

INSPIRED

JAMES GRIBBLE HASN'T LET QUADRIPLÉGIA STOP HIM FROM PLAYING THE GAME HE LOVES, AND NOW HE WANTS MORE DISABLED PEOPLE TO FIND THEIR FEET AGAIN THROUGH GOLF.

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Next time your golf ball takes an unfortunate bounce into the water or trees and unfairly punishes an otherwise good shot, before you get frustrated think about James Gribble.

Here's a keen golfer doing his best to just play the game again after a simple yet freakish accident robbed him of the chance to further his natural ability, but who is using his sheer determination to relearn the great game and make golf more accessible and welcoming for disabled people across the country.

Gribble was a 29-year-old investment banker in the prime of his life, backpacking through Africa in 2008 when fate stepped in and sent him down a seemingly catastrophic path. Hours after a long run on a typically hot day in Zambia, Gribble began feeling slightly light-headed waiting for his evening meal. The next thing he knew he was lying face up with no movement from the neck down after fainting and falling backwards off a stool onto hard sand. It was an awkward fall and broke his neck between the C4 and C5 vertebrae, damaging his spinal cord and rendering him a quadriplegic.

"It was a pretty fatalistic accident, very simple," he recalls. "The day before I was literally bungee jumping off Victoria Falls."

What ensued was a long and arduous journey to seek medical help followed by a lengthy stay in hospital and years of rehabilitation – rehab that continues to this day.

"I was seven months in hospital," Gribble says. "Initially it was 30 frightening hours before arriving in hospital in Johannesburg, including two Medivac helicopters and a Medivac jet. I had travelled, literally in a dugout canoe propelled by a wooden pole, to a tiny island on the Zambezi River between Zambia and Zimbabwe to catch the prized tigerfish. I was seriously in the middle of nowhere."

"I spent five long weeks in Johannesburg, two weeks in Royal North Shore when I got back to Sydney and then seven months in more rehab at Ryde. From there, being promised little chance of any recovery by the doctors, I continued with my own crusade to walk again. I spent four years, between 40 and 50 hours per week, trying everything from hydrotherapy, acupuncture and electrical stimulation to normal physiotherapy and occupational therapy. I

“I even tried singing lessons in the desperate hope of strengthening my breathing and my stomach muscles.”

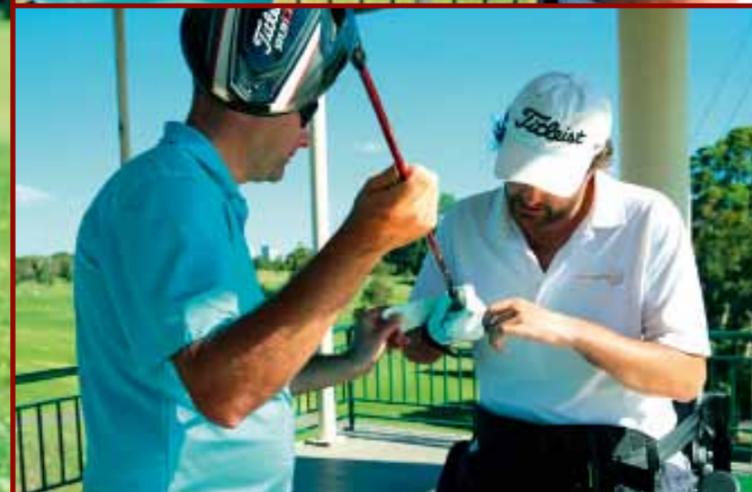
even tried singing lessons in the desperate hope of strengthening my breathing and my stomach muscles. Just anything, really, to get the body going again."

Gribble's story in golf had begun some years beforehand in his early 20s, although somewhat against his wishes. "When I was a bit younger I thought it was a

boring game and frankly a waste of time but during my second year of university, a godfather of mine from the UK came over and announced, 'We're going to go and play golf,' to which I firmly replied, 'Don't be stupid. Why don't we go and have a beer or something?' That day we ended up going to Royal Sydney, of all places, and I borrowed a set of golf clubs from a mate of mine at college. I managed to hit the ball pretty well for someone who hadn't really played much and that was it. From then, I was pretty much hooked and I was playing two or three times a week for as long as I can remember."



James Gribble is playing golf again thanks to persistence, support from his family and friends and some ingenious modern technology.



Gripping and re-gripping for each shot is one of the challenges for James as he returns to the game. Putting, though, is far less difficult in comparison.



Most of Gribble's golf was played in the United Kingdom where he was working, and in a job that paved the way onto some of the London area's best courses through corporate golf events. He's played the mighty Ailsa course at Turnberry, laughing and smiling at the thought of the scenic Open Championship venue but also wincing at the memory of a lowly punched drive he claims was to stay under the howling wind that rebounded off a forward tee marker and struck his boss in the chest. His handicap dipped to between four and six at his peak, particularly after one northern summer that included playing more than 20 rounds within a month.

Playing golf again must have seemed impossible after his accident, although Gribble confesses that he was so focused on a full recovery, in his mind he merely "parked" a few activities under the assumption he would return to them "when I was back to normal".

