

Client Story: An Interview with Blind Golf Champion Diane Wilson

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What is your story?

“When I was in high school my vision couldn’t be corrected past 20/40 vision. As a young adult I learned the good news was I wouldn’t be totally blind; that was the first time I heard of macular degeneration. My macular degeneration progressed slowly throughout my teaching career; in fact, I’ve only been legally blind in the past few years. While I was working I would play golf a few times each year and joined the US Blind Golf Association in 2009; and I became a US Women’s Open Champion in 2011. I retired in 2012 from teaching kindergarten, which gave me more time for golf. When I was still teaching, my principal arranged for me and other low vision coworkers to visit SightConnection. We visited the store and purchased some great adaptive aids. It was also at SightConnection that I learned how to use assistive technology to help me read at work. I was seen in the low vision clinic where I was prescribed a telescopic lens to compensate for my macular degeneration until my central vision completely disappeared. Now I still shop at the SightConnection store, check in with the clinic, and use assistive technology to read emails.”

What is United States Blind Golf Association?

“The United States Blind Golf Association (USBGA) was established in 1953 for the purpose of encouraging and enhancing opportunities for blind and visually impaired golfers to compete in the game of golf. We accept all low vision players over the age of 18 and no previous experience is required. There are no categories based on gender or age. We need more players, especially women, to join USBGA.

Most members of USBGA played golf before their vision loss; and many of them thought that they couldn’t play anymore. They quickly learned our mantras: “Anything is possible in partnership” and “You don’t have to see it to tee it.” It’s possible to be active like you were before vision loss. We play competitively in one open national tournament and two open regional tournaments each year with players from around the world joining us. Competitors are divided in to three vision capability categories: B3’s have visual acuity above 20/600 up to visual acuity of less than 20/200.; B2’s have the visual acuity of 20/600; and B1’s have no vision. To become a member, anyone with low vision need only contact us and we will give them a coaching handbook to get started. To compete we need a player to provide confirmation of their vision diagnosis by their doctor and their five top golf scores.”

How do you play golf with low vision?

“We play golf in very much the same way as full-sighted players with eighteen holes played each day of competition; we are only limited in that a coach has to be with us and become our eyes. Players often don’t even see the flag or the grass, so a coach can align you according to another visual cue such as the dark outline of a tree. When putting, the coach also indicates verbally how far to position the club: a ‘1’ is a tap, ‘2’ is a hit, and ‘3’ is a full put. Sometimes the coach helps align the player with the hole or place them in the right direction; in those cases the physical contact make up for vision loss. The relationship between coach and golfer involves a lot of trust; you have to learn to trust them just as much if not more than your own eyes. My husband is my coach. We had to work through things; sometimes a coach can be overly helpful. There have been many people in USBGA who have had devastating experiences tied to their vision loss, but seeing them play is so uplifting. It shows they still keep going.”

What would you say to someone just diagnosed with low vision?

“I would tell them to stay as positive as possible. From hearing stories of other USBGA players, I’ve learned that not only are you not alone, you are better off in more ways than you expected. There are so many opportunities and resources at places like SightConnection to help you adapt to vision changes. Even though there are frustrating times with low vision, don’t lose sight — your life isn’t over. Sometimes I feel guilty for having more sight than other players. I’ve had people with no vision tell me that it is probably worse for someone like me, because I look like I have normal vision and people expect me to be able to do anything. It’s hard for me to admit I need some help but SightConnection has been the place where I can find the right tools for me. Low vision doesn’t mean you can’t do things. You just need a coach to lead and assist you. SightConnection can be a coach for your life.”

For more information about USBGA visit www.usblindgolf.com or contact Diane at bigblittled@msn.com.