



# Driven

Dennis Walters is paraplegic. He is also a golfer extraordinaire. BY MICHAEL KONIK

**T**HESE ARE a few of the dozens of amazing trick shots Dennis Walters performs at “The Dennis Walters Golf Show,” starring Walters and his assistant Benji Hogan, an adorable mutt:

- He drives a golf ball 230 yards off a 3-foot-high tee.
- He drives a golf ball 220 yards with an upside-down lefty club. (Walters is right-handed.)
- He drives a golf ball 200 yards with a putter.
- He drives a golf ball 175 yards with a club head attached to an automobile radiator hose.

Walters accomplishes all these shots while sitting down—strapped into a seat attached to the side of a golf cart, actually. During his demonstrations of golf-shot wizardry, he assumes a sitting position not for the sake of show biz impressiveness but because he has to. Walters is paraplegic.

“Any good single-digit player could hit these shots,” Walters tells me. “But why would anyone want to drive off of a 3-foot tee? It’s not really practical. My show isn’t so much about the shots. It’s about *the show*. The message.”

The message? “Live your dreams, no matter how impossible they seem,” Walters says.

We’re in Walters’ tour bus, a rolling hotel that would be the envy of an indie-label rock band and its entourage. Over 25 years he’s entertained hundreds of thousands of people, including 33,105 fans at an Anaheim Angels baseball game (his largest audience) and 11 hockey aficionados in Lake Champlain, Quebec, Canada (his smallest). His journeys across North America, involving around 16 shows a month during the summer golf season, have taken him to each of the 50 United States; he hits some golf balls, tells some stories, allows Hogan (a shameless ham) to get the big laughs and leaves his audience’s lives profoundly changed.

Tonight, Walters is in Columbus, Ohio, where, tomorrow afternoon, he’ll be the warm-up act for a charismatic sports celebrity named Eldrick, whose personal charity, the Tiger Woods Foundation, puts on junior clinics that give disadvantaged children the opportunity to try out the game of golf.

Young Dennis Walters dreamed of being a professional golfer. As a boy he won the New Jersey State Juniors Championship and the New Jersey Public Links Championship, as well as the state’s caddie tournament. He studied at North Texas State University on a golf scholarship and, during his senior year, finished 11th in the U.S. Amateur. In the early 1970s, after failing to procure a PGA TOUR membership card at Q-School by only a few shots, he played on the South African Tour.

Then, at age 23, he had “the accident.”

To this day, Walters isn’t sure exactly what happened. He remembers driving an old three-wheel golf cart down a steep hill and sliding sideways when the brakes failed. The cart hit a rock or a ditch, and he remembers being thrown from the vehicle. “I landed wrong, I guess,” Walters, now 52, says. “I couldn’t get up.”

He was paralyzed from the waist down.

Four months in a hospital. Four months of being told he’d get better. Four months believing it was so. “Never

For more on the life of Dennis Walters, read his book, **In My Dreams I Walk With You**, written with James Achenbach (Sleeping Bear Press). For an up-to-date tour schedule for “The Dennis Walters Golf Show,” visit [www.DennisWalters.com](http://www.DennisWalters.com).

happened,” Walters says, without a trace of bitterness or sorrow. “And that made me very depressed for some time. I couldn’t imagine not having the wonderful feeling of hitting a golf ball. That feeling when you connect. But if you can’t stand up, how can you hit a golf ball?”

It seemed like a good question at the time. How?

But lots of other seemingly unanswerable questions—questions silently pondered at a Tiger Woods Foundation clinic—have the same answer.

If you grow up in a broken home and subsist on government support, how can you become a successful entrepreneur? If you’re the “wrong” color, how can you become a member of the “right” country club? If violence and neglect are an accepted part of your everyday life, how can you recognize peace and love?

How?

You can because you want to. Simple as that.

Walters really wanted to earn his living playing golf. It didn’t matter that he no longer had legs to stand on, to pivot on, to thrust from. He wasn’t going to let a little thing like that stop him.

### **The Grass Office: Phoenix**

Like most of the desert golf courses in the Phoenix/Scottsdale area, **SunRidge Canyon** (13100 North SunRidge Drive, Fountain Hills, Arizona; 800-562-5178 or 480-837-5100; [www.sunridgegolf.com](http://www.sunridgegolf.com)) started out as a gorgeous evocation of arid beauty, highlighted by forbidding saguaro cactuses standing sentinel and rocky vistas that seemed to go on forever. Now, like most of the desert golf courses in this part of Arizona, much of the aesthetic pleasure has been stolen by hideous real estate developments over, beside and around the golf course. Still, the great variety of holes (short and long, up and down, easy and hard) remains, testing all your shots, particularly around architect Keith Foster’s fun-to-miss greens. These days you can leave the camera at home—but bring a full bag of clubs; you’ll need them all. **Greens fee:** \$65–\$175. (Note: The course will be closed until October 11 for overseeding and will reopen October 12.)—*M.K.*

grumbles. “So I’ve got maybe 120 left. I take a 5-iron and knock it about three feet from the edge of the green. It’s a simple chip and a putt for par. But, I’m telling you, it felt like the greatest par in the history of the game!”

