

It's All in Your Head

By: Craig Stirton

Uitenhage, 13 October 2021: Whether adapting to life as an amputee or playing the game of golf competitively, a positive mindset is everything. By this measure, @Deon Van Niekerk outlook on life is both inspirational and aspirational.

When individuals lose a limb, it is often the result of a harrowing accident. Van Niekerk's accident is about as harrowing as it gets.

"I went to Maun (in Botswana) for work. On the way back, 40 km from Francistown I was involved in a head-on collision with a 30-ton truck carrying an excavator," recalls Van Niekerk.

In an effort to take evasive action, Van Niekerk attempted to dive in between the seats. His right arm got caught in his seatbelt, however, and left it mangled.

Being in a particularly rural area of Botswana, assistance was slow to come. After some time and with great effort, Van Niekerk managed to extricate himself from the vehicle- the right-side of which had been damaged significantly from the right headlight all the way to the pillar behind the driver's seat.

Fortunately for Van Niekerk, policemen were on hand to rush him to Ngangabwe Hospital where an emergency operation was performed.

"I lost most of my blood and all I know was the (right) arm was off and they were amputating the shreds.

"Ja and then the new way of life started."

Despite the many challenges that Van Niekerk faced as an arm-amputee, he maintained an admirable perspective on his situation.

"The learned people say that a person losing an arm above the elbow loses 60% of what they could do.

"You learn quickly to manage most things and cope with things you cannot do. Yes frustration sets in but with the Grace of God and patience most things work out," he says.

A keen squash player prior to the accident, Van Niekerk turned his attention to another sporting pursuit- golf.

Former Botswana golfer and a friend of Van Niekerk's - Keith Munger had built a 9-hole golf course around his farm and it was there that Van Niekerk first played the game. Munger helped teach Van Niekerk the basics of the game too.

Clearly the fundamentals Munger instilled were pretty sound as Van Niekerk once recorded a hole in one at Tantebane Golf Club's par-3 18th, a short hole that plays over a dam. The ace even earned Van Nuekerk a story in Sports Illustrated magazine!

Having joined the SADGA six years ago, Van Niekerk was effusive in his praise for the work that the association does.

“It is uplifting and an absolute joy to be in the company of disabled people, enjoying companionship and playing a competitive sport where each of us is playing very competitively and also against one’s own head. That is the difficult part - Your own head!

“I absolutely love the support SADGA gives towards the disabled players as well as the camaraderie.

“The work done with the First Swing is great too!”

Van Niekerk’s appearances in the first two Canon Open Series events have been his first taste of competitive disabled golf. Nevertheless he has acquitted himself well with a 4th-placed finish at the Canon KwaZulu-Natal Disabled Open before a share of sixth-place at the Cape Town Disabled Open hosted by the City of Cape Town.

Having turned his attention to the Canon Port Elizabeth Open - Van Niekerk is hoping for an improved short-game and putting performance as he targets a top-3 finish.

As is often said about golf, Van Niekerk pointed to a strong mental game as being the key to executing on his goals.

“I am happy so far but know that I can do better.

“It’s a head thing!”

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Photos: Carl Fourie/ Gallo Images

