



CHALLENGE GOLF: Empowering People of All Abilities



Jane Finn talks to José Quesada and discovers how helping a friend recover from an accident turned into helping a nation win gold medals



I have listened to hundreds of TED Talks and paid big bucks to hear motivational speakers, but it has been a long time since I have been as inspired as I was after having lunch at the 18th & Greene with José Quesada.

José is a natural redhead, a spitfire, a bundle of energy, and a force to be reckoned with, who happens to be the PGA Director of Golf for Costa Rica's Los Sueños Marriott Ocean & Golf Resort whose commitment and contribution to the game far exceeds his position. When José is not dreaming up innovative events or making improvements to an already exceptional course, he finds ways to make golf accessible to anyone who wants to play.

Sixteen years ago, a close friend of José's

had an accident and lost his mobility and some of his motivation. That is when José set out, with his employer's support, on a mission to help unleash the potential of people with intellectual or physical disabilities.

As José tells the story of how he started out teaching his friend in his backyard, there is a light in his eyes and a fire in his belly that burns bright. For José, it was gratifying to witness his friend's progress. Week after week, his friend gained physical strength and mental agility, and José saw how recreation could drive health and happiness. One day, his friend turned to him and said: "Gracias. Algo mas Porque Vivir!" – "Thank you. Something else to live for!" That moment would prove to be the catalyst that would launch Challenge Golf.



What started as a clinic here and there with a handful of participants is now a thriving, grassroots organisation. La Iguana remains Challenge Golf's home course, but the addition of Valle del Sol, Cariari and the Westin Reserva Conchal, which provide free facilities and volunteers, has extended the programme's reach to hundreds of people in Costa Rica with diverse abilities.

Currently, Challenge Golf players range in age from 14 to 60, but José affectionately refers to them all as 'his kids' and his enthusiasm for every one of them is boundless. When I ask him why he does what he does, he exemplifies being humble and kind. All he says is: "I want to give back", and deftly turns the conversation to his students' accomplishments.

With every word, you can hear how proud he is of his players. Through golf, they have learned discipline, focus and patience. Some have regained physical strength. Others have acquired new skills, but most importantly, every participant has made new friends and built relationships that enhance their lives and the community. And while Challenge Golf's mission is to have fun, encourage cooperation and help one another achieve their personal goals, that does not mean that the players are not competitive.

In 2016, Emanuel Viquez travelled to Milan and played in the ISPS Handa Blind Open. Emanuel competed and represented Costa Rica well, but with Christian Mora his trainer and José serving as his eyes, he also explored the

architecture, history, and culture and felt Italy's energy. Emanuel has gone onto university and is now working as an economist, demonstrating that golf is more than winning awards. It is about experiencing life to the fullest.

In 2018, a Challenge Golf delegation of four became the second team from North America to be invited to the Macau Masters, the largest tournament in the world for golfers with intellectual disabilities. In 2019, after working hard to hone their skills, Jafeth López Carvajal captured a gold, Paula López Alpizar and Sergio Umaña brought home silver, and Dennis Sala Cordero scored a bronze. Their victories were a win for them and their friends, showing that anything is possible with dedication, encouragement, and determination.

Due to current circumstances, the 2020

Macau Masters was cancelled, and it is uncertain if the 2021 event will go ahead as planned. Still, this has not deterred any Challenge Golfer from striving to earn a coveted spot on the team.

With the clinics also suspended, José has devised a series of challenges using household items to keep his players engaged while continuing to develop their skills. Everyone is encouraged to submit videos after completing an activity or exercise and receives one-on-one feedback and coaching support. Several times a month, participants don their uniforms and join their teammates online to share tips and trade stories. Parents report that they notice a change in demeanour and a more pronounced 'can-do' attitude on these occasions. Sharing their trials and triumphs virtually builds camaraderie



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and self-esteem, and everyone is grateful for these opportunities. Still, some admit they miss the combo lunches McDonald's generously supplies to anyone who attends a clinic! Like so many of us, they appreciate the technology that has kept them connected but look forward to celebrating in person once more.

Challenge Golf's participants, their families and their sponsors are sources of inspiration, living proof that the more you do, the more you can do. And José's passion for people is a reminder that each of us has a lot to give back if we so choose.

All of us have moments in our lives when

something seems impossible, and none of us can achieve success without some help along the way. You can give back by donating if you have the means or volunteering if you have the time. Either way, when you enrich the lives of others, you grow richer in the process.

To quote Denzel Washington: "At the end of the day, it's not about what you have or even what you've accomplished...it's about who you lifted up, who you've made better. It's about what you've given back."

Isn't it time you challenged yourself to do more? And yes, one person can make a difference!

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