

Golf Digest

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INDIA

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INDIAN OPEN PREVIEW



BRAVE
HEARTS

Manvir Mangat rips one down the fairway at the Delhi Golf Club's Peacock course.

No handicap

How much does golf mean to you? And how would you play if life dealt you a crippling blow? A dozen golfers came together in a unique tournament to testify to this wonderful game's power to change lives, infuse hope, and add meaning to life. The feeling that all golfers live for, and these brave hearts were no different.

By **MERAJ SHAH**

After finishing his round at the Delhi Golf Club's Peacock course, Manvir Mangat heads straight for the range. "Just not my day," he says with a grimace. "Not being able to time my release... pushed it right all day." The big golfer wraps the club around his frame in a practice swing and makes an exaggerated wrist release at impact to emphasize his point. It seems to work and half a bucket later, the farmer from Punjab is stripping it 250 yards with a driver. His ball flight is low with a slight draw. "Now if only I had been able to do that during the round today," he exclaims, pleased with the results.

The talk veers to swing technique — something Mangat is obviously well-versed with — and he speaks of what he's learnt, and how he's adapted his swing to counter his unique predicament. Mangat lost his left arm in a grain thresher on his farm a few years ago; the fact that the arm had to be amputated from the shoulder joint makes the possibility of using a prosthetic arm difficult, and Mangat has decided to just let it be the way it is. He has great extension through the ball with his right arm, uses a strong grip and works at his game as hard as anyone else. Speaking to him, initially you feel awkward bringing up the issue of his disability and how it affects his game. The man himself, however, considers it a minor issue which he can work around, and believes that he can play as well as anyone else.

Mangat was in town, as were 11 other golfers, to

participate in a tournament organized by the Paralympics Golf Association of India. The event, explains Sanjeev Chaudhary, Senior Vice President of the PGAI, is just to test the waters. "We wanted to see what the potential and quality of differently abled golfers in the country was. The event is also serving as a trial to select a team which will represent the country at the upcoming games," he says, referring to the World Amputee and Wheelchair Games which will be held in Bengaluru later this year.

News of the trials spread through word of mouth and club pros, among them DGC's Jasjit Singh, volunteered to help out. Participants came from all over the country — Bengaluru, Delhi, Chandigarh, Baghpat and Pune. Not surprisingly, all are consummate sportsmen.

Mangat's beefy frame gives away his athletic background. "I was a discus and shot-put athlete and took part in a number of national and international competitions. Unfortunately, because of the strain those disciplines put on the body, I was getting injured very often," he says, explaining how he gravitated towards golf. He's taken to the game with gusto, participating in the world one-armed championships in Wales last year, and hopes to emulate a four-handicapper he played with there.

The field is dominated by defence personnel. Col. R.S. Rawat, who wins the tournament, lost his left leg in a skirmish during

BRAVE HEARTS



Ajay Jadeja presents the winner's trophy to Colonel R.S. Rawat.

operations against the LTTE in Sri Lanka when he was just 19 years of age. He's a stout man and gives the ball a solid three-quarter punch. "The DGC is such a fantastic course!" he gushes, adding that his home course in Meerut is not bad either. "Did you know it's where Jyoti Randhawa cut his teeth?" he says with pride.

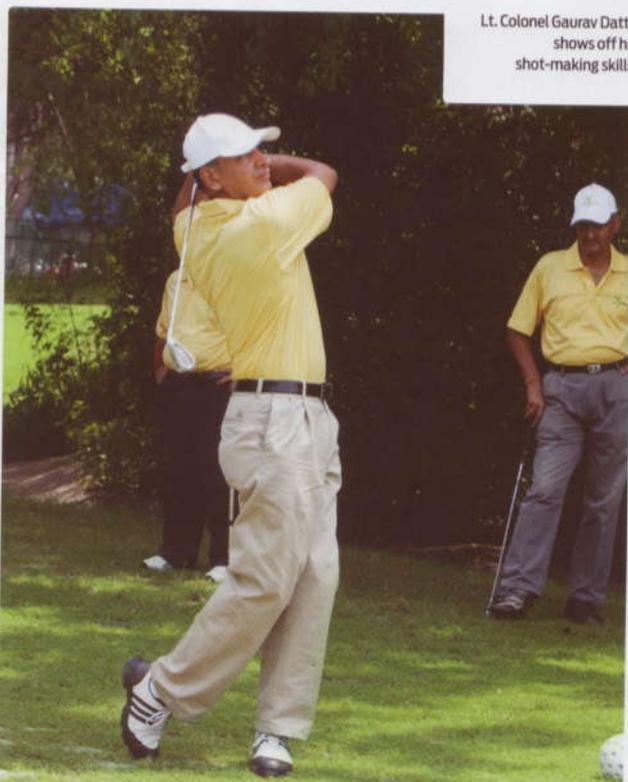
Lt. Col. Gaurav Datta, currently stationed in Bengaluru, is a fan of the KGA course there. "The course is in fabulous condition after the recent relaying of the fairways," he says, adding that he can't do without his afternoon dose of 18 holes. He's got a soldier's temperament and says that his physical disability is only as limiting as he allows it to be. "My swing is pretty grooved in now. The only thing I can't do is put too much strain on my prosthetic left leg on the downswing, which means I need to rotate more rather than try and build a tight coil. No big deal." Lt. Col. Datta hits his irons sweetly with

a lot of clubhead speed and ball spin. The only indication that he may have an affliction is his very old-fashioned left heel position at the top of the backswing—it is raised off the ground to accommodate the turn.

The R&A's 'A Modification of the Rules of Golf for Golfers with Disabilities 2008-2011' states that, 'A

potential issue for some lower extremity amputee golfers who wear prostheses is their inability to climb into or out of bunkers. On that basis, Rule 28 (Unplayable Ball) should apply without further modification.'

It's not a rule any of the motley group of participants is likely to cite. Indeed, it's difficult to tell that they face any hindrance at all, given



Lt. Colonel Gaurav Datta shows off his shot-making skills.

the way they stride off at a quick pace after each shot.

At an impromptu award presentation ceremony, ex-cricketer and now pro golfer Ajay Jadeja gives away the prizes. Col. Rawat wins on a countback after tying Lt. Col. Datta with a 16-over-par 76. Jadeja gives an extempore, heartfelt speech and as an impulse-of-the-moment gesture, offers to sponsor one golfer's trip to play in an international tournament.

There's a discomfiting moment when the press contingent taking pictures requires them to look evidently disabled, but no one says it. It's just as well. None of these golfers give their disability any merit, nor do they use it as a psychological crutch to explain a bad shot. Theirs' are understated, yet shining, tales of grit and courage, but also, and this is the way they'd like to see it, testimonies to their ability to see the sunny side of life and live it vicariously. Perhaps it's got to do with dealing with loss, which changes the complexion of how they view the grand scheme of things.

Ask Col. Rawat if he feels any regret at the hand that life dealt him and he gives a look of plain disbelief. "Regrets... are you kidding? I'm alive, I'm playing golf and I just won a tournament. You'll know how I feel when you win one!" he says tongue in cheek, grinning ear to ear. Roger that Colonel. You're the man. ■

RESULTS

(PAR 60)
WINNER: COL. R.S. RAWAT (76)
RUNNER UP: LT. COL. GAURAV DATTA (76)
 (COL. RAWAT WON ON COUNTBACK)
SECOND RUNNER UP: COL. RAKESH SHARMA (80)