

Rising Above

By BRIAN MCDONALD – The Patriot News

Need a reminder of the indomitable human spirit? Dauphin Highlands Golf Club was the place to be last weekend.

Sometimes winning really isn't everything in sports. For one group of people, just the mere ability to play a cherished game is more than enough enjoyment. Throw in the fact that they're playing with their best friends who share a common bond, and the enjoyment turns into euphoria. Winning doesn't matter. It just sweetens the deal.

Such is the case of the members of the Eastern Amputee Golf Association. The organization was formed by retired National Amputee Golf Association Eastern trustee, Bob Buck in 1987 as an avenue for amputees to meet each other through golf.

Central Pennsylvania got its own personal view of the EAGA this past weekend as the organization played its 15th annual championship tournament at Dauphin Highlands Golf Course in Swatara Township near Harrisburg.

"What's unique about our organization is it provides a venue for amputees to play golf with their own peers," said Buck, who's an amputee himself. "Our members can always play with their own friends at home, but there are people here this weekend who have never played with another person with the same amputation."

The tournament attracted 52 players of all ability levels from 14 different states. But the players all agree that it's the camaraderie of the event, not the competition, that brings them to the annual tournament.

"This is where I belong; this is for me," said Jim Wegrzyn of North Hampton, N.H. "It's like a support group, only it's centered around golf. Everyone is happy to be here and it's a fantastic group of people." Wegrzyn is actually a double amputee. When he was 9 years old, he had his spleen removed and subsequently had trouble fighting off diseases and infections. Fifteen years later, he lost both of his legs as well as seven fingers after a serious bout with the flu.

Like Wegrzyn, the majority of EAGA members were born with all of their limbs but lost one, or more, through accident or illness. Yet each member has an uncanny outlook on life. Judging by their demeanor, it's impossible to tell that they suffered a physically and mentally debilitating loss. If you're looking to give them pity, take your business elsewhere.

"My doctor ran out of Scotch tape, so he had to take [my leg]," Howard Taylor of Monroe Twp., N.J., said with a twinge of sarcasm. "I fell down twice today too, but I usually hit good shots when I fall down." Taylor, who played in the Super Seniors flight, lost his left leg after developing a vascular disease that prevented proper blood flow to his lower limbs. While Taylor is light-hearted and has come to grips with his condition, he puts all kidding aside when he speaks of his beloved organization. "It [the EAGA] is important because it's a fraternity and it's very important for us to get together," Taylor said. "It makes you realize you're physically challenged, but not handicapped. These people truly become an extended family to you."

The organization isn't just for men. Four women amputees also competed over the weekend. Kellie Valentine of Erie has been with the EAGA since 1996. She lost her right arm after a car accident in 1993. She said she joined the EAGA because of her drive to stay active. "I was a competitive softball player in college, so when I lost my arm I wanted to keep competing. So I took up golf and here I am," said Valentine, who won this year's women's event shooting a record 89 – 88. "I wanted a way to compete and it helps when you find fellowship with people who are in similar situations as you're in."

Like Valentine, Kim Mecca of Jessup, PA is a former softball player who lost the ability to play competitively after she lost her right arm in an extracting machine at the Laundromat she worked at

when she was 18. Watching both women hit the ball with just a left arm is nothing short of amazing. Their control and distance rivals that of men and women players who have both of their arms. What's more amazing is that Mecca has only been playing for 10 years while Valentine didn't pick up clubs until five years ago. Both of them routinely shoot rounds in the 80s. "When I get out on the course, I don't consider myself an amputee, just a golfer." Mecca said.

Even with all of the benefits the EAGA provides to its members, the majority of the golfers agree that there is one lingering problem with the organization. There simply aren't enough members.

"We're out here having the times of our lives because we were able to get past our problems and move on with our lives," Wegrzyn said. "Everyone here has a positive approach to life. There are too many amputees who sit at home and are afraid to come out. They need to realize that we'd be more than happy to take in new members and that there's nothing wrong with being an amputee."