

## **Teeing Up Olympic Dreams on a Public Course**

Erik Simmons patted his putter he affectionately calls “Maui Zowie.”

He had just finished a nine-hole practice round on the Williams 9 at Metro Parks Tacoma’s Meadow Park Golf Course with other fellow Special Olympian athletes. Like any golfer he was enjoying the memory of making two nearly 20 foot putts.

But the one he wanted to talk about was the really long one that he almost made. He told his story quickly. The ball lay 40 feet away from the cup, “maybe 36 feet,” he allowed. With “Maui Zowie!” he stroked the ball. Remembering the golf ball’s seemingly unerring path, Simmons’ eyes narrowed as he sighted down the outstretched fingers of his right hand. The ball stopped two feet short of the cup but it had been close and wonderful to watch. He enjoyed the retelling of it.

Simmons, 40, was among a couple dozen athletes in Metro Parks Special Olympics Golf Program at the regular Monday practice last month. All were getting their swings, chips and putts in shape for the Washington State Special Olympics regional golf competition to be held July 29 at Meadow Park.



Metro Parks is hosting the regional tournament for the eighth year in a row and it is expected to draw 260 athletes along with their families and friends. There are members of 17 Special Olympics teams from nine

counties in southwest and northwest Washington as well as King County. Metro Parks alone will field more than two dozen athletes on its team for the event.

The regional event is a big deal in Special Olympics golf. Gold Medal winners at the regional tournament are invited to the state tournament to be held later this summer at Fairwood Golf & Country Club in Renton.

### **Metro Parks’ golfers score medals**

Metro Parks Special Olympics golfers were well represented at state last year.

“We went home with a lot of medals,” said Metro Parks’ Julie Hollatz, second year coach of the Special Olympics golf team.

David Young, joined the Metro Parks golf team in 2010, won at regionals last year and went on to earn a gold medal at state. He was firm about his goal this year. More medals, he said.

The regional tournament will take over Meadow Park Golf Course for most of the day. It means a loss of revenue for a day on a summer Sunday, but Meadow Park Golf and Business Operations Assistant Erik Haag said it is worth it.

“Mainly it’s a feel good event,” he said. Watching the golfers get excited about making a good shot is worth all the effort.

The competition includes Special Olympians playing both Meadow Park’s 9-hole course and the 18-hole course. Most of the golfers are accompanied by a volunteer mentor or coach. While some golfers play a ball on their own, others alternate shots to keep the pace going. Athletes unable to walk the course itself will test their skills on six stations set up on the putting and chipping greens, as well as the driving range.



On the driving range, Bill Fueston of Tacoma watched his son Bill, 37, practice. Bill’s backswing is short, but he has a good follow through. When he connects, the ball flies. Though they have played together for many years, Fueston said they joined the program two years ago because he wanted his son to learn the rules and etiquette of golf. Bill didn’t compete at the regional tournament last year but hopes to this month.

“He’s getting better,” Fueston said.

Kristina Heckard, 18, of Bonney Lake, was driving her balls high and straight. She is in her fourth year with the golf program. Her mother Tracy stood behind her and praised her good shots. She said her daughter is a natural athlete and loves golf. If she is not out hitting real golf balls, she is hitting the lightweight Wiffle balls in the backyard with her Dad. She also plays volleyball, basketball and bowls. Tracy said her daughter is out of school for the summer and getting bored. Golf helps fill the summer doldrums.

“We don’t have anything without Metro Parks,” she said. “The program is awesome and the people are wonderful. They are very caring.”

### **Special Olympians**

Special Olympics sports is but a small part of Metro Parks Specialized Recreation Program which has provided a variety of recreation, social events, outings and sports for individuals with intellectual disabilities for 55 years.

Kodi Smith-Doty coordinates the program which serves people with intellectual disabilities out of Metro Parks' sprawling Star Center complex in South Tacoma. Last year, the program served approximately 450 people and many participants took part in more than one sport or event.

Activities and sports programs happen year around. While the two-month summer golf program is aimed at Special Olympics competition, golf sessions are also offered in spring and fall.

Metro Park's also offers competitive Special Olympics programs in soccer, track and field, softball, bowling, volleyball and basketball.

Smith-Doty credits Omar Canty, the executive director of the Puyallup-based Options Unlimited Inc., with helping start the specialized golf program. Options Unlimited Inc. is a community-based, supportive-living program for adults with intellectual disabilities which currently serves 25 clients living in the area.



Canty is a golfer himself and said he wanted to help change the image that golf courses are for the elite and change attitudes about people with disabilities. He recalled a comment back in 1999 from a golfer who referred to them as “those people” who shouldn’t be allowed to play on a course.

“That comment started everything,” he said. He began with 16 of his Option Northwest clients at the covered range at Tacoma Firs Golf Center. They would get a lesson and have lunch. He also worked with Metro Parks and the Meadow Park Golf Course.

Metro Parks formally launched the Special Olympics Golf program in 2004 with the help of Meadow Park. The number of golfers has nearly doubled. Option Unlimited Inc. clients still make up a major part of the program.

“It’s everything in the world to them” Canty said of Metro Parks’ Special Olympics programs including golf. “They still walk around with their medals. There is a sense of pride in doing something they can excel at.”

With the regional golf tournament coming up and all the publicity about the Olympic Games in London starting later this month, he said his clients who golf are sporting their golf medals from past competitions.

## **Volunteers make the program go**

Like many Metro Parks offerings Smith-Doty said the golf program wouldn't work without volunteer coaches. "They are absolutely critical," she said.

Tom Monin has volunteered with the golf program for three years. A Metro Parks accountant by day and an avid golfer when not working, he was drafted by Smith-Doty who happened to see him wearing a golf shirt.

Monin started out helping golfers on the driving range and ended up being Erik Simmons partner and coach on the course.

"We hit it off," Monin said. "Part of it I think is we just had fun. We tease each other. I tease him gently a lot and he occasionally gives it back to me. And he is very positive."

Monin named Simmons' putter Maui Zowie because it had the name of the Hawaiian island engraved on its head. "He said he paid \$1.99 for it" at a thrift store, he said.



## **Golfing dream**

Out on the Williams 9, Chad Mix of Puyallup pushed his wheeled golf bag down a fairway. He had hit a decent shot. He's been coming to Meadow Park for two years and won a Gold Medal at the state Special Olympics tournament last year.

Asked how he likes golfing, Mix, 34, said it was great.

"I'm thinking about going to the PGA Tour," he said matter-of-factly and added. "I'd like to be with Tiger Woods."

He can dream, too.