



Part III "THAT GAME'S FOR SISSIES"

Part I "Allah be with you"

Part II "Get the hell out of my room"

Part III "That game's for sissies"

Part IV "His head was the size of a basketball"

By **William Nack**, Special to ESPN.com

Sean Lewis was caught in a web of angst and despair, a one-legged jock feeling useless and restless in his diminished mobility, when he ran into Billy Bartlett at a dinner party one night at Fran O'Brien's Stadium Steak House in Washington, D.C.

It was fall 2004. The 21-year-old Lewis was still recovering from wounds he had suffered while serving with the U.S. Army in Iraq. Bartlett, an old Vietnam vet who had been injured on duty for the D.C. Fire Department, knew what Lewis was going through -- indeed, what a lot of injured U.S. servicemembers were going through in rehab at Walter Reed.

Bartlett did not like the way many of the amputees were spending their leisure time, either drinking in bars or sitting idly at home. Bartlett loved golf, and he saw in the game an answer to their ennui -- a sport that not only would take them off the stools and into a world of fairways and greens but also would offer them a physical challenge beyond the tedium of daily rehab work, a place to rebuild lost confidence. So he sprang the idea on Lewis and Wasim Khan, 27, a Pakistani-born U.S. Army sergeant who was wounded when the armored personnel carrier he was riding in was hit by a rocket-propelled grenade, damaging his right knee so badly that he cannot bend it today.

"Let's go to the range and hit a few balls and see if you like it," Bartlett said.

Khan agreed, but Lewis waffled.

Michael Temchine
Special to ESPN.com



Standing on only one leg, the thought of swinging a golf club seemed impossible to Sean Lewis.

"Oh yeah, right, golf!" Lewis said. "That game's for sissies."

Bartlett persisted: "If you don't like it, I'll never bother you again about it."

At that moment, learning how to hit that little dimpled ball off one leg seemed the most absurd of all possible athletic pursuits for Lewis. On Jan. 21, 2004, this bright, active, talkative former Indiana high school rugby player and long-distance runner was horsing around with two friends at a base camp in Baqubah, Iraq, when a 120mm mortar round slammed into the ground a few feet away.

The blast cut one soldier in half, killing him instantly and covering Lewis with his blood. Instinctively, Lewis reached up and tapped his own head to make sure it was still there, then looked over and saw the other soldier, his chest cut open by shrapnel.

"I could see his heart beating, and he was just bleeding out," Lewis says. "He reached and I kind of grabbed for him and he died. Then I looked down at myself and ... the piece of shrapnel that cut off my right leg had jabbed into my left leg."

Three major arteries were sliced open -- the femoral arteries in both legs and the carotid artery in his neck. A soldier and a medic rushed to his aid. They put a tourniquet on the butchered right leg and a pressure bandage on the left leg, and the medic, Mike Bradley, another of Lewis' friends, plugged the carotid artery by sticking a finger in it.

"Stay with me, Sean!" the two men yelled.

"I don't wanna die here!" Lewis yelled back. "It sucks!"

"Sean, we're not gonna let you die here. You're gonna be

fine."

Under the impression that if he passed out, he would die, Lewis fought to stay conscious. But at the base hospital, he begged for relief from the pain despite the anesthesiologist's warning.

"Doc, I'm dyin' now! Put me out!"

When Lewis finally awoke, he heard the doctor say, "I hate to tell you this, but you lost your [right] leg."

Michael Temchine
-Special to ESPN.com



With Billy Bartlett's encouragement, Lewis finally stepped up to the tee and found a new direction in life.

"I know that," Lewis replied. "I saw it layin' next to me last night."

When Lewis began his therapy at Walter Reed, he battled that descending shadow of depression, while trying to figure out what he had left, what he had to look forward to. "You feel useless for a long time after you become an amputee," Lewis says. "Even if you're not an amputee, if your arms or legs or face are messed up, you feel useless. You feel like there's nothing you can do."

"EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT AN AMPUTEE, IF YOUR ARMS OR LEGS OR FACE ARE MESSED UP, YOU FEEL USELESS. YOU FEEL LIKE THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO."

