

The vision for Blind Golf



Barry Cable, Western Australian Ambassador for the Blind Sporting Council of SA, wears specially blacked out glasses to simulate playing blind golf. He is being caddied by a student from the Como High School Golf Academy. David Blyth is in the background.



Jenny McCallum, centre, 2009 Women's Australian Blind and Vision Impaired Golf Open Champion at the presentation dinner, Nedlands GC, WA. Left: Oh sai Jung, caddy for Inchan Cho, right, both from Korea.



Gaye White helps husband John line up a putt at the 2010 Victorian Blind Open at Rosebud Country Club.

Before his sponsorship of the Women's Australian Open and other golf events, Dr Haruhisa Handa – with some help – put blind golf on to the world stage.

Story by KAREN HARDING
Photos courtesy BLIND GOLF VICTORIA and the WESTERN AUSTRALIAN BLIND GOLF ASSOCIATION

Dr Haruhisa Handa is the person most associated with the expansion of blind golf throughout the world - and deservedly so – but he has had a couple of able lieutenants along the way.

As Recreation Officer at the Association for the Blind of Western Australia, Ron Anderson devised programs teaching golf and organised competitions for players from the late 1970s. As part of his development strategy, he managed to get six minutes of competition footage on television. The phone rang hot with enquiries about blind golf.

Dr Handa, on a visit to Australia to look at investment property, was shown the video by a mutual business acquaintance and requested a meeting. Anderson outlined his plans for blind golf, including an international body, for over an hour. By the end he had a dedicated supporter.

There is recorded and anecdotal evidence of blind golf being played around the world from as early as the 1920s but it was really after Handa met Anderson and came on board, initially to underwrite the Australian Blind and Vision Impaired Golf Open, that the sport gradually became more organised.

The first Open was held in 1989, the year after that initial meeting, and continued under Handa's sponsorship for the next ten years.

"We had wonderful times together in the first few years," recalled Anderson. "Dr Handa knew nothing about golf initially but once he saw what we were doing, he wanted me to teach him golf and the following year wanted to play in the pro-am.

"We sang together and entertained the competitors. One year he brought out all these tapes and said, I've decided to be a rock and roll singer. He wrote all the songs himself and it went to number two on the hit parade in Japan. Then the following year he comes out, he's singing like Mario Lanza.

"I love the guy and I think the world of him. He's just the most generous man you could ever meet."

Handa's patronage also led to blind golf developing its own infrastructure. First came the state associations, then in 1993 The Australian Blind Golf Association - now known as Blind Golf Australia - was formed.

David Blyth was known to Anderson through Blyth's work at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind and when programs were being initiated in Victoria, Anderson assisted him in setting them up, which is when Blyth himself began to play. By now, Anderson, who was also setting up blind athletes in other sports – tenpin bowling, water-skiing, snow skiing, swimming, cycling – and much of it on his own time, recognised the need to delegate.

When discussions with Handa commenced in 1996 regarding the international body, it was Blyth, President of the national organisation since inception, who was the prime mover and who became its interim chair. After a short break from the Board, he returned as chair in 2002 and continues to perform both significant roles.

The International Blind Golf Association began with six founding members – Australia, the United States, Scotland, England, Canada and Japan. The United States Blind Golfers Association had already been formed in 1953 but the other organisations were created under the guidance and financial auspices of Dr Handa. There are now 15 member and two associate-member countries. Handa's company International Sports Promotion Society (ISPS) funds the IBGA which then directs funds to the national organisations under its umbrella.

One of the presidents of the USBGA (from 1976-1992) was the outstanding player Pat Browne who took out his national championship 23 times (20 consecutively) and holds the record for the lowest round in official USBGA competition, a 74 at Mission Hills, as well as twice going around St Andrews in 76. Brilliant indeed, especially given he is a B1 player. Early on, Anderson brought Browne out to Australia to play in the Open and to promote the game, such was the regard for his skill and promotional value.

There are three sight categories in blind golf – B1, which is total blindness, and B2 and B3 which are based on levels of visual acuity, recognising that some people have more vision impairment than others.

Handicaps in blind golf are structured to reflect this. B3, the best sight, has a maximum men's handicap of 36; B2 maximum is 45 and B1 is 54. Female maximum handicaps are nine strokes higher than males.

Blind golf is governed by the R&A and has only two differences from standard rules. One is that players are allowed to ground their club in a hazard and the other is that caddies are allowed to stand on the line either behind the player or extending beyond the hole.

Events available to players include two national championships – the Open and the Australian Blind and Vision Impaired Stableford Championship – while each state holds its own annual competition. The IBGA also hosts the World Blind Golf Championship every two years. In 2010 this is set down to be played at Whittlebury Park Golf and Country Club in Northamptonshire, England, in August.



Joanne Mills at the Handa Women's Australian Open 2010 with her pro-am partners. Front row (from left) – blind golfer Kay Hancock, Joanne Mills, Jenny Chittick (caddy for Hancock), blind golfer John White. Back row (from left) – Brian Leeming (caddy for Krolik), blind golfer Rick Krolik (Vice President Blind Golf Victoria), Gary McInnes (caddy for White).

Australia's Jenny McCallum, from Nedlands Golf Club in W.A., is the defending Women's World Champion, having won in 2006 in Japan and again in 2008 in Northern Ireland. She is also the current Women's Australian champion, taking out that title at Nedlands in October 2009.

Blind Golf Australia in conjunction with Golf Australia has produced a DVD which is designed to showcase blind golf and offer current golfers with developing sight problems options to continue playing their sport. Called "You Don't Have To See It To Tee It", it is available at no cost to interested individuals, including club and teaching professionals, and film material has been placed on both the Golf Australia and Blind Golf Australia websites.

Handa's contribution to all this is inestimable. But he is quick to acknowledge the deeds of others. At a large tournament in Japan in 2009, he made special mention of Anderson, while Anderson himself is also at pains to highlight the magnitude of Blyth's work and the army of helpers behind them.

"Things don't just happen. There were a lot of great volunteers. Without those people, this would not be there. You need caddies, you need drivers, you need supporters", he said.

In 1981, a nine year old blind girl from Canada wrote:
The sun is filled with shining light, it blazes far and wide
The moon reflects the sunlight back, it has no light inside
I think I'd rather be the sun that shines so bold and bright
Than be the moon that glows with someone else's light

Her simple words embody the ethos of Ron Anderson. "I believe the blind need to have the light shone on them," he said.

Persons interested in playing blind golf or being caddies or drivers are encouraged to contact either their state association or Blind Golf Australia. For contact details visit www.blindgolf.com.au.