

## Golf for the Blind

by Lisa Angle

**H**oward Shaw selects a club and approaches the tee. He holds his left arm out from the side of his body. His coach moves Howard so his hand is pointing toward the flag on the green.

This is how a blind golfer gets his shoulders, hips, and feet lined up with the hole.

It wasn't until Howard lost a great deal of his sight that he learned to play. In 1996, at the age of 72, he signed up for the golf class at the Braille Institute in Santa Barbara.

Page O'Brien, a pro at Sandpiper Golf Course, donates her time to teach this class.

When she asked Howard about his goal, he said, "I'd like to learn to play golf well enough that someday I could play in the National Championships for the blind."

With only an hour a week, Howard didn't get much of a chance to practice. Then in 1998 he was chosen by the United States Golf Association to make a commercial, which still airs during the US Open every year. In the ad Howard says, "I may be blind, but my passion for golf is twenty-twenty." San Diego golfer Tony Buonarigo saw the spot, moved to Lompoc temporarily to teach Howard everything he knew about the sport.

"I teach him as if he's a sighted person," Tony said. "I don't teach him as if he's blind." He saw that Howard had the physical ability, and with proper instruction he could be a golfer who is blind—not a blind golfer.

The duo spent several days a week at La Purisima Golf Course working on Howard's stroke. When they couldn't use the course, they trained in Howard's backyard.

Because Howard has a good swing, **it doesn't matter that he can't see the ball.** "You don't hit the ball," Howard said, "You swing through it." Of course, for safety, Howard never moves his club until he's told it's "clear."

Tony admits that teaching a blind person is different.

With a sighted person he could show them what they're doing wrong, and they could mirror him. With Howard he has to be able to give him verbal instructions.

As a coach, Tony's job is to align Howard and his clubface prior to the stroke, and to advise him in respect to distance and direction.

Based on Tony's information, Howard is responsible for executing the putt. As Tony said, "He's seventy-five percent, I'm twenty-five percent."

The United States Blind Golf Association has been in existence since 1953. They hold several tournaments throughout the country during the year, including the National Championship played near Orlando, Florida. In 1999, with Tony's help, Howard reached his goal and qualified for the championship match. "Of course I didn't do extremely well," Howard said. "But at least I was there."

In 2000 Howard, along with the Santa Maria Noontimers Lions Club, organized the first USBGA sanctioned tournament in California. The next California Blind Golfers Classic will be October 21-22, 2001 at Black Lake Golf Course in Nipomo.

Howard will be at this event. He is once again taking golf instruction through Braille Institute because Tony has moved back to San Diego. This class has become more popular and Braille has added another section. Page O'Brien still does the teaching and is looking into involving more fully sighted people to help the visually impaired. The future of blind golf depends on the willingness of everyone, regardless of visual acuity, to believe in the USBGA's slogan: "You don't have to see it to tee it."

For more information contact the USBGA at Tel/Fax 850-893-4511 or [www.blindgolf.com](http://www.blindgolf.com)



**Tony Buonarigo gets Howard Shaw in position (Lisa Angle photo)**

*Lisa Angle freelances in Santa Barbara.*