Along came Bartlett. Next thing Lewis knew, he was beating balls at the Olney Golf Park in Olney, Md., the best public driving range in the D.C. area, with its enormous fairway dotted with flagged greens and crowned by an island green

set in the middle of an artificial lake. Bartlett had Lewis, Khan and a few other disabled soldiers in tow that day when he approached Tim Landres, the park's principal owner, and asked about getting a discount on the balls.

Landres looked around and saw all those disabled Iraq War vets. "Their money's no good here," Landres told an elated Bartlett. "I don't want them spending a dime. And I'll even do you one better: I'm gonna get my pros to work with them."

The first day he ever hit balls at Olney, with his prosthesis planted on the ground, Lewis grew so frustrated he suddenly ripped off his prosthesis and tossed it 15 feet behind him, to Bartlett's feet. "The leg was flying through the air!" Bartlett recalls, with Lewis growling: "I can't hit with this damn thing on me!"

That was the last time he ever hit a golf ball while wearing his artificial leg.

The head pro at Olney, Jim Estes, took the job so seriously that he practiced raising his right leg and hitting the ball off his left for hours as he tried to figure out the best way, mechanically, for one-legged people like right-handed Lewis to hit the ball. "I had to learn to hit it his way to know what he was experiencing," Estes says. He moved Lewis' grip from weak to strong, had him stand with the ball farther back in his stance and emphasized the importance of spinning through the shot on his left foot. "He learned to spin and keep his balance," Estes says, "and this allowed him to get his lower body around."

Once he got the hang of it, Lewis began to play and practice as often as he could, working on his grip with a special diligence. "Jim showed me the grip, and I spent nine hours and hit roughly 1,200 balls until I got it right," he says. "I'm a very determined person." Landres, Estes and his other pro helpers -- Dale Turner and Edward Simms -- threw a fundraiser for war veterans at Olney Golf Park this summer and raised \$25,000 to buy clubs and equipment for disabled Iraq War vets.

Michael Temchine
Special to ESPN.com



He once called golf a game for sissies, but now completes a round standing on only one leg.

Now Lewis calls himself "an excellent putter" and "good with my irons," regularly driving the ball 250 yards and shooting in the 80s. On Sept. 15, in a bank-sponsored tournament, he hit the longest drive of his life: a 267-yarder that came to rest six yards shy of the green on a short par-4.

The game he once derided as a sissy sport now consumes him.

"I'm pretty obsessed about it," he says. "It was a short while, but there was a time when I was thinkin', 'Man, what can I do as far as sports is concerned? When I get my new leg, I'll start running again.' Golf is my main sport now. I'd like to get down to being a scratch player. I love it. It helps you get back into the world."

"IT WAS A SHORT WHILE, BUT THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I WAS THINKIN', 'MAN, WHAT CAN I DO AS FAR AS SPORTS IS CONCERNED? WHEN I GET MY NEW LEG, I'LL START RUNNING AGAIN.' GOLF IS MY MAIN SPORT NOW."

And, often away from it.

Lewis has gone through a difficult separation and divorce since his return from Iraq, and golf has been a healthy diversion for him. "Sometimes I need to get away from things for a while and I'll go out and play golf," he says. "Or go horseback riding. Golf is a sport I can do."

Khan has grown proficient at it, too. He played cricket and soccer in his native Pakistan before coming to America eight years ago on a "diversity visa," but he has embraced golf since joining Lewis at Olney and, with Estes' help, has adapted to swinging with a stiff right leg. One day this

summer, Khan was slashing balls with a 3-iron, sending them on white arcs across the artificial lake and plainly relishing the moment, with Bartlett looking on.

"This is wonderful," Khan says. "I've got to get into this game."

He coiled over the ball and launched the perfect 3-iron over the lake and to the green 221 yards away. The ball bit and stopped on the grass.

"Look at the Pakistani Prince!" Bartlett crowed.

"You've created a monster," a passerby said.

"I love it!" Billy said. "I love it!"

William Nack, a former writer for Sports Illustrated, is a contributor to ESPN.com.

[<<](#)) ([Part I](#)) ([Part II](#)) ([Part III](#)) ([Part IV](#)) ([>>](#)



[E-ticket Archive](#)) ([ESPN.com](#)) ([Print](#)) ([Send to a Friend](#)