

Second chance at a *first love*

BY TOD LEONARD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON KOHLBAUER

SAN DIEGO'S JOHN KLEIN OFFERS DISABLED GOLFERS THE JOY OF THE GAME



RICH LARSON AND HIS SON RYAN (FRONT) DRIVE 70 MILES EVERY SUNDAY TO WORK WITH JOHN KLEIN.

Jane Cogan had her own entourage when she came to play golf on a bright and clear February morning at the Four Points Sheraton Golf Course in San Diego.

In tow behind the 79-year-old Cogan, who was being pushed in a wheelchair by a caregiver, was her daughter, Katie Mittleider; son-in-law; and two small dogs. They had come to serve as Cogan's support team — her coterie of caddies — though from the expression of concern on Mittleider's face, it looked like maybe they were beginning to wonder if this were such a good idea.

"She really shouldn't be out here," Mittleider admits with a nervous laugh.

Three weeks earlier, Cogan suffered her second hip fracture in 10 months in a fall at her home. After the latest fracture, she spent two weeks in the hospital. Only a week after being discharged, she returned to the golf course, which had been her place of rejuvenation after the first hip injury.

Now out of her wheelchair, standing braced against a walker at Four Points, Cogan was intensely focused, stroking putt after putt on the thick kikuyu greens until she got the speed just right and knocked a 15-footer dead into the center of the cup.

Cogan's small gallery cheered, and she says with a smile, "I want to do that again!"

"This means so much to her," Mittleider beams.

Such are the small but meaningful moments that happen every week in San Diego PGA instructor John Klein's 33-year-old Project FORE (Future Opportunity for Recreation and Enjoyment) program, which has served several thousand people with dis-



JANE COGAN USES GOLF TO HELP RECOVER FROM A FRACTURED HIP. ABOVE RIGHT, KLEIN ALSO HAS A SOLORIDER GOLF CART, FOR THOSE UNABLE TO STAND.



abilities and impairments due to strokes, accidents or birth defects.

His current golfers include a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy, a 45-year-old stroke survivor and a man who suffered a severe brain injury in a car accident.

"It is amazing to see the progress people can make," Klein says.

Patients often come to the program feeling depressed or angry about having been stripped of the activities they so enjoyed before their disability. They feel a tremendous loss. Klein works to rebuild a sense of worthiness and confidence.

"It's been so restorative," says Cogan, who was an avid golfer in her younger years. "It is great, great therapy. It's so breathtakingly beautiful; how could you not love it outside right here."

Klein, 60, has teamed up with three hospitals in the San Diego area: Alvarado, Grossmont and Sharp. When inpatients express an interest in golf, they are referred to Klein, who conducts golf putting and chipping sessions at the hospitals.

The work is about more than simply swinging the club. Patients concentrate on their balance, hand-eye coordination and muscle strength. Klein doesn't baby them. When they've chipped their bucket of balls, they've got to go pick them up, too.

"It's thinly disguised therapy," says Tom Burke, 64, who has worked with Klein since suffering a stroke nearly four years ago. "You're walking, you're shifting your weight from one leg to the other. It takes a lot of balance.

"When I was in the hospital doing my rehab, you walk up and down the hallway. John told me to picture walking down the fairway. I did that, and it really helped."

Like many other stroke survivors who suffer debilitating weakness on one side of the body, Burke has to swing the club with just one hand — his right — and his balance isn't always good. ▶

PATIENTS CONCENTRATE ON THEIR BALANCE, HAND-EYE COORDINATION AND MUSCLE STRENGTH.

"I've had the wind blow me over," Burke says with a smile. "That's OK, though. I don't get a chance to lay in the grass very often."

Once patients are discharged from the hospital, Klein invites them to the golf course. On weekends, he hosts sessions at the Four Points facility, a lightly used par-3 course where there are few hazards, and not many holes measure more than 100 yards. On weekend afternoons, Klein travels to Cottonwood Golf Course in rural El Cajon, where he uses his own SoloRider golf cart, donated to the program, on the driving range to teach those who cannot stand on their own.

During the week, Klein teaches special education in the San Diego Unified School District.