"It all started about a year ago," he says of reviving his love of golf. "Because I had finally managed to walk small distances on crutches, I thought I'd remove a crutch even though I wasn't particularly stable, and then literally strap a golf club in my hand. Striking the ball wasn't an issue but replicating the setup around the golf course was more challenging. So after some research, the Paragolfer was identified, which effectively replicates almost everything you can do on a golf course."

The Paragolfer is an ingenious and intriguing piece of machinery that is best described as a motorised wheelchair with a mechanism in the seat that props up the occupant to an almost vertical position. "After breaking my neck five years ago and having no movement from the head down, the feeling of being upright and swinging the club

again is difficult to put into words," Gribble says.

Funded by the Centennial Parklands Foundation at a cost of about \$35,000, the Paragolfer is a typically clever piece of German engineering developed by medical technology company Otto Bock. Moore Park Golf Club in Sydney, where Gribble currently plays and practises, houses this particular one for shared use, however in time through an association Gribble recently established, Empower Golf Australia, there will be Paragolfers at more and more clubs across the country so people can travel and play other courses without them requiring transportation. Not only is the device liberating for disabled golfers, it is a versatile contraption that is suitable on most terrain. It is light enough to not damage putting greens but solid enough to allow access into most bunkers.

Yet the Paragolfer fills in only part of the picture. Standing upright is a large part of the equation but gripping a club becomes the next obstacle to clear. Recently, while in the UK watching a multi-disability disabled golf tournament, Gribble found a British manufacturer of special gloves for people with minimal hand function that help him create the right level of grip stability.

"Apart from not having much sensation or movement from the chest down and therefore reduced potential for power from my legs or torso, my biggest challenge is the minimal feeling or movement in my wrist and hand, deeming grip consistency near impossible. Almost every new shot is effectively regripped," he says. "The Grip-Par is basically a golf glove with a built-in strap to assist grasping the club. In addition, I have an adjustable piece of elastic the size of a sweatband around my

wrist that the end of the club slides under to prevent the club flailing around too much. That said, you can imagine if you only have one impaired arm, you rely on the club being a touch loose in the hand to produce a longer swing plane and generate a decent amount of power. Of course, any golfer will tell you it is counter-intuitive to have a loose golf club in your hand to play consistent golf, but I'm learning how to time and co-ordinate the club to hit the ball effectively."

So, how well does he hit it? Gribble swings to about three-quarter length, holding the club with his right hand only. His grip is strong for right-hand position but the Grip-Par glove lets his wrist self-cock and achieve a consistently good swing plane. Coupled with his good rhythm and the swing becomes sound. Of course it is by necessity a contrived action and one that is a triumph of invention, but it retains a definite naturalness and the flow is poetic.

Gribble is a master of improvisation – to the point that he will use his teeth and mouth to adjust his grip. He uses a 12-degree Titleist 913 D2 driver with a whippy, L-flex shaft. This combination produces a nicely arcing ball flight and roughly a 100-metre carry that can run out as far as 150 on firm fairways. He hits the ball quite straight from the tee and has re-learned golf's variety of touch shots.

"They're probably a little bit easier because you're not relying on actual power as much," Gribble says. "I actually know a pro who chips with one arm because he thinks it takes a lot of

the variables out but again, touch shots are more about practice and producing consistency by actually being out on the course. Bunker and flop shots where you rely on greater clubhead speed are a lot more difficult. Putting and medium-range chip shots are far easier."

WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

Ask yourself: when was the last time you stopped to consider the simplicity of everyday golfing acts such as teeing up a ball, bending down to retrieve a bunker rake from its sandy home or collecting the flagstick for replacement in the cup? We do each one numerous times per round and take the ease of these acts for granted.

For every round of golf Gribble, now 35, plays or for every time the urge strikes to hit balls at the driving range, he needs help to do it. Fortunately that help is abundant thanks to a legion of helpers: his fiancée, brother, sister, parents, other relatives, a handful of golfing mates and a friend who is a trainee pro. On the afternoon that *Golf Australia* spent with him, Gribble's aunt, Judy, was there by his side, helping retrieve the Paragolfer to collect James from the carpark, adjusting his grip, teeing balls and more.

"None of my achievements could have happened without an incredible fiancée, family, friends and even total strangers who have supported me from day one with all my endeavours, from gliding to getting back into golf."





Bunker and flop shots test the capacity to generate clubhead speed through impact from the Paragolfer.



A sound grip coupled with good rhythm and the right shaft flex, and James can create a nice, arcing shot shape with the driver. He also hits the ball very straight off the tee.

"I'm an incomplete C4-C5 quadriplegic. In my case I am quite incomplete, which means I enjoy some movement in my legs and more in my arms than I would if I severed my spinal column. I've been one of the lucky ones, really, in terms of my recovery because day one [after the accident] I literally was a head on a bed. So I was in a pretty bad place and managed to slowly fight my way back through mountains of rehab, plenty of exercise, staying positive and amazing support. The Puffin Magic Foundation, set up to support myself and others with spinal injury, has been absolutely critical."

