

## A Soldier's Smile

I never know what to expect when I visit my friend Bob Burns at his golf learning center in Appleton. We have been friends for many years and I enjoy catching up with Bob whenever I drop by. He has also allowed me teach at his facility, which is a gesture that goes beyond being a professional. With his shadow, Hogan (a spry Springer spaniel) Bob's facility attracts people who genuinely love the game. Whether it's hitting a few balls, searching for clubs or needing repairs, people of all ages stop at Bob's to get a little closer to the game.

Who is going to be at Bob's on any given day is also a mystery. I've met entertainers, politicians, basketball players, major league baseball players and last year even got a chance to meet Bob Costas when he was in town for NBC to do a Packer game. In fact Bob dropped by the learning center twice because the Packers played two Sunday night games that season. Costas is short in stature, doesn't possess a great golf swing, but he knows baseball like the back of his hand. Being a St. Louis Cardinal fan, (Costas is from St. Louis), I picked his brain for any inside information about the players, coaches and team's prospects.

For those who don't believe golf brings together a unique collection of players – guess again. I've met hoboes and CEO's that relish the opportunity to pick up a club. The neat fact is they're all happy to play with one another. Social setting makes no difference in many cases. The game is a great equalizer. Once it gets into the blood, the game

Bob has made it one of his priorities to bring people with disabilities to the game of golf. He has donated much of his time to teach individuals missing legs, arms, and fingers. Whether they are service people or others injured outside of the military, Bob will devise a way to get these folks into golf. He conducts clinics for autistic kids, Wounded Warriors, has visited Walter Reed Hospital and is planning on visiting Washington again to help encourage disabled vets rediscover the joy in a little white golf ball.

Last summer I had the chance to partner with Bob conducting a clinic for some Wounded Warriors. The day featured great instruction and stories all too real from the Warriors about their experiences. I've always admired our servicemen and women who sacrifice so much for our freedom. Looking back, I wish I pursued the opportunity to serve in a branch of the military. These people's efforts are not appreciated enough. When you see individuals whose bodies have been altered through the affects of war it raises many questions. Why did they expose themselves to that risk? Why were these people so selfless? How could they possibly survive some of the conditions in foreign nations we never experience in our country? These service men and women are truly special. When you see a service person be sure to acknowledge their efforts. They appreciate it.

When I dropped by to see Bob on a fall Wednesday last year I expected to see Hogan, a few people hitting balls, his son Robbie involved in one of his projects, son Chris teaching and of course Bob out helping someone with their game. When I walked into the shop I came across a young man, maybe thirty-something, sitting in a chair. I said hello to him and proceeded to the counter where Bob was busy with some paperwork. He greeted me, as he always does, with a hug and well wishes. Then he introduced me to the fellow sitting in the chair. His name was Jeremy. His prosthetic left leg told me there was a possibility he was a Wounded Warrior. My hunch was correct.

Jeremy lives in Mukwonago, just south of Milwaukee. Yes, he was a serviceman in Iraq. After I went in the back to say hi to Bob's son, Robbie, I caught Bob alone. Jeremy had ventured out to the putting green. Bob gave me some detail about the soldier's ordeal.

It turns out Jeremy had been the victim of a roadside bomb. This is a story we've all heard before on news channels but now I was looking face-to-face with one of our wounded warriors. He spent four and a half years at Walter Reed Hospital fighting to regain his life. Placed in a self-induced coma for nine months, Jeremy awoke not realizing what had happened and missing his left leg. His intestines had been split open; his right leg badly damaged. Imagine being in a place for that long of a period of one's life? To see him walking around and talking would be classified as a miracle. Watching him hit golf balls with a smile flashing across his face brought out emotions hard to describe. After Jeremy left the shop at 7:00 p.m. to drive home to Mukwonago, Bob remarked he had gotten so much more out the time spent with Jeremy than perhaps Jeremy did with him. Jeremy did tell Bob he would be back to continue working on his game. Once again a smile lit up on his face – a smile of hope, of comfort, of accomplishment.

I left the learning center around 9:00 p.m. that night. It's about a forty-minute drive home. Driving helps me clear my head. As I drove up Highway 41, I thought about another man driving in the opposite direction. Hopefully he made it home ok. I also thought of my luck to be introduced to an extraordinary, yet ordinary man caught in the ravages of a war. The two of us had very little in common. He had experienced things I never could comprehend. Yet there was one common bond – both of us knew the thrill of hitting a golf ball dead flush and watching it rise up into a blue September sky. There is no other feeling like it. Thanks to people like Bob Burns, Jeremy and me both had smiles on our faces as we drove home that evening.