

**M**arty Ebel enjoys playing golf. He hits the ball pretty well for the average Joe, usually scoring in the 90s. While there is an issue with Ebel's golf game, it has nothing to do with his skill level.

Ebel says the golf industry doesn't embrace him as a player. Because he's an amputee — he doesn't have legs from above his knees — Ebel says he's been made to feel like an outcast at some golf courses. Worse, Ebel says others with similar disabilities, including paraplegics, have been treated the same.

What a pity — not for Ebel but for the people in the golf industry who have caused him this humiliation.

Ebel doesn't want you to feel sorry for him. He's a strong soul who's out to prove that he and others with such disabilities belong on the same golf courses as able-bodied players.

The 47-year-old Massachusetts lawyer played golf long before he lost his legs in a front-loader accident 21 years ago, and nobody is about to stop him from playing now. In fact, when Ebel plays now he says the game feels the same as it did when he was able to walk a course with his two feet.

And it's a beautiful feeling. But unfortunately, that good feeling can quickly turn into a sinking feeling in Ebel's gut when the dark clouds of presumption and prejudice roll in. That's when others — from golf course employees to players — cast Ebel and his specially designed single-rider golf car in a dubious light and charge that:

"He's going to slow everybody down with his plodding play."

"He's going to tear up the green with that funky golf car."

"He has no business being out there."

Ebel doesn't get that treatment everywhere, but he still says the golf industry has a long way to go when it comes to servicing some disabled golfers appropriately.

It sounds from Ebel that some courses are downright discriminatory in their approach, not to mention ungracious. While other courses are undoubtedly less insulting, it's

## Giving Them Golf — And So Much More

BY LARRY AYLWARD



COURSES NEED  
TO LOOK INTO  
SUPPLYING  
SINGLE-RIDER  
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DISABILITIES

probably safe to assume they would rather not have to deal with disabled golfers like Ebel if they don't have to.

Like a lot of folks, Ebel has heard everyone from the leaders of the National Golf Course Owners Association (NGCOA) to the superintendent of the nine-hole public golf course in Smalltown, America, clamoring that the stagnant golf industry needs to do something to attract new golfers and increase rounds played. So Ebel doesn't understand why golf courses don't do a better job of rolling out the welcome mat to attract players with disabilities like his own. The industry would benefit with a spike in rounds played if it did, insists Ebel, a trustee with the National Amputee Golf Association.

Golf courses by law are required to make their facilities accessible to disabled people, according to the Americans with Disabilities Act. But Ebel insists that most courses have not made a concerted effort to do so.

This is where the matter gets murky. If the law says golf courses must be made more accessible to the disabled, shouldn't that require golf courses to purchase single-rider golf cars? While Ebel admits the law isn't explicit, he does believe its wording is clear enough to require golf courses to supply single-rider cars. Incidentally, only a small percentage of the nation's roughly 17,000 golf courses do supply them.

Ebel believes that one reason golf courses have balked at buying single-rider cars is because they believe there isn't a large enough audience of disabled golfers to use them. For that reason, Mike Tinkey, the deputy executive director of the NGCOA, believes golf courses shouldn't be required to purchase single-rider cars. But Ebel insists

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more people who are amputees, paraplegics or senior citizens who simply have trouble walking would come out of the woodwork to play golf if they were made welcome by golf courses. And welcome partly means a course would provide a single-rider car.

Perhaps this is where the issue becomes less about the law and more about golf courses doing what's right and possibly helping their businesses and images in the process.

The issue is about integrity at its core. It's about a golf course's brass — from owners to general managers to superintendents — opening their minds and their hearts to *really* welcome disabled people to their courses. They shouldn't do it because they have to. They should do it because they want to — because it's the right thing to do.

And apart from that genuine commitment, a golf course has to do more than just purchase and supply a single-rider golf car or two to demonstrate its earnestness and commitment to attract disabled golfers. A course needs to let its golfing public know that it has purchased a car for use and that disabled people who want to use it to play golf are welcome at its facility. A course has to market the initiative.

Then the course needs to educate its able-bodied players, which could be its bread-and-butter clientele, that the specially designed golf car, which might feature a 350-degree swivel seat and ergonomic controls for the disabled operator, is manufactured so it can be driven on greens and tees without damaging turf.

Then the course needs to enlighten the same able-bodied players that just because a player doesn't have legs and is using a single-rider car doesn't mean he's going to slow down play for golfers playing behind him.

While single-rider golf cars are expensive — they can cost twice as much a normal golf car — a lot of



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golf course owners can afford them. In fact, golf courses that make less than \$1 million in revenue or have fewer than 30 employees are eligible for a federal tax credit, which will bring the car's price down dramatically. The bottom line is this: A single-rider car might pay for itself whether purchased or leased in a short time if it's marketed effectively. That will take a commitment and some planning on behalf of the operator, but that's what running a solid and exemplary business is all about.

This has been a hot issue as of late. In fact, the U.S. Department of Justice is now considering a mandate to require every golf course in America to provide one or two accessible golf cars at its facility at a potential cost of \$6,000 to \$12,000 per golf course.

While Tinkey disagrees with the mandate, that doesn't mean he's discriminatory against players like Ebel. "We're all about attracting and retaining more golfers," Tinkey says of the NGCOA's mission, noting that it includes attracting and retaining players with various disabilities.

Tinkey only questions whether there are enough potential disabled players to use them. It is a gray area with various statistics that can be debated, and Tinkey can't be faulted for taking such a guarded stance.

But the fact remains that there are

**Marty Ebel lost his legs below the knee when he was 21, but that has not stopped him from playing golf.**

many good reasons for golf courses to purchase single-rider cars. And whether the Department of Justice passes the mandate or not, golf courses should look into this matter on their own.

They need to conduct some research on the matter — yes, it might require some time and money — to discover if there are potential disabled players in their respective regions who will come to their courses and use the single-rider cars.

Ultimately, this is an issue about the triumph of the human spirit. Roger Pretekin, president of SoloRider, a Centennial, Colo.-based single-rider car manufacturer, loves to tell a story about a woman with multiple sclerosis who was able to play golf again because of the advent of the single-rider car. The woman told Pretekin, "Thank you for giving me my life back."

Golf courses around the country might be able to give even more lives back. It's time they look into the matter to see if they can.

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