

Worcester Telegram & Gazette (MA)

Cart creates fair way

September 2, 2001

Section: SPORTS

Page: D1

By Bill Doyle

COLUMN: GOLF

Martin Ebel drove his golf cart onto each tee at **Wachusett Country Club** last week, turned his swivel seat to his right, and teed up his golf ball with his right hand while he leaned over the side of the cart and braced his left hand on the ground. Then he straightened up and swung while still sitting in his cart.

On the 10th hole, Ebel rode his cart into a fairway bunker and, without getting out of the vehicle, knocked his ball onto the green with an 8-iron. Ebel then drove his cart onto the green and two-putted.

Wachusett owner Don Marrone and his staff not only didn't scold Ebel for driving the cart on the normally forbidden turf, but they encouraged him to do so.

Wachusett is believed to be the only golf **club** in the region with a cart designed for disabled golfers. Marrone ordered a **Club Car 1-Pass** at the PGA Merchandise Show in January in Orlando, Fla., and it arrived about a month ago.

Ebel, 43, of Marlboro, lost both of his legs well above his knees 18 years ago when a Bobcat front-end loader flipped over and onto him while he was doing some landscaping at his grandmother's home. He has golfed for 15 years while riding his own heavy-duty, three-wheeled mobility scooter, but the scooter wasn't built for golf. It's much slower than a golf cart and not as stable.

Ebel fell every year trying to hit shots from difficult lies. One owner kicked him off his course, fearing the scooter would ruin his greens.

"I've encountered varying degrees of acceptance," Ebel said, "coming out on the course with equipment of my own. It's gotten better over the years, but it's still not anything like what it ought to be."

Ebel heard about the **Club Car-1 Pass** while visiting family in Michigan and he e-mailed Roger Pretekin, president of SoloRider in Denver, which builds the vehicle for **Club Car**. Pretekin put him in touch with the New England distributor, Tom Durbin of **Country Club Enterprises** on Cape Cod. Durbin told Ebel that **Wachusett** had one, and last Tuesday the two played a round there with Jay Shepherd, Ebel's partner in his Boston law firm.

"It's fabulous," Ebel said. "It lets me hit the ball farther and with more confidence and lets me play more shots than I would otherwise not be able to play. That bunker shot I never would have played with my scooter. I would have taken a penalty."

"I don't believe there is another cart on the market like this one," Durbin said. "There are a lot of scooters and a lot of smaller carts that aren't as stable, but nothing like this."

SoloRider spent eight years and \$4 million developing the 1-Pass. The single-seat 1-Pass is about three-fourths the weight of a regular golf cart, but because the weight is evenly distributed, it doesn't mark up greens. The 1-Pass has 7.5 pounds per square inch, less than a standing person and much less than a walking person, Pretekin said from his office in Denver. So footprints actually leave greater indentations. The smooth tire tracks in the bunker on the 10th hole left the sand in better shape than a rake would have.

"Don Marrone is a pioneer," Durbin said. "He and his people deserve credit. They took the initiative and ordered it."

Marrone said he'd lend the cart to other courses if they needed it for a day when **Wachusett** wasn't using it. But when word gets out, chances are the cart will be used quite often.

Ebel never left the cart his entire round. His bag rested on the front of the cart with his **club** heads facing him. Handle bars control the brakes and speed. A softer suspension offers a smoother ride. The seat turns 360 degrees so golfers can hit the ball from either side or the back of the cart. **Wachusett** has no elevated tees, so Ebel had no trouble riding onto them.

"I've never seen anything like this," said Keith Niles, **Wachusett** director of golf and a 20-year golf pro.

"It's just a matter of the rider knowing where to go on and off the greens," said **Wachusett** superintendent Matt Marrone, Don's son. "Other than that, I think it's great. But it takes some getting used to."

Ebel shot a 27-over-par 99, beating the able-bodied Shepherd by four shots.

"I'm happy whenever I break 100," Ebel said.

Ebel, who bears a striking resemblance to PGA Tour golfer Blaine McCallister, smiled throughout much of his round. Ever since his accident in Michigan with the rented Bobcat, he has tried to remain positive.

"When the accident happened, and the machine was rotating into the water (Lake Cinclair), I realized I was going to die," Ebel said. "I accepted that. But when I popped my head up out of the water and I was alive, I realized I was given a second shot. It changes your life when you think you're going to die and you don't. It makes it easy to have a good attitude."

"We play golf all the time together," Shepherd said. "To me, the most amazing thing is not that he can physically do it, it's that every time we go to a course, people stop and stare. You don't see somebody without legs playing golf. But it doesn't bother him."

"The staring doesn't really bother me any more," Ebel said. "But I know people do watch and they're very conscious about what I'm doing on the golf course. That's what I like so much about this cart -- you can't tell where I've been."

Ebel walks with prostheses and canes on occasion, but mostly uses a wheelchair. In addition to golf, he skis sitting in a specially equipped chair. He and his wife, Michelle, have a 2-year-old daughter, Jacqueline.

The **Club** Car 1-Pass costs about \$10,000, but Durbin said a 50 percent tax credit generally applies, dropping the price tag to not much more than a standard golf cart.

Wachusett rents the cart for \$15, the same as half a standard cart.

Ebel loves the cart so much, he has offered to help promote it. He'd like for every course to own at least one. Durbin said the **Club** Car 1-Pass could help the 7 million disabled people who would like to golf, but to this point couldn't.

Shepherd and Ebel defend companies against discrimination lawsuits. They believe owning this cart could prevent such a suit.

``It's cheap insurance," Ebel said.

Marrone said he bought the cart for member Lenny Smith to use. Smith and Fred Hannan have ridden the **Club Car 1-Pass**, but they step out to hit their shots and don't ride on the greens. Ebel was the first one to make full use of it. Marrone said he's considering ordering the optional seat that lifts golfers at an angle so their legs don't get in the way of their swing.

It's only fitting **Club Car** would help Ebel get around a golf course because **Club Car's** parent company, Ingersoll-Rand, has purchased Bobcat, the front-end loader which cost him his legs.

Bill Doyle may be reached via e-mail at wdoyle@telegram.com.

ART: PHOTOS

PHOTOG: T&G Staff Photos/CHRIS CHRISTO

CUTLINE: (1) A new golf cart at **Wachusett Country Club** allows disabled golfers such as Martin Ebel of Marlboro easier access to the game, even on the greens. (2) Martin Ebel of Marlboro is able to hot tee shots and bunker shots from the 1-Pass cart. (3) Eight years and \$4 million were spent on making the 1-Pass a reality. Its weight is distributed evenly so it makes less of an indentation on greens than normal footprints do. (4) With the new 1-Pass cart, disabled golfers such as Martin Ebel of Marlboro can hit the ball farther and play shots they otherwise couldn't when using other modes of transportation.