

## **Amputee Enjoys Inspiring Professional Golf Career**

by Joan D. Bennett

A motorboat accident in 1975 at age 17 led to the amputation of Mike Gibson's left arm above the elbow. The former lefty had to relearn how to do many things right-handed, including writing and swinging a golf club. While he initially tried a prosthesis, he found it cumbersome and decided to get on with his life with one arm.

Now, at age 44, Mike has enjoyed careers as a PGA golf professional and regional instructor for Titleist. In the spring, the Warwick, R.I., resident plans to return to his golf roots by teaching the sport to able-bodied and disabled golfers.

Before Mike's accident, he had played golf for fun in junior high and high school. In 1984, when he was an income auditor for the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Oakland, Calif., his friend and co-worker Bill Condaxis decided to become a golf professional. Mike tagged along and fell in love with the game.

"I was looking for something to challenge me physically," says Mike. "Mentally I had a grip on it, but physically I was struggling with who I was."

With no golf authority or book to teach someone how to play golf with one arm, Mike spent a lot of time alone trying to figure out ball striking. His friend Bill told Mike he was no different from other golfers. He just needed to focus on the club head.

Mike's passion for the game grew and he played every spare minute. He also switched careers to real estate, which gave him more time to play. When he found himself playing golf more than working, he decided to join the PGA apprenticeship program.

### **Joining the PGA**

"One thing I struggled with as an apprentice was being normal and being treated fairly," says Mike. "While the PGA was shocked that I joined the program, they were accommodating because they didn't know where it was going, but they knew I had limitations that would keep me from fulfilling full PGA member status, one being the player ability test."

The test requires golfers to score better than 75 twice in one day on a pro challenge course. On a good day, Mike could shoot in the mid 70's once, but completing the feat twice in one day was impossible. Mike says that while the PGA questioned his ability to pass the test, they didn't discourage him from participating in apprenticed tournaments.

To meet the program's other requirements, Mike took business courses and taught golf at Sunken Gardens golf course in Sunnyvale, Calif. He began a program called Golf Therapy to teach disabled individuals how to play golf or how to play golf following their disability. He worked with a number of stroke victims.

### **Life-changing experiences**

"This was a defining moment for me," says Mike. "I realized I could help people, and what I gave these people, more than any golf instruction, was unlimited possibilities. I always wanted to make

a difference and if I could give these people a platform to be whoever they wanted to be and achieve goals that they never thought were achievable, then I had found my place.”

A second defining moment for Mike was meeting his wife, Suzanne, who is now a life coach. Because Mike felt he had been dealt some bad cards, his approach to life before meeting her was to live every day like his last. Meeting Suzanne helped Mike see that he didn't have to run through life; he could walk and take his time.

But Mike was running out of time with the PGA. He needed to complete all the requirements of his apprenticeship program in eight years. His challenge in golf was not control or scoring, but distance. His drives averaged 190 yards. The PGA finally agreed near the end of his time limit to give Mike a yardage difference so he could play the player ability tests at a shorter yardage. But his time ran out.

He claims that a third defining moment came a short time later when he moved on to the Haggin Oaks golf course in Sacramento as an assistant golf professional. There, golf director Ken Morton took Mike under his wing as an “inspirational hero.” For three years, Mike worked with Laine Case, director of the California Eagles, a program for developmentally disabled students, many with Downs Syndrome. Every Tuesday night for 24 weeks, Mike co-directed the golf program for these youth with the help of 20 community volunteers.

“I brought something to the program that no one had in the past, the human side of it,” says Mike. “I was not afraid to mentally touch these kids and really challenge them.”

To put people's view of disabilities in perspective, he enjoys telling the story of a California Eagle with Downs Syndrome who was riding in a golf cart with Mike one night. The young man felt bad that Mike had only one arm. Mike told him that everyone is disabled in some way but people can see Mike's disability. The youth responded, “Yeah, I know. When I get nervous I stutter.”

### **Recruited by Titleist**

Mike claims that fitting golf clubs is an art. Besides teaching the game, fitting clubs had become his specialty. Titleist recognized his ability and recruited Mike to become a regional instructor, training club professionals in how to custom fit clubs to members. He also fit well-known people like Clint Eastwood and Randy Quaid.

“Working for Titleist elevated me emotionally and physically to feel very good about what I was about,” he says. As a regional instructor, he worked from the San Diego area and then covered the Northeast from his home in Rhode Island.

Over time, Mike missed teaching golf and working with the public. He also missed Suzanne and their two young children when he was traveling 140 days a year. In October 2002, he left Titleist after five years to follow a new dream.

### **A return to teaching**

Mike's goal is to develop a platform for able-bodied and disabled golfers. He is spending the winter developing his golf program and instruction literature for a spring start. He plans to teach group clinics and conduct private lessons wherever people need him.

In the future, he also hopes to write a manual on teaching disabled golfers, as well as conduct seminars for golf professionals on teaching people with disabilities.

Mike claims that teaching golf isn't something that can be done completely by the book because every individual is different. But if players have enough information, the basic laws of physics can apply to everyone.

"It's all about the club head," he says. "I can teach what the club face is doing on impact and how that affects ball flight. Once people forget about what the little finger on their right hand is doing and start to focus on more important things, they become better golfers."

"My friend Bill did everything he could to coach me and we realized it wasn't about being one-armed or two-armed or one-legged or two-legged or blind," he adds. "It has a lot to do with what the club does to the golf ball. But no one makes it that simple. The premise of my coaching is to simplify it so people really get it."

### **Prosthesis adds distance**

Another focus of Mike's this winter will be learning to better use his new prosthesis while playing golf. He never considered using one until he met U.S. Paralympic gold medal sprinters Dennis Oehler and Todd Schaffhauser in an airport during the summer. They encouraged Mike to give the technology another try.

Mike called about eight prosthetic companies but heard back only from Next Step Orthotics and Prosthetics in Warwick, R.I., which fits world-class athletes, children and everyone in between. He later found out they also fit the Paralympians he had met in the airport. Mike doesn't believe in accidents and feels it's prophetic that he found Next Step.

Since Mike has operated for 25 years without his left arm, he is interested in his prosthesis only for playing golf. Peter Couture, C.P, president and clinical director of Next Step and Bob Rollinson, C.P.O., worked with Mike on his new arm's weight, elbow and hand to make it an effective tool for his golf game.

"We designed a prosthesis that allows Mike to stay connected to the club in tandem," says Couture. "This unique prosthesis incorporates an elbow that changes and locks into multiple degrees of flexion as needed for the various shots required in golf. The self-suspending socket allows an unrestricted full range of motion at the shoulder and allows for increased proprioception to the club. Working with Mike gave me a better knowledge of golf and a greater appreciation for the game."

By early fall, Mike had played a half dozen times with this new prosthesis. His 190-yard drives without a prosthesis were now up to 215 to 220 yards. He was also hitting the ball straighter and with more control. But his short game, his strength before, still needs some work, he admits.

"I'm still distance challenged," he says, "but with the prosthesis I've gained some of it back. And I've also gained connection. For 25 years I played one-handed and disconnected on one axis. There's a lot more room for error. Now, I feel connected and I have better contact with the golf ball." He hopes to get his 14 handicap back down to a nine with his prosthesis.

"The things I look for are no limitations and offering possibilities to people," adds Mike. "Next Step gave me another possibility. Now I can go back into the public sector and maybe get more credibility because I will play a better game of golf."