

## **Amputation Drives New Interest in Golf**

by Joan Bennett

Mark Salmon had dabbled in golf for much of his life, but losing his right leg is what got him hooked on the sport. The 59-year-old from Sutton, Massachusetts, was an avid wind surfer and climber who played golf socially. Then a series of serious health issues changed his life and the focus of his interest in sports.

While surfing in the Dominican Republic in 1989, he experienced a heart attack and underwent double coronary artery bypass surgery. The following year, the pain in his knee that he thought was an old work injury was actually bone cancer. After a bone transplant, Salmon says he took up golf as a “default sport, because I couldn’t do anything else.”

In 1993, the transplanted bone broke. While in the hospital after the repair, he contracted a serious infection that led to the amputation of his right leg above the knee. “I was really depressed when I lost my leg,” he remembers. “I thought I wasn’t going to play anything. But my physical therapist recommended golf as a way to learn to move my hips to get an efficient walking style and I got obsessed right away with golf.”

Salmon claims that golfing and walking complement each other. “When you make a proper swing, you have to turn your hips and shoulders synchronized, like the back and forth movement of walking. The smoother you do it, the more effective and more efficient you are.”

He credits his first prosthetist, Peter Couture, CP, now president of Next Step Orthotics & Prosthetics, with helping him with a good fit and teaching him the finer points of a proper gait, which helped him with his golf game. Salmon’s “default sport” became a passion.

A year after his leg amputation, however, the cancer metastasized in his stomach. He needed a Whipple operation, a radical restructuring of his digestive tract.

Even when he was in the hospital recovering, Salmon had a golf club with him. He practiced his grip and played golf in his head. “I’d wake up at night and rather than think about the disease, I’d think about different shots.”

During his illness, his weight plummeted from 180 pounds to 110 pounds, but he fought his way back to strength. Within six months he was on the golf course again.

A short time later he moved to the Atlanta, Georgia, area, where he worked as a ranger at Stone Mountain Country Club. Here, he took his first organized golf lessons and made great progress with his game.

Although his golf game improved during his five years in Georgia, his nephew, who had recently earned a degree in physical therapy, noticed that Salmon’s walking was deteriorating. Unable to find what Salmon thought was a good prosthetist in the area, he moved back to Massachusetts in 2000 and returned to Next Step. He credits prosthetists

Arthur Graham and Jerry Scandiffio with getting him both back on track and a properly fitting mechanical prosthesis, a non-fall computerized leg.

Confident again in his prosthesis, Salmon is playing golf in earnest now, often with family. For instruction, he looks to his cousin Bill Barnes, a scratch golfer, who is following the lead of his father Al, Salmon's first golf instructor.

His favorite matches are with his three brothers. The foursome plays what they call "death matches," with the loser having to "commit suicide" by buying everybody a drink at the bar.

"We're very competitive with one another," he adds, "and we all play at about the same level." While he never broke 100 when he played before his amputation, he now routinely shoots in the high 80s.

He credits this to practice. "You have to be very patient with yourself and consistent with your practice, practicing almost every day and slowly building on it. I find that if I leave golf alone for even a few weeks, when I come back, I've picked up some bad habits and it takes me a while to get back into the groove again."

His favorite shot is a downhill lie going to the right, where he can tuck his prosthetic right leg behind him. "I can lean into the hill if I'm going right. If I'm trying to go to the left, it's very hard, as I have a tendency to fall over."

Until last year, he had played with the same clubs for more than a decade, thinking it was "more the carpenter, than the hammer" that was influencing his game. Deciding to see if this was true, he met with a golf professional who fit him with new clubs. After consistently practicing, in his first time out on the course he shot a 75.

"I couldn't believe the difference the clubs made," he says. "I advise any amputee to go to someone who really knows how to fit clubs. Have them see your swing and get the clubs fit to your swing."

Salmon finds playing 18 holes frequently can be tiring, and cautions other golfers who are amputees to not wear out their legs with too much play. He prefers hitting balls at the driving range, so he can rest when he wants. When he does play a round, it is usually with his family. He proudly notes that his mother, who is 89, played golf until last year.

Golf is truly a family event for the Salmons, who play in a yearly family reunion tournament. Each year the family, which owns Salmon Family Services, a group of assisted living and independent living facilities, hosts the Beaumont Open, a golf tourney for employees and their families. Salmon has also played in the annual Next Step Orthotics & Prosthetics golf tournament with other amputees.

"Golf is the framework that I have hung my rehabilitation on," he explains. "It gets you outside, it gets you to meet other people and it gets you outside of yourself. I've never been bored for one second since I lost my leg." [994 words]