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Getting back in the game

Disabled golfers tee up with one-rider carts

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In 1991, doctors told Joe Kopistecki he would never walk again. Then a 47-year-old former truck driver, Kopistecki suffered from an inflammation of the spinal cord that left him partially paralyzed from the waist down.

To the Blackwood resident, the doctors' pronouncement also meant he would never play golf again.

Yet six years later, Kopistecki was back on the golf course using a single-rider golf cart especially designed for disabled golfers that takes him from tee box to green. The cart has a seat that rotates 360 degrees, allowing disabled golfers to maneuver over the ball.

"This car lets me get out of my house and on the golf course, which is tremendous for my emotional and physical stability," said Kopistecki, who golfs at Valley Brook Golf Club in Blackwood, Camden County.

For years, golf courses have allowed those with disabilities to drive closer to the green. But those golfers still had to walk some distance to the ball. There were few options for those who were as mobility-impaired as Kopistecki.

But the tide is slowly turning as regulations begin to flow down from the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990. After passage of the law, the PGA set a precedent when it purchased single-rider carts for each of its 23 Tournament Players Clubs, including Jasna Polana in Princeton.

Since then, golf courses all over the country have begun to provide single-rider carts for disabled golfers.

Union County bought one of the carts more than five years ago and Morris County bought the carts about three years ago. And in April, the Somerset County Park Commission bought four single-rider golf carts for its four county courses.

In New Jersey, however, only a small proportion of the 167 public golf courses have single-rider golf carts on hand.

Several counties let handicapped golfers put a special flag on their carts so they can drive closer up to the fairway, closer to the tee.

County officials who don't offer the single-rider carts say there's no demand for the machines.

Dan Salvante, who oversees Essex County's golf courses, said not having the carts hasn't been an issue here. They offer the flags, but with no one pushing for the purchase of the carts - which can cost between \$2,000 and \$7,000 - they haven't bought any.

The same is true in Middlesex County, where none of the county's three courses offer the single-rider carts. No one has ever considered buying them because no one has requested them, said Jane Leal, a spokeswoman for the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, which operates the county's courses.

"But it's certainly something I'm interested in getting more information about and looking at," Leal said.

Other counties are providing single-rider carts because they want to offer golf for everyone, according to Gary Robb, executive director for the National Center on Accessibility.

Others are planning for the day when the Justice Department requires every course to provide equal access to people with disabilities, he said.

ADA regulations included golf courses, mandating that access be provided to people with disabilities, Robb said, but noted the law does not clearly define the type of access required.

"The real questions are what the golf courses will be required to do and what provisions will be allowed to provide disabled golfers access to greens and tee boxes," he said.

After being briefed on the Americans with Disabilities Act and seeing the single-rider carts at a golf convention, Morris County Golf Superintendent Rene Klose recommended buying the carts.

They are infrequently used, probably a couple of times a week at each course, she said. But before they had the special carts, Klose said, it was difficult for disabled golfers to play on county courses.

"One golfer in a wheelchair used to play our courses. He would roll his chair right up to the green, but was nice enough to stay there, and not go on the green. Another golfer would get his ball and bring it near him, so he could putt," she recalled.

Union County, which has one of the carts at each of its courses, was one of the first counties in the state to buy the single-rider carts. County officials made the purchase because they knew they were needed.

"We have been involved for over eight years with the Eastern Amputee Golf Association and have been conducting clinics at our golf courses, and the need for these specialized carts became apparent through our involvement with that association," said Charles Sigmund, the county's director of parks and recreation.

Meanwhile, some users say there are still kinks to be worked out with the design of the single-rider carts. Their main concern is that they operate on rechargeable batteries that often run out of power before a full round of golf is finished, stranding disabled users, course operators say.

Kopistecki has had a few problems with the battery and wheels on his cart. "I didn't know you had to put distilled water in the battery cells, and so it has conked out on me a few times where they had to come tow me in," he said.

Another time, a wheel got stuck, but he is not deterred.

"But if it wasn't for this car, I wouldn't be able to golf, so I'll put up with it," Kopistecki said.

Once word spreads that these carts exist, the more popular they'll become. At least that's what people such as Laura Kirkpatrick, supervisor for the Therapeutic Recreational Division for Monmouth County Parks, say. The county courses there have four single-rider carts.

"The more advertising that these single-riders are getting, the more people are learning that they're able to golf," Kilpatrick said.