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## The San Diego Union-Tribune.

### 'This feels so good'

#### TaylorMade Golf provides clubs and instruction to benefit wounded veterans program

By Tod Leonard  
STAFF WRITER

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CARLSBAD – A bright smile on his youthful, clean-cut face, Jake Williams looked down at the beautiful golf clubs arranged in a new black bag just for him, and he didn't quite know what to say or do. He could almost see his reflection in the shine, the irons' soles not yet stained by a single blade of grass.

"I'm afraid to touch 'em," Williams said with a giggle, handling the irons as if they were made of crystal. All Williams had ever played golf with before was Kmart cheapies, and now he was a little blown away by the moment: The full set of clubs before him were his to keep, courtesy of TaylorMade Golf, and in just a few moments he was about to get two hours of instruction on the TaylorMade driving range from one of the country's most renowned teachers, Jim Flick.

"This is huge," Williams, 20, said. "It builds somebody up as a person, just to know there are people out there willing to help you, who really care."

On Aug. 13 of last year – his 20th birthday – Williams, an Army private from Sun City, a kid who had played on the tennis team at San Jacinto College, was on patrol in Iraq when he was fired upon. An armor-piercing round grazed Williams' throat and blew off his right hand below the elbow.

Less than nine months later, Williams was standing in the warm sunshine yesterday at TaylorMade with two fellow combat amputees, and they were getting the kind of star treatment afforded PGA Tour pros such as Sergio Garcia and Retief Goosen on their visits to "The Kingdom."

"Kind of unreal. The feeling is hard to explain," said Army Spec. Alroy Billiman, an avid golfer whose right arm was amputated above the elbow following a roadside explosion on Nov 9, 2006.

This day was dubbed "Operation: Game On!" by Tony Perez, the San Diegan who had the idea for the project. Perez, the president of the local Pin Pals golf program for underprivileged youth, is a Vietnam veteran who wanted to do something special for wounded military personnel.

Perez first arranged for several amputees to help him with his first-tee announcing duties at his year's Buick Invitational, and when he found out several of the veterans had a passion for playing golf, he went to work with TaylorMade to make it happen.

Two weeks ago, the golfers were fitted for clubs at TaylorMade, and yesterday they were each presented with their own full set on the driving range. Flick then took time with each of them to work on the specific issues with their swings.

Navy hospital corpsman Randell Leoncio, 26, wore golf shorts to reveal the metal prosthetic that is now his lower right leg. His femur was shattered by a roadside blast on Oct. 4, 2005, in Ramadi, and Leoncio was awarded the Bronze Star for ignoring his injuries while going to the aid of his platoon commander.

Flick worked with him on making a full turn with his hips, and when Leoncio drilled a shot long and straight, the instructor of Jack Nicklaus and many others exclaimed, "Perfect! Perfect!"

Williams and Billiman, 28, both have special prosthetics on their arms that allow them to screw in a golf club holder, developed by an amputee in Colorado. They slide the club into the ring of the holder and then grip the tubing with their other hand.

After some instruction from Flick, Billiman pulled out his driver and began hammering nice, shapely draws that were traveling well over 200 yards.

A grateful smile on his face, Billiman clasped hands with Flick and quietly said, "This feels so good."

Billiman is a Navajo Indian from Northern Arizona who grew up working hard on a ranch with his dad. An inactive Army reservist, he was set to do that for life when he got a letter requiring him to return to duty. Eight months later he lost his arm.

"It was tough for me in the beginning," Billiman said. "Everything flashed before me, all my dreams – I was thinking, 'What am I going to do now?'"

At the Navy Medical Center in San Diego, where a sizable portion of the 800 Iraq War amputees have gone for recovery, they have been aggressive in getting veterans back into daily activities, including sports such as snowboarding and surfing. Golf is the No. 1 amputee sport, according to Peter Harsch, the Navy's director of prosthetics in San Diego.

"These guys are competitive, young, healthy. We expose them to as much opportunity as possible," said Harsch, who helps provide prosthetics for activities such as swimming, basketball and running. "You see these three young men out here, they'll be golfing for many years to come. They can say, 'Honey, I'm going out to play a round with the guys.' You tell me what that means? That's what it's giving them."

Billiman knows that deep satisfaction. He first played in an amputee tournament a year ago and got hooked. He bought some off-brand clubs and, true to his nature, has practiced hard at it. He relishes beating his able-bodied buddies.

"In basketball, I can't play with the guys like I used to; I can't dominate," Billiman said. "In golf, I've got the feeling that I can beat anybody. Golf with my dad and brother, it's good therapy for me. It helps me out a lot, to be able to do things other people can do."