge, Va., and now works in the defense industry. “They’re able to figure it out for you. Whether you’ve got one arm, one leg, no legs, they find a way so that you can hit that ball. For me, it was very challenging. I could not get the stance I wanted. Last year, they gave me ‘an old man’s swing’ that was more wrist than the whole body. This year, they opened my stance to a 45-degree angle that allows me to put weight on the prosthetic leg. But it’s also a mental thing. Golf got me out of the house. These people help you build self-confidence and show you that you can do things you never thought were possible.”

For Nevins, hitting balls and learning how to play again were critical factors in his ability to recover physically and mentally during his first 18-month stay at Walter Reed. “It was so nice to be away from that hospital environment,” he says. “Then I was able to start playing some of the courses. That’s when I fell in love with the game. It was so peaceful, so beautiful. When you’re out there, you forget the pain, the next surgery, the infection. It was just a great mental break.

“Golf has been the most therapeutic thing I could ever have done. The golf course also sets up a whole new level of personal challenges that dominate your thoughts. After the last operation, getting up and swinging a club was tough. It felt like I was standing on two pegs and trying not to lose my balance, but the



**Estes instructs an injured veteran (above) and poses with other wounded soldiers at his clinic (right, from left) Ramon Padilla, Jeff Hensley, Bryan Wagner and Nevins.**



[prosthesis] technology is really amazing now, and I’ve been able to figure out how to play.”

He has figured it out to where, less than four months after the second amputation, he is a legitimate 16-handicapper who often scores in the mid-80s and regularly smacks 275-yard drives. On a recent round at a challenging 6,300-yard northern Virginia course, a front-nine 39 had him thinking he might even break 80 for the first time. Two deflating double bogeys early on the back nine ended that hope, but just like anyone else who plays the game, he still has lofty goals.

“For now, I want to break 80, and ultimately, be a scratch golfer,” Nevins says, demonstrating the same positive thinking that

has helped heal so many of his wounds and led to a new career with the PGA Tour. “Walter Reed is full of people who have had a hard time. Most people get over it. Every chance I get, if I see someone who seems outwardly bitter or negative about life, I’ll always say something. I tell them, ‘Look, buddy, you got hurt badly, and so did I. But isn’t it better to just be hurt than it is to be hurt and pissed off and angry?’ Focusing on the positive will get you better. Some listen. Some don’t.

“But I’ve also seen some of those ‘ah-hah’ moments, especially with the ones who come out and try golf. Some of them have never played. And then they’ll get it airborne, hit a good shot, and they’ll have a big grin on their face for the rest of the day. Some of the guys used to think golf was a game for sissies or rich, old guys, and then they’ll hit a ball 200 yards and it changes everything. It can open a whole new door.” **GW**