"I've always enjoyed working with people with disabilities. This is where I found my niche," says Klein, who was chosen in 1999 as the SCPGA San Diego Chapter's Teacher of the Year.

Klein was inspired by his mother and grandmother, both of whom worked at the Veterans Administration hospital in Palo Alto when Klein was growing up. And the young Klein was influenced by playing golf with veterans. He received his bachelor's degree from San Diego State University in recreation therapy, and he started his FORE program in 1977,

when he was an assistant at Santa Barbara Municipal Golf Course.

The people Klein helps rave about him.

"He is an absolutely beautiful person," Cogan says. "He is so encouraging. He never criticizes, and he never loses his patience. He's always there to calm us and get us to be doing what we should be doing."

Adds Rich Larson, "John is awesome. He's patient and he cares. From what he charges, I don't think he's in it for the money. He just loves to do it."

Larson, of Oceanside, drives his 12-year-old son, Ryan, 70 miles roundtrip each Sunday to work with Klein. Ryan has cerebral palsy caused by a stroke he had before he was born, and in October 2008 he underwent surgery to remove a part of his brain believed to be causing him to suffer as many as five seizures a day.

"Ten hours and 40 staples," Ryan says of the surgery, which left a sizable scar that can be seen through his shortly cropped hair.

The surgery halted the seizures, and about a year ago Rich Larson heard about Klein's golf program and enrolled Ryan, who has limited use of his right hand and leg. Klein taught Ryan to swing one-handed from the left side.

"We just want to expose him to it," Rich says. "It's something he can do — there are certain things he can't do because it requires both hands. From what I've been told, there are some pretty outstanding one-handed golfers in the world. It just takes practice and a good coach."

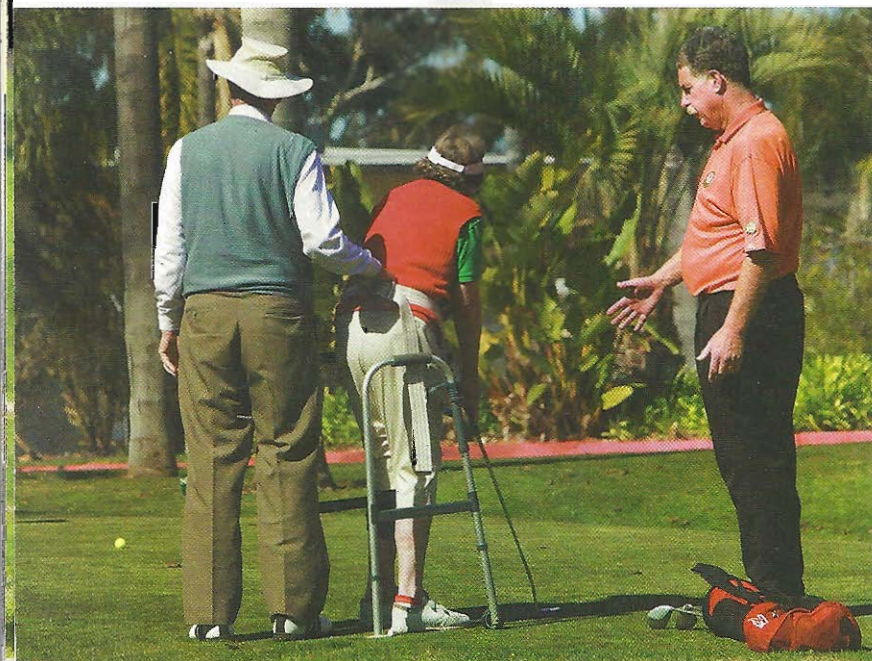
Ryan says he loves to hit his driver, which is part of a new club set he got for Christmas.

What does he enjoy most about golf?
"I once got a par!" he says proudly.

Brian Sorensen, a 38-year-old from Pacific Beach, has become a par-making machine at Four Points, despite impaired vision that he says makes it seem as if he's looking through the wrong end of a telescope. His visual range is about the size of a nickel.

Sorensen suffered a massive head injury in a 2002 accident in which his car rolled under a semitruck. He says he spent four years in the hospital and at one point was down to 90 pounds. He was introduced to Klein's program in 2007 because he had been an avid golfer before his injuries.

