

SportsMonday



RUSS BRYANT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Don Vickery at Wilmington Island Golf Course. Vickery gives golf lessons at the course.

ON PAR

After Accident, Teaching Golf And Perseverance For Vickery, a 20-Year Quest To Be a Certified P.G.A. Pro

By BILL PENNINGTON

Golf is unpredictable and challenging. You can be playing well, walking along in control of all that is before you, and suddenly face unseen difficulty. One setback seems to breed others. And that's what makes many golfers curse their fate, throw clubs and boil over in frustration.

If anyone understands the golfer's plight, not to mention adversity, it is the teaching pro Don Vickery of Georgia.

"Strange things are going to happen," Vickery said. "But golf is a game of recovery. It's not going to be perfect out there. But perfection has nothing to do with it. It's having the sense of recovery and waiting for your opportunities when they come along again."

Two months ago, Vickery became the first double amputee to earn P.G.A. of America membership, an achievement that capped a 20-year journey after an accident that nearly killed him.

Vickery, a 51-year-old assistant professional at the Wilmington Island Club in Savannah, Ga., passed the last of three levels of exacting study and examination required by the P.G.A. in May. Those tests included two days of golf during which he had to post a 36-hole score no higher than 155. Vickery, who had one leg amputated above the knee and the other below the knee in 1989, is also missing two fingers on his left hand. With the use of

Continued on Page D7

SportsMonday

On Par

GOLFING WITH BILL PENNINGTON

After Accident, Teaching Golf And Drive

Vickery's 20-Year Quest
To Be a P.G.A. Pro
Ends in a Milestone

From First Sports Page

leg prosthetics and a practiced grip, he shot 75 and 78.

"I just had an overwhelming sense of gratification and accomplishment," Vickery said last week. "But mostly, I realized that golf gave me more in the last 20 years than I could ever give it."

Vickery tries to avoid discussing the details of his accident.

"It's embarrassing," he said. "And completely my fault."

Working in construction while attending a local college, Vickery took his hunting dog for a walk on the grounds of the Fort Gordon Army base near his home in Augusta, Ga. Vickery let the dog run.

"I didn't know it, but we got into a restricted area," he said. "Either he stepped on something or I did, but there was an explosion that blew my left leg off. I got hit in the chest, face and hand, too. The dog was torn apart but still alive, and I thought at the time that my right leg was O.K."

"I was bleeding pretty badly, but I tried hopping out of there carrying the dog when my right leg, which was broken, split and collapsed under me. So I was sitting there with the dog dying, and you know, you wonder just what is going to happen at that point."

A passer-by saw him and summoned help.

"In the hospital, I asked the doctor if I was going to be all right," Vickery said. "And he told me: 'I don't know. You've lost a lot of blood.' I woke up a couple of weeks later, happy to be alive."

Vickery had never played golf. Growing up in a Savannah orphanage, he was a good athlete but viewed the game as "something rich people did."

He added, "Besides, it looked so easy."

The man who made his prosthetics, Ray Rice, happened to be an avid golfer. Rice suggested Vickery take up the sport.

"I said, Ray, I'm having a hard time just learning to walk again," Vickery recalled. "But I wasn't doing anything else. So I tried it. I was worried about looking silly at first, but I went out and watched able-bodied people play golf, and they looked pretty silly to me. They were hitting it all over the place."

He played every day, regardless of his pain.

"Pretty soon, I started looking forward to when I was going to play again," he said. "I came to realize pretty early that my best bet was having a strong short game, so I worked on my putting and chipping constantly. Then I went to driving ranges and watched the better players hit balls. I started trying to copy them."

Within a year, Vickery was shooting in the low 90s and landed a job at a driving range, where he mowed the grass and picked up balls.

In 1995, he returned to Savannah and went to work in the pro shop at the golf course that would later be renamed Wilmington Island. Four years later, he was married and guiding the club's junior instruction programs when his new boss, the head pro Patrick Richardson, suggested he enter the P.G.A. of America program and be credentialed as a golf professional.



RUSS BRYANT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Don Vickery had one leg amputated above the knee and the other below the knee. But that did not stop him from becoming a P.G.A. of America certified pro.

"Patrick had more faith in me than I did," Vickery said.

Because the P.G.A. certification process requires applicants to master every element of golf — swing analysis, club repair, rules and customer service are just some of the subjects — several years of study followed.

"He had a lot of support from our membership," Richardson said. "Don's an uplifting guy. I don't think I've ever heard him complain about anything. People would want to take lessons from him. Given all he's gone through, he makes a chronic slice seem like an easy thing to overcome."

The Wilmington Island membership, with the help of the larger Savannah community, began a fund-raising drive last summer to pay for Vickery to visit the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, so he could meet with American war veterans who had lost arms and legs.

"I went in there with shorts on, so they knew that I had been in that bed 20 years ago," Vickery said. "And I said: Life is not over. It's going to be difficult, but not impossible. You can do anything you want. It might take a little longer but you can do it. Look at me, I'm in the mainstream of society. There's a world of people out there who

will help you. You will have a life, and life will be good to you."

Vickery, who served eight years in the Army in the 1970s and 1980s, said he planned to make another visit to Walter Reed in September.

"The hardest part when you lose a limb is the idleness that sets in," he said. "Golf gave me a new passion. Everything in my life at that point, even simple things, had become hard. And here was this very difficult game of golf, but there was an honor to it. I came to love the difficulty. I saw that the difficulty could be overcome."

"It became a model for life. It's like I tell my students: 'Don't focus on what you can't do on the golf course. Go out there and choose to magnify the things you can do.' It's the mind-set that changes everything."



On Par on the Web

Bill Pennington learns how to speed up his golf game in this week's On Par video. Readers can watch videos and comment on articles at nytimes.com or on Facebook.