



Photo: Julia Evans

"LOSING MY ARM GAVE ME A FUTURE"

Written by Craig Stirton

One kick. One kick of the soccer ball was all it took for Raylen De Wee's life to change forever. Nearly a decade since that fateful winter's evening and the 21-year-old arm-amputee is carving out a bright future for himself one swing at a time.

An afternoon-turned-evening in Carnarvon spent like any other - playing sport with his friends took a turn that De Wee could've scarcely believed was in the offing. "I was 12-years-old when on the 8th of June the accident happened after I played soccer," De Wee recalls.

The accident occurred just minutes after he and his friends had parted ways for the evening. Kicking his soccer ball as he made his way home, a poorly-lit area prevented him from seeing an electricity cable dangling in the line of one of his kicks. De Wee was "grounded" at the time which meant that the effects of the electrocution were all the more devastating.

His clothes and shoes were burnt to a cinder and the electricity which coursed through his body caused untold damage - damage that would continue to negatively affect him for years to come. Knocked unconscious by the sheer force of 33 000 volts of electricity which shot through his body, De Wee awoke in a bed at Kimberley Hospital. It was then that he received the news that anybody in such a

"The doctors told me there was nothing they could do for my arm and that they had no option but to amputate," says De Wee.

The amputation would be the beginning of a period that would test the physical and mental resolve of any individual let alone a 12-year-old boy. After spending three months in Kimberley Hospital, De Wee was transferred to Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town.

One year and an astonishing 17 operations later, Raylen remarked that it was faith which had helped him through his darkest times. "The doctors treated me very well and I survived which I am very thankful for. God was with me through the painful times and the doctor said my heart was very strong which shows we can do nothing without God."



Above: Raylen De Wee reflects on a life defined by perseverance.

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After finally being discharged from Red Cross, De Wee began his new life as a pupil of Astra school in the Cape Town suburb of Montana. For the second time in as many years, De Wee's life would take a second - though decidedly more welcome turn.

Having caddied and played as a youngster at Carnarvon's local golf course, a visit to Astra by the South African Disabled Golf Association piqued the youngster's interest. Though playing with one arm instead of two must have felt awfully foreign and unnatural, there was no denying Raylen's natural ability as SADGA Operations Manager Lily Reich explains.

"The first time that we had him, our coach said to me 'that's a player'. Good hand-eye coordination. He's very good with ball skills and has very good eyesight so we realised quite early on that he could be a very good golfer," Reich explains.

That serendipitous first meeting was but the first chapter in a story that has come full-circle. In the ensuing years, Raylen has completed SADGA's five-tiered First Swing Program and is now a member of the Association's Elite squad. Recognising that Raylen not only had potential as a player but as a coach too, Reich worked her magic to enrol De Wee in the PGA Grow Golf Coaches course.

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Today Raylen is the head coach of the Astra First Swing Program for children. Reich says there are a number of traits which make Raylen the ideal role-model. "He's very very gentle and he's very funny. The kids love him. He's very down to earth and he's very accepting of his disability, he never ever complains."

Raylen's golf journey has been far from easy. Despite the physical struggle he has to deal with every time he plays, De Wee has kept plugging away and shows signs of slow but steady improvement.

In his debut at the 2014 SA Disabled Golf Open, De Wee proved a talented player to keep an eye on with a victory in the Stableford category of the Arm-Amputee division. Though he followed it up with three further titles, the pieces of the puzzle are only just beginning to fall into place.

In the past year, Raylen's handicap has come down from 19 to 11 - a remarkable feat by anybody's standards and an improvement he attributes to a better work ethic.

"I was a high-handicap for quite a while but then I began to practice, and practice. I played a lot of rounds of golf and combined with the practice, lowered my handicap," he explains. As for the future, Raylen has aspirations of following in the footsteps of fellow SADGA member and four-time World One-Arm champion, Reinard Schuhknecht. As Raylen points out though, he'll need to dig deep to achieve his dreams.

"I want to one day be better than Reinard, so he is an inspiration. I must practice harder and mustn't give up."

Yet being part of SADGA has done more than just help De Wee perfect his golf game. One of the perks of being a First Swing Program coach and part of the Elite squad is flat residence in a safe area with the added bonus of a monthly stipend.

De Wee admits that were it not for the loss of his arm, his life would have panned out very differently. "I wouldn't be here today, if not for the accident. I would just be sitting at home in Carnarvon... Losing my arm gave me a future."

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