

Playing WITH Pride



Judi Ruiz uses the assistance of a patriotically themed single-rider golf cart.

With the assistance of RevelationGolf, veterans take a swing at the game

By Matt Beardmore

With the freshly painted American flag glistening from the single-rider golf cart, Judi Ruiz positioned her motorized wheelchair close enough to hoist herself into this newly found freedom on four wheels.

Once Ruiz was safely seated, her smile beamed brighter than the sun that drenched this picture-perfect afternoon in Lemont.

"I used to be into everything, but when I became disabled I lost the ability and there weren't any programs," she said. "Now with these kinds of programs, it brings me back to the freedom that I had."

Since Ruiz, 49, returned to Chicago from Southern California five years ago, her battle with Multiple Sclerosis means an everyday struggle against fatigue and diminishing cognitive abilities. But throughout the summer, the retired Marine Corps sergeant joined four others from the Edward Hines, Jr. VA Hospital on the Three-Hole Sunshine Course at Midwest Golf House for a well-deserved afternoon of golf, smiles and fun with the Sunshine Through Golf Foundation and RevelationGolf.

"This is just one small thing we can do to thank them for their service to our country," said Donna Strum, executive director of the Elk Grove-based, not-for-profit RevelationGolf.

Since programming began in January 2006, RevelationGolf has served more than 800 people, from adults and children with disabilities to breast cancer survivors to at-risk youths.

"It gives us an opportunity to showcase that golf isn't just for one segment of the population," said Carol Rhoades, an LPGA teaching professional at Stony Creek Golf Course in Oak Lawn. "It's very rewarding."

With former University of Minnesota women's golf coach Kathy Williams, the associate director of RevelationGolf, participants not only benefit from the therapeutic aspects of increased balance, range of motion, endurance and coordination, but they also receive top-notch golf instruction.

"We only use LPGA and PGA teaching professionals," Strum said. "We really want to make sure people in the program receive professional instruction. That makes us different."

Outside for just the second time since admitted to Hines last December, 46-year-old Iraq War veteran Chris Blazton devoured Williams' advice as he swiveled his chair 180 degrees and maneuvered



*Top: Veterans arrived in a school bus decorated with symbols of America.
Bottom: A veteran receives help teeing off.*

his club to tee off at the first hole.

He was far removed from where he was stationed just seven months earlier.

On Oct. 24, 2007, Blazton was in a Humvee that was struck by an improvised explosive device (IED). The military police officer suffered immediate paralysis from injuries to his spinal cord, leaving him without any feeling in his lower extremities.

Blazton had just nine days left in Iraq and in his 21-year career in the Army.

"It's part of the business," Blazton said matter-of-factly while being accompanied by his physical therapist, Shobha Patil. "I accept what happened to me."

Whether it's hitting a perfect chip shot on No. 2, or focusing on his release date when he plans to return to Lansing, Mich. with his wife, Sabine, and their

four children, Blazton forges ahead rather than asking, "Why me?"

"He's really made a lot of progress," Patil said, "and he has such a positive attitude."

The same can be said for all the veterans who travelled down Archer Avenue and entered the Midwest Golf House complex in a full-length, white school bus displaying murals of a bald eagle and the Statue of Liberty.

"If I would have known, I would have brought my video camera," said Ruiz's older brother, Joe, as he watched the event from nearby. "Right now, that's a beautiful picture with the flag cart and her sitting in it.

"She's an inspiration to all of us."

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