Walters pets his dog and says, “It took 40 minutes to play that one hole. But I was alive again.”

Under the guidance of an old Florida teaching pro named Alec Ternyie, who was accustomed to coaching elderly ladies who didn’t themselves have much “leg drive” to speak of, Walters developed what he calls the “Hoboken Twist,” a little open-and-close move that produces an artful, PGA TOUR–style draw.

Ternyie had the idea of cutting the legs off a swiveling barstool and attaching it to the side of a cart. With his legs splayed outward in an upside-down V, Walters could create the kind of shoulder-to-hip ratio normally found in dimple-smashers like John Daly. “Twenty-six years later,” Walters says, “I’m still using the same design.”

Every shot Walters hits, whether it’s a “long-distance call” (a cell phone on a shaft) or a “three-iron” (a golf club with three heads, which he uses to strike three golf balls at once), flies with a nearly identical shape and trajectory. There’s something beautiful and comforting in his consistency, a tacit message, perhaps, that the unconquerable game of golf is maybe not as complicated as those of us with the use of our legs believe.

Now, one of the greatest platitudes about the game of golf is that it’s not a sport of brute strength. You hear it all the time: Balance, rhythm, timing—these are the qualities that produce an effective and suitably powerful golf swing. Few of us duffers, however, are able to translate our intellectual understanding of these principles into physical action. For Walters, all this elegant blathering about the ideal golf swing was no longer a gassy theory. It was all he had to believe in.

In the early days of his rehabilitation, Walters, roped into a wheelchair, would hit golf balls for eight hours a day. At this point he wasn’t thinking about a career. He was thinking of surviving. “I was so depressed,” Walters recalls. “Golf was my therapy. Life felt absolutely rotten except when I was on a golf course.”

Not having played for seven months and feeling desperate, Walters went to a golf course called Crystal Lago, in Pompano Beach, Florida. Some friendly high school hackers wheeled him to the first tee. “I killed it,” he remembers. “Absolutely crushed it. Blasted it out there around 170, 180.” Growing animated with the memory, Walters nods vigorously. Hogan, his constant companion, looks up from his nap and

Originally, with the encouragement of some club-pro friends, Walters introduced his new lazy-Susan technique under the title "How to Play Golf Sitting Down." Then he remembered trick-shot artists he had enjoyed as a child, men like Paul Hahn and Joe Kirkwood. "I figured, how hard could this be?" Walters says, laughing.

After he spent some time banging out 500 balls a day in practice, "The Dennis Walters Golf Show" was born.

On the morning of his Tiger Woods Foundation performance, Walters changes into his work clothes: snazzy golf slacks and a crisply ironed shirt, emblazoned with the logos of some of his many sponsors, including the United States Golf Association, on whose behalf he appears at events taking place in conjunction with USGA championships. (Yes, Walters is definitely a *professional* golfer. And so is Hogan, who's sponsored by dog-food maker Eukanuba.) He stocks his giant golf bag with tees and gadgets and props and golf balls that have Hogan's shaggy face on one side, Walters' logo on the other. Walters seems excited, expectant. "After more than 1,500 shows, I don't get as nervous as I used to," he says. "When I used to play tournament golf, if I wasn't nervous it was bad. Now I'm more eager than nervous. I just love to show what I and that guy," Walters says, pointing to Hogan, "can do."

The dog can put balls on tees, solve math problems and capture the crowd's hearts. All Walters does is hit golf balls. With a radiator hose. From a chair. Without using his legs.

"I'm human," he says, cleaning his glasses. "Sometimes I miss a shot. But I guess that's the beauty of golf. You can't hit every shot perfect. You just try to make good misses."

This sounds funny coming from a guy in a wheelchair who has had four holes-in-one, always breaks 80 and has shot as low as 32 for nine holes.

"Most of the shots I do in my show," he admits, "I mastered in less than a day. It's the story behind the shot, the lesson, that I'm always working on."

We go to the driving range at Columbus' Bridge View Golf Course, where a temporary stadium has been erected to accommodate the thousands of fans who want to spend a few minutes in the company of Tiger Woods. Walters warms up with a few easy pitching wedges. Each shot is perfectly on plane, a replica of the one before it. A ball shagger could practically stand in place with a butterfly net. Then he moves to longer clubs, smacking shots progressively longer while Hogan has a beauty rest beside the cart, oblivious to the thousands of fans now streaming into the amphitheater. Then a few drives, high and softly bending. Pronouncing himself ready, Walters retreats to the side of the range, where he waits until called to perform his trick shots. He's glowing.

Over the next 90 minutes, after Walters does what he loves to the delight of all, a procession of dignitaries presents checks on behalf of various corporations eager to support the Tiger Woods Foundation's efforts. Tiger's father, Earl Woods, delivers a few words on the art of parenting. Tiger Woods hits golf balls as only Tiger Woods can. And then it's over.

But before he escapes in his golf cart to the far end of the range, where there's a car that will whisk him to his waiting jet, Woods reminds everyone in attendance to chase their dreams, to remember that nothing is impossible, no matter what the obstacles.

Dennis Walters sits on his golf cart and smiles back at the stadium full of children who can't stop looking his way.



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