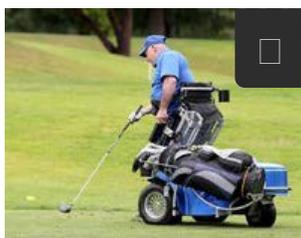


SPORTS

Gold Mountain provides new scene for disabled veteran golfer



LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN Paragolfer Bob Brush, a U.S. Army veteran, watches his putt with his golfing partner Mike Haugen, of Silverdale, an Army reservist for 23 years, on Friday.



By *Annette Griffus*

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BREMERTON — It was just another day at the golf course for Bob Brush, of Lakewood.

Paragolfer Bob Brush, a

U.S. Army veteran, uses his paragolf chair to tee off at the Gold Mountain Golf Course on Friday. (LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN)



Paragolfer Bob Brush, a U.S. Army veteran uses his paragolf chair to tee off at the Gold Mountain Golf Course on Friday. He gets a fist bump from Navy veteran John Cannady of Orting for his tee shot to the green. (LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN)



Paragolfer Bob Brush, a U.S. Army veteran, uses his paragolf chair to tee off at the Gold Mountain Golf Course on Friday. He watches a shot from Navy veteran John Cannady of Orting. (LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN)



Paragolfer Bob Brush, a U.S. Army veteran, uses his paragolf chair to golf at the Gold Mountain Golf Course on Friday. Brush is greeting Mike Haugen, center, of Silverdale, and Orv Olsen from Bremerton. (LARRY STEAGALL / KITSAP SUN)

Brush addressed his ball at the driving range at Gold Mountain Golf Club, lined up his shot and let loose his swing. The ball went a bit right, but all in all it was a pretty good shot.

A downright good shot for a man who uses a paragolfer.

The paragolfer is a three-wheeled, all-terrain golf cart that raises the user to a standing position, which allows Brush, a paraplegic, to do what he loves.

Brush is a former Army staff sergeant who served nearly 19 years. He lost the use of his legs when doctors severed his spinal cord during a second back surgery at Seattle's Veterans Affairs hospital 10 years ago.

"My first two years in the (wheelchair) was the most miserable," he said. "And I thought many times of checking out, but then I said, 'Wait a minute, there's more to life and you can do anything, you just have to do it a little bit different.'"

Brush began playing golf five years ago at American Lake Veterans Golf Course in Lakewood after receiving his \$31,500 paragolfer through the Bill O'Reilly Foundation.

It's been a blessing.

"I don't let anything stop me," he said.

Brush said the course is his second home. He also works with handicapped children, teaches other disabled veterans and civilians how to use a paragolfer, and also marshals at the course.

"American Lake Golf Course has done so much for me," he said. "I never played golf (before). I got put into the chair, my buddy golfs and he said, 'Bob you ever think about golf?' I

said, 'You crazy? I'm not golfing.' "

Brush said the designer of the paragolfer was at American Lake for a demonstration; he took a few practice swings and has been playing ever since.

"Golf is rehabilitation for us," Brush said. "It's stress relief for us, at least it is for me. It's exercise and a quality of living that we probably never would have had because most of us that are in the wheelchair, most of us think that our life is over. And so, my goal is to show them that they have a different life. That they can still function just like anybody else."

Unfortunately for many wounded or disabled veterans, having limited mobility also means unintended social exclusion.

It's why Brush happily accepted the opportunity to play at Gold Mountain.

"This is the only golf course I've played at except at American Lake (and) one I played at in Virginia," Brush said.

After a few holes, he was enamored with the course.

"I love it. It's a great course," he said. "I want to come back and play again. Very beautiful course."

The idea of inviting golfers from American Lake was the brainchild of Orv Olson, his wife, Claudia, and members of Gold Mountain's Friday couples league. The couples league is strictly for fun. A time for husbands and wives to spend on the course, then head to the clubhouse for dinner and some laughs, or in Orv's words, "mostly retired guys that are happy as hell that our wives like to play golf with us."

The league already supports the Bremerton High School golf teams, but after seeing a video of Brush using his paragolfer at American Lake, the Olsons wanted to do more. Orv, a retired Bremerton High

economics teacher, said the video resonated with him and other couples league members.

"When I saw that video, it just touches your heart," he said. "That these people have given something that they can never get back. ... Our big thing is, we're going to go play golf with them, they're going to get to know us and we're going to get to know them, and they're going to dinner with us. That's what our couples club is about."

So Olson walked into Gold Mountain general manager Daryl Matheny's office and pitched the idea.

"Daryl, he was 'Yeah, let's do it,' " Olson said.

Olson said one of the objectives he had in inviting Brush to play at Gold Mountain was to inform people in Kitsap, and its large veteran population, about American Lake and what its mission is. It also allowed Brush to waylay any fears other golf courses might have of allowing paragolfers to play.

"They're worried about us tearing up their greens," he said. "If it's done correctly, you're not going to tear up the greens. To educate the civilian population on how to use the adaptive carts, I love doing that."

Ted Ramirez, of Bremerton, is a retired Navy submariner who plays in the couples league with his wife, Linda, each Friday from May to September.

"Nowadays, veterans are getting the respect that they deserve, and now even more so the disabled vets are getting the respect that they deserve," Ramirez said. "It's something wonderful. These guys put a lot on the line."

For 23-year Army veteran Michael Haugen, of Silverdale, having the chance to meet and play with other veterans like Brush was an honor.

"It means a lot to me because I'm concerned with a lot of the stuff

that's been out there about military people who have not gotten proper medical care for a number of reasons," Haugen said. "We need to honor them in a greater way than we have been."

Haugen said he'll remember Brush the next time he thinks he's having a bad day.

"I'm excited to play with a par golfer because I'm not one," Haugen quipped after shaking Brush's hand.

"I could train you to play with this (paragolfer)," Brush joked. "That's not a problem."

American Lake opened in 1957 and is a volunteer-run course. It recently added nine holes, designed by Jack Nicklaus, to become an 18-hole course. Brush said the course is in need of lawn mowers and more golf carts for the veterans who use the course daily.

"American Lake, it's a family," he said.



About Annette Griffus

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