

When Push Comes to Shove

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“You really can do anything if you put your mind to it”.

Three of them came rolling at me, their arms pumping their wheelchairs and pointing their forefingers in synch. “We need you”. It was as if an Uncle Sam recruiting poster had come to life. I turned around because I knew they weren’t. . . Nah, they couldn’t be talking to me. But sure enough, they were. The threesome needed a fourth to even out their side in an eight-person wheelchair basketball pick-up game. So, like a reserve coming off the bench, I hustled. I ran down the bleachers hurdling over a pile of prosthetic legs. The eager team helped me strap my two legs into an amazingly colorful high-tech sports wheelchair. My heart was pounding. What an adrenaline rush!

The thought of playing basketball with these guys was certainly unique to me as I’d never done anything like this before. I mean, I’ve played basketball but not from a seated position. Without legs, the challenge was daunting. Just moments earlier I was semi-daydreaming, catching up on some e-mails and returning phone calls. I had tucked myself high up in the corner of the metal bleachers of a very bright indoor basketball court waiting to catch a red eye back to the east coast. The pick-up game was taking place at the Naval Medical Center San Diego in California. I was in town for 48 hours, training several golf professionals called upon to teach the game of golf to the men and women returning from Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as well as other combat theaters. When I awakened that day, it never occurred to me that I would be getting a “crash” course – literally, as wheelchairs collided with each other like bumper cars - on playing wheelchair basketball from some of the bravest men who had gone to war to protect my country’s freedom. In that game, I was transformed from being their golf

instructor earlier in the day to serving as an “official fill-in sub” at night. I had no idea how hard this was going to be. I was breathless, my fingers became entangled in the spokes of the chair as I attempted to alter my direction and speed. Coordination became paramount. The art of maneuvering a wheelchair while playing basketball was just as difficult as playing golf blind folded. Half way through the game, the other end of the court started looking as far away as a marathon finish line. I had all these strong men who became my “teachers” giving me advice on how to “Push the wheelchair like this”, “Stop and turn like this! Speed up this way and slow down this way”. “Shoot! Block!”. With all these tips on how to roll the chair, get the ball, block the shot, or steal the ball it reminded me again as a golf instructor just what my golf students go through when they are trying to learn something new or different. Making five birdies in a row seemed easier than attempting a free throw from a seated position. I just didn’t have the upper body strength to throw it that high and far. I wanted to impress the guys. If they came out to the golf course earlier in the day exposing their vulnerabilities, the least I could do was show them the same respect.

Sitting in that wheelchair, trying to keep up with these men who had been involved in wheelchair basketball for a few years since losing either one or two legs to IED’s in the wars overseas, was one of the special adventures of my life. I was reminded just how powerful golf is to someone in recovery. It underscores the essence of staying active to someone who had lost a part of their body and is forever a changed person. As we rolled over to the sideline, I had a reality check. I just got up and out of the chair. I didn’t have to reattach one or two legs as we headed for the exit. This was a profound reminder to be thankful for what I have in my life. I embraced this life lesson as I flew home that night. Although my team lost the game that evening, I affirmed a renewed sense that when push comes to shove, you really CAN do anything if you put your mind to it. Just ask the guys in the chairs!

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judyalvarez.com | judyalvarezauthor.com

golferja@aol.com | 1.772.834.6711