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Wounded veteran hits the links in Jackson

Retired Marine Corps Sgt. Nicholson holds his own, despite swinging with one arm.

By Clark Forster 12 hrs ago





Nicholson lines up a putt during a round Thursday at Jackson Hole Golf & Tennis. Nicholson said he grew up playing golf with his family, so relearning how to play after his injury was difficult but important.



Vacations for Warriors
VIDEO BY BRADLY J. BONER /
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Mike Nicholson swiveled his chair around, leaned it forward over his golf ball and took a one-armed hack at it. The ball barely moved, but an inch- deep divot formed.

A couple more hacks were taken, and the shanks continued. Nicholson wasn't used to his new chair, which was attached to his specially designed one-man golf cart. It was similar to the cart he uses back home in Tampa, Florida, but it took a little getting used to.

Five minutes later, Nicholson was smoking every ball he hit down the dead center of the driving range at distances of roughly 170 yards.

"I don't hit them like that every time," Nicholson said after about six straight long balls. "I'm not going to be happy until I know I can do that every single time."

Nicholson, 29, was the guest of honor Thursday at Jackson Hole Golf & Tennis. The retired Marine Corps sergeant was in the middle of a 10-day Wyoming vacation paid for by Vacations For Warriors, a nonprofit that sends wounded veterans on dream vacations.

Nicholson was hit by a roadside bomb July 6, 2011, while serving in southern Afghanistan. He lost his right leg just below the hip, his left leg to the knee and his left arm below the elbow.

Nicholson was a 4-handicap golfer before the accident and said he now ranges between 20 and 25, an impressive number for a man who plays with one arm while sitting down. But it took a while after the accident before Nicholson was seeing his tee shots land deep down the fairway.

“First time I went out, I came back to the house and told my wife ‘I think I’m done,’” Nicholson said. “I think that’s it. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to keep going.’ She was like ‘Get out there and shut up. You’ve said this before. You’ll be fine.’ I’m still not nearly as good as I know I can be, but I’m hard on myself.”

Golf & Tennis instructor Mark Bradley hosted Nicholson and Vacations For Warriors founder Bob DeMonbrum on Thursday. In honor of Nicholson the course’s 18 flagsticks were replaced with American flags that are typically used for Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. Even a few of the houses lining the golf course were draped with American flags upon hearing that a war hero was going to play the course.

Bradley, along with the rest of the group of five that played with Nicholson, couldn’t believe what they were witnessing. At times Nicholson’s tee shots beat those of his friendly competitors, and the Marine opted to play from the middle tees, despite his length disadvantage.

“Those last three drives were so pure,” Bradley said as the two left the driving range and headed for the first hole. Five minutes later Nicholson was driving up to his first shot of the day, which landed in the middle of the short stuff.

“Did you get that on camera?” Nicholson asked the photographer who snapped his picture-perfect tee shot.

Nicholson used to hit it 320 yards before being confined to the cart. The one plus about the cart is that he is the only player on the course allowed to drive on the greens, something he said he is never bothered about by fellow golfers unaware of his condition.

“Well, then they’d have to deal with me if they did say something,” Nicholson said with a grin.

DeMonbrum rented a U-Haul in order to bring the specialized cart from Highlands Ranch, Colorado, to Jackson. He didn’t try out the cart himself, but he and the rest of the group of five did try their hands at Nicholson’s new swing.

“We all tried to swing with one arm on one hole,” DeMonbrum said. “It’s not easy. I hit mine about 25 yards, and one guy hit it straight right.”

Nicholson isn’t the golfer he used to be but can still hang with most of his playing partners. He’s worked hard on his swing and plans to continue to improve it over time.

“It’s just figuring out the little things and how to adapt to it,” he said. “You do that with everything in life. Especially in my type of situation, it’s about what little changes you can make in the swing, and eventually it will all come together.”

Vacations For Warriors has helped send 21 soldiers on dream vacations since its inception in 2014. Anyone who would like to help send a wounded soldier on vacation may visit

VacationsForWarriors.org.

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