

# Angela Johnson: a lesson in following through

by Paul Baswick

SIX NATIONS – From the first hole, the first swing, Angela Johnson knew her driver and ball weren't going to get along. The opening shot soared off the tee with all the grace of a shot put, grinding to a quick stop 25 yards away. The sphere then strayed misguidedly towards the rough to the foot of a tree. Then Angela accidentally toed the ball, which may sound cute to most of us, but not to a golfer. It cost her a two-point penalty.

After eight swings, and a few heavy sighs, the ball eventually, reluctantly, dropped in the cup.

While some golfers may have been tempted to make a bee-line straight for the club house, Angela decided to carry on. It's a good thing she did, too. She ended up shooting the best round of golf in her life.

It was a moment when the game spoke more eloquently of the player than any words could. In spite of an opening hole rife with imperfection, Angela resolved not to quit, and in the end, she came out on top.

Triumphing under less than idyllic conditions has become a way of life for Angela since she took up the game three years ago. She, unlike most who have risen in the sport's ranks, is completely blind. She's never seen the ball resting on its tee, or watched it as it glides gently across the green into the cup. But she hears it. Feels it. Excels at it.

Angela and her husband Bob have spent the past three weeks on Six Nations, vacationing in their motor home at Chiefswood Park — although vacationing is rarely so productive. That game with the shaky beginning she shot at the Chippawa Creek Golf Course in Mount Hope on Aug. 5 proved not only to be a personal best, but a world record for a woman golfer with her degree of blindness. It was two shots better than the 92 she shot the day before, which combined set another world record for 36 holes.

To Angela, a native of California, golf is much more than an enjoyable passtime. The seemingly simple game has given her a passion for life and a strength to overcome her life's darkest tragedies.

"Golf has given mesomething to grab a hold of. It's given me a purpose," says Angela.

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# Angela Johnson: Golfer

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It wasn't long ago that Angela, as a bird colonel in the United States Army, was working towards a very different set of goals. A martial arts master and aspiring doctor of psychology, Angela was planning to retire from the forces to establish her own martial arts dojo and counselling clinic.

That ended, however, when in the same week her retirement from the army was approved, a car accident claimed her sight and 55 per cent of her brain.

"Everybody else gets a gold watch," she says.

"I got a white cane."

Angela spent the next three-and-a-half years confined to a hospital bed, when it was feared she would never walk again. She not only had to contend with immobility and partial blindness, but also with amnesia and seizures, which she continues to experience today.

It wasn't long after a lengthy recuperation that Angela was again touched by tragedy. While in a shopping mall food court, she had a violent seizure, during which she suffered a serious head injury and lost the remainder of her sight.

"I had no life," she says.

"My adoptive dad and my twin died in the same month that I lost the rest of my sight, and I wanted to join them so bad. There was no future for me."

Angela was in a state of despair she wasn't able to escape on her own. Fortunately, she says, someone cared enough to push her out.

"Somebody kidnapped me and took me out to play golf for the first time, someone who thought I needed something to lift me up," says Angela.

Unfortunately, because of the memory limitations caused by her earlier injuries, she can't remember who introduced her to the game.

"Whoever it is," she says, "I owe them alot."

"I've been blessed that people have believed in me and have taken the effort to push me. One of the things about disabled people is that people are afraid to offend them and just back away. They need pushing to succeed. Anybody who says 'I did it myself' is just kidding themselves. I don't know of any severely disabled that can do it themself."

Angela certainly hasn't walked alone in the course of her impressive three-year golfing career. For her, she stresses, golf is truly a team sport, which she says is the reason she enjoys the game so much.

Angela golfs with no special equipment. The clubs, the balls, the rules are all standard. The only difference, she says, is the role of the caddy coach, a "team mate" who helps her line up her shots and assists her in reading the fairways and greens.

Her caddy coach for her recent world record rounds at Mount Hope was Six Nations' own Carl Johnathon.

"I am not the record holder," says Angela.

"Carl Johnathon and I are world record holders. We're a team."

It was in that same spirit of co-operation that Angela has founded Angel's Blind Golf Association, an organization that helps blind people from all over the world experience the thrill of the game.

"If a person wants to learn how to play golf, we will try to find a golf course in their area and see if one of the coaches

there will be willing to teach them. If they know how to play golf we will let them know where the golf tournaments are. If they don't have money, the foundation will try to help them financially," says Angela.

The foundation, she says, has already managed to help 32 people this year.

"I've been told a thousand times 'you can't.' Very few times have I been told 'you can.' I'm one of the lucky ones — I've had a few people believe in me. Most blind people never get that. The foundation was set up to let them know 'you can.'"

She says although the game of golf is growing in popularity among the blind, the sport has yet to embrace women players with open arms.

"Blind women's golf is like sighted women's golf 60 years ago. It's coming around, but that's because we're pushing it," says Angela.

"As in any minority group, in order for things to happen somebody has to push it and be unpopular. I feel that I've kind of been stuck with that. I'd rather just go out and have fun, but you just can't see injustice go on and do nothing about it."

It was the pressure and exhaustion that comes with being a high-profile pioneer in her sport that Angela and her husband decided to take some time off to vacation on Six Nations.

"I was emotionally and physically exhausted. I was almost kind of giving up," says Angela.

"But coming here to Six Nations has given me some of that extra strength that started giving out."

Angela says her simple vacation has blossomed into a "cultural re-awakening," thanks to the people of Six Nations.

"I've been told for so much of my life to hide my heritage," says Angela, a member of the Mohawk Wolf Clan, whose father was half Hopi and a quarter Seneca.

"The people of Six Nations have opened their arms to me. They've welcomed me with love and dignity and pride — how can you not love them? I've just fallen in love with this place. We're already talking about coming back up here and possibly buying some land."

Angela and her husband will be leaving Chiefswood Park for Florida in early October, where Angela will be taking part in a benefit tournament for the South Eastern Guide Dogs. She says she is looking forward to returning next year, to join her new friends on Six Nations and to pursue the search of her own cultural identity.

"I want to learn what my true heritage is all about, and I want to learn the right and honest information. I want to learn with the pride and dignity that goes with it."

The rediscovery of her heritage, she says, has renewed her passion for life.

"This has been such an outstanding year. It's been a homecoming. So many people here have embraced me, saying 'welcome home.'"

Although she has suffered great tragedy, Angela says the good that has come from her hardships make her believe there are greater purposes behind every setback.

"Losing my sight could be the greatest gift the Creator could ever give me," she says.

"Could you imagine seeing everybody the way the Creator sees you? Every man is handsome, and every woman is beautiful. It's a great gift."