That Gribble describes himself as "one of the lucky ones" is both moving and inspirational. Once the grieving eases and reality sets in, often it's the innocent victim of unfortunate incidents that must decide to what extent they are willing to allow a setback to affect them. For Gribble, his accident in the prime of his life has motivated him to rebuild and also to assist others. It is yet another example of why golf is the greatest game of all.

"Visually, it's an amazing thing," Gribble says of his technique, "because you're seeing someone who can't walk, and in my case has pretty limited function, and someone with a 'one-armed bandit' golf swing."

"I have received enormous interest from all types of injuries and backgrounds, whether ex-servicemen or individuals born with disabilities, which is why I have established Empower Golf Australia. Its No. 1 priority is to facilitate and promote the game of golf for people with all abilities. Unfortunately this is not really happening in this country at the moment. It's very fragmented with a few different smaller groups, like the blind, the deaf and the amputees. Really, it's just about encouraging many people back into the game."

"I believe golf is truly unique due to the handicap system, which

allows individuals of any ability to compete on a level playing field. Literally someone with one arm playing from a wheelchair can play with a pro or any social golfer. Golf also delivers critical physical and psychological benefits, provides strong avenues to engage socially with the community and can be played well into later life. For anyone living with a disability, these benefits are of even greater importance.

"For a lot of people who play golf it is almost like going to church every week. You meet up with friends sharing a similar passion, which is a massive part of it. For disabled people who feel ostracised from the community and find it physically difficult to be out and about, the

Paragolfer is just amazing and golf the perfect activity. I guess that's what's driving me to give more people more access to both. It is impossible to replicate in many other sports."

Gribble is highly appreciative of the support provided by Moore Park Golf Club and hopes more golf

clubs follow suit. Through the trust, the club has funded a Paragolfer to keep on-site for disabled golfers to use and added two automatic re-teeing bays at one end of the wheelchair-friendly top tier of the popular three-level driving range near the Sydney CBD. "So a disabled person playing from a wheelchair doesn't have to physically lean down and replace the ball, which is obviously key if you're going to be independent on the range," Gribble says. "They have also mapped the golf course to identify potential danger in a motorised cart where there

“Visually, it’s an amazing thing because you’re seeing someone who can’t walk ... with a ‘one-armed bandit’ golf swing.”

are steep hills and obviously some of the bunkers with sharper entry points. In addition, they are in the process of finalising policies and procedures so that people can use the facility with assistance from their family or friends."

All this paves the way for Gribble to immerse himself in the game. He tries to play as much as possible – usually once or twice a week – and aspires to get back to a 27 handicap. Yet his immersion goes so much further than that. All the challenges he has overcome to this point have opened Gribble's eyes to what golf can mean to all people with a disability.

And some things remain common to all golfers, regardless of ability, disability or barriers passed to become involved in the game. "Everyone is searching for that absolute 'peach' that comes straight off the middle and keeps you coming back. Recently I met Noel, an inspirational 70-year-old man who broke his back six months ago. In retirement he'd been playing three rounds a week and his whole social network was built around his Saturday round and bantering with his mates. Our initial aim, as he was just out of hospital, was to try him in the Paragolfer in the upright position and controlling the device so that he might be able to drive around and enjoy the interaction. Amazingly, because of his tenacity, we had him standing up and hitting balls within half an hour. After believing his golfing days were well and truly over, he was up and hitting balls for the very first time. It was an incredible experience, and he and his wife were literally crying. So was I. It was awesome to see."

These insights have altered Gribble's outlook and where he sees needs and opportunities. He is promoting and facilitating the introduction of the Grip-Par products in Australia while also working as a motivational speaker in the corporate sector. "I really enjoy sharing

my story and translating some of the experiences I've had into the corporate world and other organisations," he says.

Gribble's dealings have led him to identify shortcomings in the way disabled golfers can access golf. The focus of Empower Golf Australia is to facilitate and promote golf for all Australians. "There are a number of reasons why," he says. "Apart from the distinct lack of disabled golf in this country, nationally six percent of Australians play golf, or more than 1.2 million people – one of the highest penetrations of golf globally. Even though there are approximately four million disabled individuals in Australia, only a few thousand play golf. If the penetration of disabled golf equalled that of able-bodied, almost 240,000 would be enjoying golf. In the US, ten percent of people with disabilities play golf."

"Furthermore with the current 'buzz' around the disability sector and the implementation of the NDIS, the time is right to provide a governing body and focal point for players, investors, sponsors and other counterparties. The ultimate goal is seeing the disabled game follow able-bodied golf into the Paralympics. The three main goals of the foundation are to provide equipment (such as the Paragolfer), run development days and hold state and national tournaments for those with affected ability."

"I figure if a quadriplegic with no feeling and limited movement from the chest down, let alone no feeling or movement in his hand, can play golf then surely not many people could find an excuse."

If you would like to make a donation or find out more about Empower Golf Australia, please visit www.empowergolf.com.au. To purchase Grip-Par gripping solutions or Paragolfers, please e-mail him at james.gribble@empowergolf.com.au. To book speaking engagements or hear more about James' incredible story, please contact him through www.puffinmagic.org.au