

Four-wheel drive

By Ashley Zeldin | PUBLISHED Apr 25, 2011 | Lifestyle

From a distance, Sam Geta looks as if he is standing upright in an Elvis Presley-esque knock-kneed stance. He hits his approach shot and cheers triumphantly as his ball finds the edge of the green. He replaces the club in his golf bag, then lifts his legs one at a time back onto the accessible golf cart.

Geta is a paraplegic.

On July 26, 1990, the then-34-year-old Geta rode his motorcycle to work when his car was in a shop for repairs. The real estate agent was on his way to a listing appointment in Tarzana when a car making a left turn hit him.

Geta woke up as he was being loaded into the ambulance. He touched his legs and realized he was paralyzed, the very day President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans With Disabilities Act into law.

The aspiring golfer, who had taken up the game just two-and-a-half years prior and was considering a run at the PGA Champions Tour when he turned 50, thought he would never play again.

“All through rehab, the recreational therapists were trying to get me to read about wheelchair athletes,” Geta said of his six-month stay at Northridge Hospital. “I didn’t want to have anything to do with it. That’s what most people like this go through. ‘I’m not one of them.’ ”

He came around when Jack Williams, a veteran amputee for whom an annual golf tournament in Irvine is named, visited the hospital.

“He let everybody know that they could still play golf, even sitting down,” Geta said.

By then, a company called Golf Xpress had come out with accessible golf carts designed to distribute the weight of the cart and its rider equally so as not to cause damage to the green any more than a 250-pound player would.

But it took another seven years before Geta had regular access to an accessible cart.

According to mobilitygolf.com, an advocacy site that lists accessible golf courses and instruction, there are now 66 accessible courses statewide, including Santa Barbara Golf Club, Los Robles Greens Golf Course in Thousand Oaks and Woodley Lakes Golf Course in Van Nuys, where Geta, now 55, plays every week.

With encouragement from a former Fairfax High School classmate, Geta began playing golf again.

“We played a number of times, and he became very excited about the whole prospect of playing golf,” said Mark Tuna, who reunited with Geta after 25 years. “From my perspective, it added a whole new aspect to his life. He seemed to be more upbeat about being independent. It was quite uplifting.”



Geta learned to ignore the surprised stares and became so comfortable playing alongside able-bodied golfers that he joined the Woodley Lakes Men’s Golf Club and began competing in monthly tournaments. He became the first nonambulatory golfer to play at a PGA

event, the Buick Invitational Pro-Am in 2007. Upon learning that Torrey Pines

Golf Course in San Diego had an accessible cart, he wrote tournament director Tom Wilson, who invited him to use the cart to compete in the tournament.

In April 2008, he came across a story about Zohar Sharon, a blind Israeli international golf champion who plays with the help of his caddy. Sharon had been blinded in a chemical accident while on weapons detail in the Israel Defense Forces.

“Before I even finished reading, my brain was already imagining the two of us playing together,” said Geta, who was born in Netanya, Israel.

He contacted the Israel Golf Federation, wanting to help raise golf awareness in Israel in general but especially for the disabled, and got himself an invitation to play in the Sister Club Tournament at the Israel Open in October 2009.

Geta borrowed against the equity in his house to help pay for his trip; family members solicited donations, including El Al air miles, to help Geta — and an accessible cart he bought — get to Israel.

Geta and Sharon triumphed over their able-bodied opponents, stunning the Israeli public and the international golf world. The story on the news that night began, “Here now is a story that is simply hard to comprehend. A paralyzed man who must use a wheelchair to get around and a completely blind man decide to pair up and play in a golf tournament. They beat the whole field of able-bodied golfers to win the tournament. That happened this week in Israel.” Geta and Sharon repeated the feat the following year.

The station was flooded with calls from disabled people interested in playing golf, and so, before returning to the United States, Geta put on a golf clinic.

Meir Haion, who lost a leg after stepping on a land mine in 1984, was one of Geta’s eager students at the clinic.

“I had a love for the game since I was very young,” Haion said. It took him 25 years to get back onto the golf course. “Sam gave me another opportunity in life. Golf is my spiritual treatment.”

For Geta, the experience was a spiritual awakening.

“Finally, after 19 years, I understood what Hashem’s plan was for me,” he said. “I understood why I got hurt. Those guys in front of me were my dream becoming reality.”

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