

Golf Digest®

The Healing Game

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On July 8, 2007, his 45th day in Afghanistan, U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Ramon Padilla was ready for dinner. He was at a firebase in the Korengal Valley, the "valley of death" where Taliban warriors ruled ferociously. To make a radio call to the eight soldiers of the 173rd Airborne Brigade under his command, Padilla climbed onto a pile of dirt and rocks.

There, his life changed.

He knew it when he saw his left arm floating away from his body. "All the skin was gone, blood was running out," he says, "and my arm was hanging by two ligaments, like strings."



Soldiers know they're targets, but they'd rather not think about it. "You gotta think, *Ain't nothin' gonna happen*. Otherwise, you go crazy," Padilla says. So here's what the career Army man says about the moment a rocket-propelled grenade exploded in front of him, shearing away his arm and throwing shrapnel against his skull.

"I thought, *OK, it happened. Let's get on with it.*"

He believed his guys would save him. Two carried him to a safe house. A third stopped the bleeding. On a medevac helicopter, medics strapped the loose arm to the soldier's chest. Padilla looked at the arm. "They laid it across my chest, with the hand right under my chin, like, to calm me, for assurance," he says. "But I knew. The arm was gone." On the dead hand he saw his wedding ring.

From the deserts and mountains of Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants run their war against the West. The United States has sent 1.5 million men and women to that war. More than 5,400 Americans have been killed, more than 67,000 wounded, and nearly 1,000 have lost limbs -- as Padilla did.

He made his way to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. There, a year later, his life changed again. Only this time he didn't know it. An RPG blowing him to pieces -- that, he could imagine.

But this?

Walter Reed wanted him to play golf?

He knew nothing about golf and cared less. As a kid, most any time golf popped up on his television, it was an interruption of his search for the Dodgers or Angels. Up from Mexico to Los Angeles at age 2, Padilla had become a two-sport stud, a pitcher, center fielder, power hitter, wide receiver and safety. "As soon as golf came on," Padilla says, "I'd go, 'This sucks.' "

Still, the Walter Reed folks took him to a golf park where he heard the pro, Jim Estes, say, "You can do this."

Padilla was a real athlete, 5-foot-9, 180, strong and quick. Buddies called him Ramon Chingon, which he says translates to Badass Ramon. "Great hands," he says. "Throw it near me, nobody else gets it -- I get it." Now there was one hand and no more baseball or football. Now, even with his skull repaired, there was short-term memory loss.

But Estes kept insisting that Padilla, then 32 years old, could learn to play a game he had never thought of playing. Here's what Badass Ramon said to the pro: "You're *ker-razy*."

Self-doubt and loss of identity are a disabled soldier's enemies. But with motivated patients, therapists at Walter Reed's state-of-the-art amputee rehabilitation center can work wonders. Rory Ford, a representative of Disabled Sports USA, says, "These soldiers were strong, active young people, and now they're stuck in a hospital wondering, *Is my life over?* That's why sports like golf work so well in rehab. Sports is all about challenges. And when there's some success, it's like, *If I can do this, I can do anything.*"

On a breezy Saturday morning, Ford watched maybe a hundred men, women and children scarf up hot dogs and fried chicken, potato salad and baked beans. The air was alive with chatter and laughter coming from the golf park's playground in a Maryland suburb, Olney, a half-hour from the nation's capital. The scene was sweet Americana -- except for what war had done.



From left: U.S. Army Spc. Dean Schwartz, Kirk Bauer of Disabled Sports USA, and Staff Sgt. Karl Dorman watch as William Hansen (U.S. Army, retired) hits a shot

In addition to the amputations, there were the invisible wounds of traumatic brain injury and post-traumatic stress disorder. Every Saturday for two months this summer, soldiers came to Olney Golf Park for clinics supported by the national Wounded Warrior Project, the PGA of America, Disabled Sports USA, and the Salute Military Golf Association. This was using golf as a step toward a normal life.

On this morning, Estes had recruited seven local teaching pros to help out. They worked the far end of the range, past a sign that said, "Soldiers Only." Channing Hopper is a big ol' National Guard farm boy from Walnut, Miss. He came in Levi's and a baseball cap. His wife, Tiffany, sat with their son, Eli, 7 months old. As the daddy hit a series of high slices, the mommy said he was one lucky soldier.

"Just a broken back," she says.

On a road in Iraq, his Humvee rolled over and catapulted Hopper from the gunner's turret. He crashed to earth 60 feet away. Now the rigid pieces of a back brace are outlined under his shirt. "Landed on my butt, they told me," he says. Crushed vertebrae, fractured pelvis.

Down the range, a strapping 40-year-old Marine major named Justin Constantine, of Arlington, Va., looked at a pro's laptop and saw that the launch angle with his driver was too steep.

Over his left eye, a black patch.

"A sniper, and he was good," Constantine says. "The bullet went through my head."

He touched a spot behind his left ear.

"Went in here... "

Then he put a fist in front of his mouth and fanned open his fingers. "... and came out here."

Fifteen surgeries to rebuild his face have relieved some of Constantine's anxiety in public situations. At Olney, he felt comfortable.

"All of us here are messed up," he says, laughing. "I've got another half-dozen surgeries to go. When they're done, they say I'll look like Brad Pitt."

Shortly after declaring the golf pro Jim Estes a ker-razy person, Ramon Padilla found himself swinging a weighted club 200 times a day for a week. The idea was to improve coordination and build a swing around his baseball throwing motion. But Padilla remembers standing over a ball and asking Estes, "You expect me to hit that?"

Estes didn't worry.

"Fear inhibits the ordinary person's ability to perform," Estes says. "But these guys -- they have no fear. When your leg is blown off, who cares if you don't hit that little white ball perfectly?"

Soon enough, Padilla made the thing fly.

"A hundred and fifty yards!" he says.



Ramon Padilla's daughter Emily, 5, plays with one of her dad's prostheses.

There, his life changed again.

"I had a sense of accomplishment. I thought, *I may be missing an arm, but I'm still whole, I'm still one person.*"

On this happy morning, Padilla was at the golf park, too, but his journey from Mexico to Los Angeles, to Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally to Walter Reed had been so remarkable that he was not at Olney to hit balls with his buddies -- he was there to work. The two-sport stud who once considered golf suckable stood behind the golf-shop counter, smiling, waiting on customers.

Padilla lives in a Washington suburb, Waldorf, Md., with his wife and four children. The wedding ring he last saw on his severed arm is now on his right hand; the Army mailed it to him, "with blood still in it," as he lay in a hospital.

He has 20 prostheses for his left arm, including one that he helped design as an attachment to a golf club. His swing is smooth and powerful, capable of 250-yard drives. His best scores, in the low 90s, are evidence that the once-skeptical Padilla has been hooked into beating balls by the thousands.

Proof that his conversion to golf came on that Saturday at Olney: From behind the golf-shop counter, he shouted out to a buddy, "Jack, tomorrow get a couple guys." Then, laughing, the one-armed man said, "We'll take their money!"

To learn more about how you can help wounded soldiers, visit woundedwarriorproject.org, golfsalute.org, foldsofhonor.com and dsusa.org.