KLEIN, BELOW RIGHT, WORKS WITH DISCHARGED PATIENTS FROM THREE SAN DIEGO HOSPITALS AS PART OF THEIR REHAB.



"Vision is not my only problem," Sorensen says. "The brain injury is my main issue. I've got balance issues, memory issues, temper issues. It all comes into play when I'm out there (on the golf course). But there's a little bit of lightening up with these things, too, because I'm doing something I love with a passion."

Sorensen's friend, Rob Davis, acts as his caddie, giving him help with his club selection and also reading the greens. He jiggles the flagstick in the hole to give him a sense of distance.

"Oh, man, I love the sound of the ball going into the cup," Sorensen says.

"I've got some images stuck in my head from when I played golf before, so that helps," he adds. "It was one of those things that stayed with me (after the accident). That, and the ocean, and a little bit of basketball."

One of Klein's newest students likely will be among his most enthusiastic. His story is certainly among the most poignant.

Before Russell Wisniewski suffered a stroke last November at the age of 45, he was a golf fanatic who practiced four days a week; watched the Golf Channel religiously; and collected hundreds of balls, which he inventoried by make, model and number. The last of those activities fit perfectly with his job as a quality control clerk at Kaiser Permanente.

After his stroke, the father of four grown children had one pressing question for his doctors: "Will I be able to play golf again?"

Wisniewski was soon introduced to Klein and was back to practicing golf less than two months after the stroke. Wisniewski has little use of his left hand, but on an outing in February he was clearly enjoying himself as he played with a group of other stroke survivors.

"I'd love to play on a big course, but this is a big thing for me right now," he

says. "I really wanted this. I was really striving for it."

Just like any golfer, able-bodied or not, it is the hope of improving that keeps him motivated. He is still waiting for that day when he breaks 100.


As Wisniewski walked the course, his wife, Tamara, followed with a folding

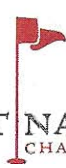
chair in hand in case he needed to rest. He sat down only once.

Tears well up in Tamara's eyes when she is asked what the program has meant to her husband.

"Everything," she says. "He counts the days for when he's going to play golf." ♡


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- 6) Assist with creating website and maintaining website;
- 7) Assist with taking photographs for website, promos, and articles;
- 8) Donate Services (i.e.. printing, advertising);
- 9) Equipment Donations;
- 10) Assist with recruiting participants for program



ABOUT JOHN KLEIN

In 1977 while an Assistant Golf Professional at Santa Barbara Municipal Golf Course, John founded Project Fore. With a background in Recreation Therapy, he combined his love of golf and college degree to form this adapted golf program. Over the years, John has increased his knowledge in Special Education and Adapted Physical Education. He works within the local school districts, teaching and recruiting kids for his community based programs. In 1999, John was chosen by his peers as the "1999 SDPGA Teacher of the Year". In 2003, John received The Fred D'Acquisto Community Service Award, presented by The American Heart Association. In the same year, John was also presented The Eagle Spirit Award by Sharp Rehabilitation Services. John is a member of the National PGA's President's Council on Growing the Game of Golf.



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PROJECT FORE GOLF FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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- Promote golf to individuals with physical and cognitive disabilities (mild to severe);
- Use golf as a therapeutic means, exercising and strengthening the weaker side of the body;
- Allow the individual to become more independent;
- Assist in improving social skills through camaraderie and social interaction on and off the golf course;
- Use modified equipment to help players enhance their learning experience;
- Have the student recall and understand the different stages of the golf swing from the start to finish.

PROGRAMS OFFERED

The following programs are offered under the umbrella of Project Fore:

- Individuals with physical impairments—spinal cord injury, brain injury, amputation/loss of limb(s), paralysis from strokes or other accidents, vision impairment;
- Wounded Warrior Military Program for service personnel who have become wounded during combat or training;
- Kids with autism and processing delays;
- Kids and adults with Downs Syndrome;

- Any other debilitating conditions not mentioned above.

The programs for individuals with disabilities are coordinated through the recreation therapy departments at various local hospitals and rehab centers.

The programs for kids and adults with cognitive delays are organized through John Klein.

Contact John for further information.



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