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BLAZING A TRAIL FOR BLIND GOLF

Two years after losing his sight, Yam Tong Woo has not only returned to golfing but is determined to establish and develop blind golf in this country

By EDWARD SAMINATHAN

Seated at the Kundang Lakes Country Club terrace, Yam Tong Woo looks like any other golfer having a drink after a round.

But look closer and you will see a strange contraption by his side: a folded white cane.

"What's a blind guy doing here?" may be the first question that runs through your mind. "Do the blind even golf?" you may wonder next.

Yam not only plays golf but is determined to establish and popularize blind golf here.

"Other sports that the blind participate in like goalball usually involve only the blind; whereas golf is a game where they can play with the sighted," said the affable 55-year-old with silver-lined hair. "It allows for social

interaction, empowering them to walk shoulder to shoulder with the sighted and enjoy the game together."

Yam's passion to introduce golf to the visually-impaired community is admirable. Recently, he almost single-handedly organized the first-ever blind golf event in Malaysia, the National Council for the Blind (NCBM) Friendly Golf Game, and is keen to go further.

But barely two years ago, Yam was still a sighted golfer.

A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

In January 2008, Yam led an ordinary life as an automotive engineer in Kunming, China, as a husband and doting father to three children,

and as an avid golfer. He did not give a second thought to the fever he had contracted, not realizing that it was the start of a journey to a life without sight.

"It was a few days after New Year celebration. I had high fever and sought treatment in a private clinic. The next day, I started having eye discomfort and got admitted into a private hospital. Slowly, my eyesight began to blur," relates Yam.

"After a week of treatment there, I was transferred back to a hospital here in Malaysia. Operations and treatments did not help to save my sight and not too long later, the doctors had bad news for me: I was irreversibly blind," he adds.

A bacterial infection, specifically the water-borne *Klebsiella* bacteria, not only left Yam blind but seriously affected his lung and liver functions; requiring him to undergo more operations and treatment. It took him almost an entire year to get back on his feet and in a way, learn to live life again.

"Life is such that never in my wildest dreams would I have given the slightest thought of this happening to me," says Yam. "I felt like I was plunged into outer space; a darkness enveloping me and not knowing what was out there. Isolation, helplessness and fear – a mixed bag of emotions; it was a shock beyond description."

"And my career came to a sudden stop. At 54, I was too young to be in this state," adds Yam, the disappointment still apparent in his voice.

PICKING UP THE PIECES

With his wife of three decades, Hong, and his three children by his side, Yam slowly but surely began picking up the pieces of his life. Little did he realize then that his battle would give him the strength and opportunity to help other unsighted folk.

"I must admit that I begin questioning my purpose in life. I felt so depressed, angry and sad that I had become a burden to my family," reveals Yam. "My initial visit to the Malaysian Association for the Blind (MAB) was to seek advice and counselling. Later on, I begin enrolling in their programmes, which empowered me to be independent."

Learning to move around with the white cane was the most important thing for Yam. "The cane is surely the essential mobility tool to me now and I cannot leave home without it," explains the Kuang resident, reaching out for his cane on the table.

But if there is something else that Yam

acknowledges has allowed him to lead a normal life, is being able to use the computer. With a special screen-reader software, Yam is able to communicate via email and access the internet just like any other person.

"He's even better at typing than me and my, can he sms!" exclaims proud wife Hong.

Yam also wears a watch and before the question could be asked, he points out that "the watch talks."

GOLFING AGAIN

Turning to a topic that makes Yam sit up; we talk about his passion for golf and, in particular, blind golf. A social golfer since 1994, Yam played off handicap 22 before losing his sight. So, what pushed him to take-up golf again?

"After losing my sight, I became sedentary. I tried jogging which I used to do with my dogs but I didn't find it enjoyable. My sons urged me to go to the driving range to try hitting some balls," states Yam. "But, I felt embarrassed about how would people react. But I know the staff at Kundang Lakes well, so I called the club manager and told him about my situation. He said "I was ever so welcome to come back." And so, I forced myself to overcome that mental barrier."

The first swing as a blind golfer was a poignant moment for Yam "I stood there on the driving range, the same spot that I have stood many times before. Except now, all I could see was darkness," he recalls.

Soon, Yam returned to the course as probably the first 'blind golfer' in the country.

"Blind golf is very different. I need a sighted guide to help me assess the terrain and distance as well as the position of the ball, club face, pin and myself," he explains.

"The rest is dependent on your own feel and judgement. Just keep your head down and focus on the location of the ball, even if

you can't see it. The icing on the cake is obviously hearing sound of a good contact when the club strikes the ball. There is always a lapse of silence, seconds of anxious waiting after hitting the ball; unlike previously, when I can focus on the flying ball for a few seconds," Yam elaborates.

"Being dependent on a sighted guide, you need to be patient and very importantly, trust the advice given. There's really no two-ways about it," says Yam.

