



## Golf and Health

### Case Study

# How Golf Saved My Life after Afghanistan Ordeal.

While on tour as a soldier in Afghanistan, Stewart Harris was involved in a harrowing incident. The Welshman endured significant challenges in his recovery, yet golf has boosted him both physically and mentally. Now an ambassador for Wales Golf, read his candid life experiences...

## The Background.

Dad-of-two Stewart suffered multiple injuries and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on duty in Afghanistan, when an improvised explosive device (IED) laid by the Taliban exploded under his army vehicle. "I served 13 years with the Welsh Guards and was posted in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Bosnia, Iraq and Afghanistan," said the former soldier.

"When the vehicle was hit, everything went dark. A few days later I woke up in Birmingham Queen Elizabeth Hospital. The doctor told me I had damaged lobes in my brain. That caused me to be blind in the right eye, partially in the left, deaf in the right ear, partially in the left. I also crushed one of my testicles, which came up into my stomach."



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## The Recovery.

Modern medicine quickly helped the now 34-year-old from Rhyl get his sight back sufficiently to retake his driving test, but further recovery proved more difficult. Although he responded well physically, his mental health suffered and he struggled with day-to-day tasks. At one point, he walked to the beach and questioned taking his own life by swimming out to sea until he could swim no more.

"I went to Hedley Court (the military hospital) and one day a guy, a Falklands veteran, came back in really buzzing. I asked him why and he said he had just been to play golf for the first time." The man had no legs, but help and equipment was around to assist patients and Stewart was asked along to play next time.

## The Love of Golf.

Given his eyesight problems, he wondered exactly how he could hit a shot. "At a driving range, I hit balls, about 50, left, right, around my feet but I remember one that I creamed right down the middle and it just felt amazing. I can still feel that grin now as it was then."

Soon, Stewart joined Rhyl Golf Club, close to his home, such was his early passion for the sport. "I can't put my rugby shirt back on, I can't go back into the boxing ring, but I can golf. Golf is such an inclusive sport, I can play with golfers of all abilities, as well as golfers with a disability."



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**The Best Therapy.**

Stewart, who plays off a 17 handicap, counts himself lucky. “Golf has given me everything. I have my family, a good job and a nice home. And it’s all because of what golf has done for me. I’ll play 9 holes, 18 holes on my own, or with strangers. It’s better than any therapy or medication I’ve ever had. I just want to thank everyone who works in golf for making it such an amazing sport.”

Stewart has played golf in national championships as a golfer, not as a disabled golfer, and has climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and the Three Peaks.

Overall, life is good for Stewart and he is creating new memories. One such day was in 2017 when, together with his father, they played golf at The Open venue Royal Lytham & St Annes and in doing so created a memory that will never leave either of them.

**The Ambassador.**

Given his remarkable story of recovery, Stewart was made an ambassador for the sport by Wales Golf. “In a way, golf has saved me and made a huge impact on life. I was at the lowest of the low places, did not want to be here and PTSD is incurable. But when I feel low I just go and hit a few balls and as soon as I hit that little white ball, then all my problems become that little white ball. I just want to hit that perfect shot.”

In his role with Wales Golf, he helps support clubs as part of a team delivering development programmes. So far, as an inclusive ambassador, Stewart has given several talks at golf clubs and been involved in the planning of an inclusive scheme for armed services veterans at Conwy GC, helping people into the sport. He also spoke at The R&A Symposium on Disability Golf in January 2018.

**Did you know?**

There is a full section of Modified Rules of Golf for golfers with disabilities.

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