



# Swing into action

**The Disabled Golf Society aims to make fairways and greens accessible to all, writes Martin Bewick**

Golfer Tucker Chance  
playing at New Malton



**F**or some people, according to Mark Twain's famous phrase, a round of golf is "a good walk, ruined". For many others it's the perfect way to spend a leisurely day out of doors – with an added element of friendly competition.

For disabled people, golf can be a great way to take some exercise and participate in a relaxing and sociable activity. With the help of some specialist golfing buggies, disabled golfers can even stand tall while playing. But if you haven't thought about taking up golf or returning to the game you once loved, then that would be no surprise to Chris Smith, who founded the Disabled Golf Society less than two years ago.

"I was a golfer for more than 40 years before I was left disabled after a car accident in 2005," he says. "At first I didn't think I'd be able to walk at all again, never mind play golf. I sold my clubs and forgot all about it. Then my doctor advised that taking some exercise would be good for me. I realised that I still wanted to play golf but there didn't seem to be many options available. There wasn't

a society out there that could help me – there was a gap in the market." After doing some research, Smith realised that many keen golfers were not taking advantage of the many disabled golf opportunities available.

Smith set out to change that, bringing his skills and experience of running his own company to meet the challenge head on. "At first all I did was set up a website. I said to myself, 'let's see what happens.' Twenty people signed up in the first week. After one month we had 100. Today, more than 1,000 people visit the site every month. Estimates suggest that there are potentially 35,000 disabled people out there who might like to play golf. It's a more popular sport than many others but there wasn't any advice out there for people – no organisation, no clubs."

### On the fairways

*Lifestyle* met Smith on a blustery spring day at the New Malton golf course in Hertfordshire, where among those taking part in a Disabled Golf Society tournament was a relative newcomer to the fairways, David Proud – the actor who played Adam Best in *EastEnders*.

"It's perfectly feasible to have golf as an accessible sport," says Proud. "I've always admired the game – it's a lovely way to spend the day. Now I'm getting addicted to it. I like the 'ping' sound you get as you strike the ball. I'm pretty busy filming on various projects these days but I'm trying to fit in more games when I'm not working."

Inbetween holes, Smith is keen to explain that all abilities of golfer are now playing at Society events. "We are a pan-disability organisation," he says. "Whatever your disability we can give you help and advice. We get a lot of people who want to return to the game as well as those who have never tried the sport before. As a group we are now creating a level of interest that people will have to take notice of. We are already the largest organisation of our kind and now the big golfing associations are actively helping us help disabled people back onto the golf course. Around 90 per cent of our members are Motability customers."

The Society is also informing golfers, clubs and organisers how, with the assistance of special buggies, disabled

Actor David Proud (left) receives encouragement in his golf buggy

**“Golf is such a positive thing. If you’re feeling down, get involved”**

golfers can now get out onto the course to play, without damaging the carefully maintained greens. The buggies can raise golfers into a standing position in order to achieve a good swing. They’re all-terrain vehicles too – “you could take them into a forest if you wanted,” says Smith. Their extra asset, however, is special low pressure tyres. This means they can be driven onto the greens, where usually only golfers’ feet and the tyres of the groundsman’s mower are allowed to tread.

“The players can buy a buggy themselves – they cost around £1,700 – or they can rent them from us on a short-term rental,” says Smith. “You can strap yourself into the buggy and it will raise you up so you can achieve a standing position. If you’re usually in a wheelchair, getting that height again and hitting a shot is a great feeling. Our aim is to ensure we have the means to service the buggies and keep them running. We’re also in the process of developing equipment that will help people grip clubs. Of course

this is also going to cost money, so we need help with funding too.”

In the meantime, there are lots of ways to get involved. “We hold events regularly over the season,” says Smith. “The highlight for us this year is our first full-blown disabled golf international tournament between England and Scotland in October at Slayley Hall in Northumberland. We also run taster sessions where people can get professional coaching at a proper golf course, free of charge. If



## Learning to play – at home and abroad

A recent convert to the game of golf, *EastEnders* star David Proud has been learning to play both in Britain and abroad – where grey skies and cold winds are less likely to cut short a golfer’s time on the fairways.

“I had played golf before with the Disabled Golf Society and started to wonder about playing abroad,” he says. “So a few weeks ago we went to Tenerife and stayed at the Mar y Sol hotel, where I could use one of their own buggies to sit in or perch on, and of course use it

to help me stand up. You can be strapped into the buggies, but I prefer just to lean.

“Playing in Tenerife was great and the hotel we stayed at organises accessible sport activities. I got expert golf tuition to improve my driving, chips, putting and swing – I’ve also been coached by the same tutor in the UK.

“From the position I play in I can’t do a stereotypical swing so he looked at that. What I do now is more of a slice but

it really helped learning about how to connect with the ball and play through it. Everyone’s different – some people play with one hand.

“There was nowhere you couldn’t go at the hotel and you could also make use of their accessible spa treatments, including sports massage. It’s refreshing when you go places that deal with disabled people day in, day out. I’ll look forward to going back to Tenerife for the disabled golf tournament that they hold.”

At the seventh hole



you fancy a go, come along and try it. It can really improve your quality of life and your health."

At New Malton, playing alongside Smith and national event coordinator Graeme Robertson is the cowboy-hatted Tucker Chance. Chance was born Tom Jones but, as he comments, "someone else came along and took that name", – so Tucker took another one. In his time, Chance, who had polio as a child, has been a comedian and even a TV chef, but his primary passion is golf.

"I used to stand to play golf," he says, "but I gained weight and ended up playing seated. Then I saw the Disabled Golf Society on the internet, got in touch and now I'm one of their regional organisers. There's a real range of people who come along to play, from amputees who have never played before to those who used to play regularly but haven't for a long time. We get a decent standard too and there are plenty of tournaments to enter. I'll be at the Disabled British Open this year and then there's the Czech Open in June. I've played at the Dutch Open, and also a German open.

"I was 23rd in Europe in the disabled rankings at one point. But getting to some of the European competitions can be difficult for financial reasons. That's what we need to change over the next few years – to get sponsorship coming so we can play and also for the upkeep of the equipment."

### Driving forward

Ironically, for Chris Smith, setting up the Disabled Golf Society means he's now playing less of the game than before. "Yes, I'd like to play more," he says. "But running the Society means I now work seven days a week. But in some ways running the Society is my holiday. I enjoy every second of it. Golf is such a positive thing. If you're feeling down and miserable then I'd really recommend getting involved. We'll be able to give you something that might just make your life change a little bit. We want everyone who comes to us to have that same beneficial experience."

While the golfers on the greens are making friends, receiving tuition and getting some exercise, Smith is ready to build on the early success of the Society, plotting the route ahead.

"We're looking forward to finding a permanent home for the Disabled Golf Society," he says. "We need a place where we can store the equipment and set up an academy where anyone can come to play. Our members are fantastic and our success so far is down to their strength of will and sense of purpose. That's what will take us forward. We've now got links with Canada, India, America and Argentina. There are so many possibilities out there for the future and my dream is, by 2020, to have a tournament with ten international teams. Watch this space – it will happen!"



## Find out more

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