Yam says that being able to swing again has been therapeutic. "It helped me regain some of my confidence and self esteem. Now, I'm able to invite my golfing *kakis* to play with me," he grins.

This was what inspired Yam to develop blind golf here, so that more blind people can benefit from the therapeutic effects of golfing.

THE EVENT

"The idea for a blind golf event came up during a casual chat with my friend, Moses Choo from the NCBM. He was talking about the Hong Kong Blind Sports Association (HKBSA), which were in close contact with NCBM. I then found out that one of the activities organized by HKBSA was golf. I was ecstatic!" explains Yam.

He adds, "So I told Moses, I would very much like to get involved if there was a possibility of getting blind golf here. We begin communicating with our Hong Kong counterparts and we were lucky as they were keen to help us spread the game here. It took us a few months to get the ball rolling and then we begin approaching the clubs here."

Yam's voice takes on a serious tone when asked about the reception from local clubs. "Most of the clubs have not heard about the blind playing golf and they were quite sceptical. Most were not favourable for myriad



In motion



Yam with his eyes to the world now, Hong



"This is how its done," says Yam, as his wife looks on of reasons but I don't blame them. That is the point I realized that there is little or no awareness at all about blind golf here in Malaysia. It was always going to be an uphill task," relates Yam.

Finally, Yam managed to rope in Bukit Jalil Golf & Country Club as the host for the first ever blind golf event in Malaysia on October 15. Yam relates his first meeting with the club's management: "On our first meeting, I could sense the shock in them seeing a blind guy walking up to them. For the first ten minutes, you could feel the awkwardness; how do respond and what to do," he chuckles. "But they listened to our requests and by the time I met them for the second and third meeting, the barriers had broken down and everything was fine."

With the event running smoothly with few hitches, Yam is proud that the first step towards introducing blind golf has been successful. "We managed to create public awareness but we still have a long way to go. We can't change mindsets overnight and people will be people; unless there is a continued awareness push, interest will wane," he admits.



With wife and kids back in 2005

"But more importantly, for many of my blind friends, this was the first time they were holding golf clubs or even stepping foot into a course. Whether they will play again or not, I don't know, but I know that they will cherish that experience for a lifetime. It gives them bragging rights. Air shots are immaterial but at least they have been exposed to golf, what's the game all about, how it's played and how difficult it is," says Yam.

Yam is currently on a mission to form a pro-tem blind golf association here, with the end goal of gaining affiliating with the International Blind Golf Association (IBGA).

"Without a proper set-up, it will be difficult for us to get sponsors, financial assistance and support from the golfing fraternity. Also, with consistent exposure and opportunity, more visually-impaired individuals will be able to take up the game. Who know, maybe one day, the

world champion may be from Malaysia! Hopefully I can get this off the ground," says Yam.

"But of course, there are a lot of sceptics around, whether blind or sighted. I have to overcome all these hurdles and just keep going. But I'm confident it can be done. Even in England and Scotland, where the game is flourishing now, the people who initially started the game also faced similar hurdles. So, it's just a rite of passage that I have to go through but at least, I can learn from their experiences," stresses Yam, his conviction apparent.

The American blind educator, Helen Keller, once said: 'When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us.' Yam Tong Woo is set to open more doors not only for himself but others as well. ■

ABOUT BLIND GOLF

Blind golf is governed by the same R&A and USGA rules as regular golf, except that blind golfers are allowed to ground their clubs in a hazard.

The caddies, or sighted guides, play an important role in giving the player as much information as required, describing the terrain, giving the direction and distance as accurately as possible and then lining up the player for the desired shot.

On the green, the player and guide work closely together in assessing the distance and borrow from the ball to the pin, which will involve pacing from the ball to the pin and determining the strength and line of shot.

The International Blind Golf Association (IBGA) is the governing and sanctioning body of blind golf events worldwide. The IBGA is dedicated to coordinating efforts to promote blind golf internationally and assisting blind golfers to enjoy golf. It was formed in 1998 with the United States Blind Golf Association (USBGA) as one of its pioneering members.

Together with the United States; Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Ireland, South Africa and Hong

Kong make up the current IBGA membership, while France and Israel are associate members. Biannually since 2000, a member country hosts the International Blind Golf Championships.

Similar to golf, blind golf has its own Majors: the USBGA National Championship, which is in its 64th edition in 2010, the Ken Venturi Guiding Eyes Classic, the "Masters" of blind golf since 1978 and the British Open. Other notable tournaments include the Japan Open Championship, the Australian Open and the Auld Enemies Cup, a Ryder Cup-format tournament between England and Scotland.

World Blind Golf Championship

2000	Marriot Dalmahoy GCC	Scotland, UK
2002	Niakwa CC	Winnipeg, Canada
2004	Rosebud CC	Melbourne, Australia
2006	Five Hundred Club	Shizuoka, Japan
2008	Belvoir Park GC	Belfast, Northern Ireland
2010	Whittlebury Park GCC	Northamptonshire, UK