

## MOTOR SKILLS

## Down syndrome and golf

Victor J Bishop

Around age 10, if not hopefully way before, parents with a child with Down syndrome make the transition from therapy to sports and recreation; from aquatic therapy to swimming; from hippotherapy to horseback riding. It was readily apparent from Emmanuel's first golf range practice that he had an innate ability to swing a golf club. It is in his genes. He is at a disadvantage with his typically developing peers that his father has never wielded a golf club in his life.

In our house there is a major philosophical schism: my wife, Gloria, bless her soul, thinks that Emmanuel can be good at tennis. He has been to four tennis camps and still cannot hit a tennis ball for the life of him, but he never misses a golf swing. Furthermore, Emmanuel cannot bounce a basketball or catch a baseball. The moral of the story is to follow your child's sports' strengths, ability and interests. This is diametrically opposed to the therapeutic model of remediating weaknesses we were drilled at during Early Intervention, which I consider myself now cured of. The purpose of physical therapy is not to accelerate the acquisition of gross motor skills in Down syndrome, but rather to prevent compensatory movement patterns<sup>[1]</sup>, but we do have two recent evidence-based therapies, 1) Dr. Ulrich's treadmill research<sup>[2]</sup> to help babies walk earlier by several months; and 2) Dr. Klein's Lose the Training Wheels™ bicycle camps<sup>[3]</sup> to teach children how to ride a two wheeler in five sessions. For my wife, it is a matter of finding that elusive adapted teaching method for Emmanuel to learn how to hit that pesky tennis ball; for me, after Emmanuel hits two large baskets at the golf range and asks for a third bucket, why bother with tennis or basketball or baseball?

We did flashcards and Emmanuel was an early sight-reader<sup>[4]</sup> – sight-reading is the single most significant intervention for pre-school age children with Down syndrome – my son had a set of sports flash cards, images of bowling balls and softballs and volleyballs, etc., but the one he always gravitated to as a toddler was the golf ball flash card. Hmm...light bulb. I buy my son a plastic set of golf clubs at Wal-Mart and my wife goes bonkers because Emmanuel is redecorating the house, but check out his swing, and my wife looks at the pocket holes in the wall and maybe a casualty lamp. Must be a guy thing. So then I buy him some real Nike youth golf clubs at Target and



Clinton Hills Country Club. Age 10: Ceremonial First Drive: Five consecutive balls.  
Photo: Tim Nienhaus.

take him to the driving range and Emmanuel is so happy putting a couple of dollar bills in the golf ball machine, “all by myself, I can do that papá” and carries his little basket to the tee and flings away. Have I mentioned that my wife wants Emmanuel to play tennis and she throws a fit when she sees my son, well, our son, proudly carrying his golf bag strapped to his back? I am sure our paediatrician was bemused, here is a couple with a child with a disability with a ‘problem,’ asking if a golf bag full of clubs would break my son's back and the Doctor rules in my favour, the triumph of modern medicine.

How did he learn? For the first outings I printed a golf swing sequence and laid it on the ground, you know, break down the task into discrete manageable chunks, yada, yada, but it was almost superfluous, he did not need to be taught the shoulder turn, hip rotation, the backswing, he came

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**Emmanuel Bishop, age 8. Three months after starting to play golf.**

Photo: Tim Nienhaus.



**Decatur, Illinois: Emmanuel Bishop, age 10.**

Photo: Michele Henson, Special Olympics Illinois.

equipped with it. It was only after he won a gold medal at the Special Olympics district qualifiers to go on to State that we found Dan Polites, the golf pro at Clinton Hill Country Club in O'Fallon, to teach my son. Dan has an excellent golf video<sup>[5]</sup>, which Emmanuel promptly memorised. Scaffolding upon my son's relative visual strengths, he learned from the *Golf for Kids* video<sup>[6]</sup> the grip: "hotdog-in-a-bun" and how to chip or pitch: "over-the-bench".

Likewise, I had to make sure that Emmanuel practised at the golf range with good role model golfers; else he would try to imitate a hacker's swing, including all the hilarious hitches. Another pro, Mark Morfey, at the Belk Park Golf Course in Wood River, helped my son groove his putt with a 2 x 4 with markings and a centre point for proper stance and direction. Tim

Nienhaus gave Emmanuel the opportunity to hit the ceremonial first drive at the *Puttin' for Down Syndrome* charity event.

At the golf range I would place the ball on the rubber tee, so once Emmanuel figured out the distance from the golf ball, he only had to concentrate on the swing, putting him in a win-win situation. If my son's backswing became too unwieldy, we would simplify by abbreviating his swing. There are moulded golf grips to encourage a correct grip during practice and for Special Olympics we used a step-down tee so the golf ball would always be at the right height. Proper equipment is paramount: use only Junior golf clubs with the correct shaft length to the child's height and just like sight-reading, the first step is to ensure that your child has good (or corrected) vision.

Given the option my son will choose golf over McDonald's. Before I bought him a golf glove, he would hide his blisters behind his back, so he could keep on practising until dusk: that is how much he loves the life long game of golf.

The golf community has embraced him; golfers stop to admire his swing at the Spencer T. Olin Golf Course in Alton or challenge him at the putting greens and give my son their favourite embossed golf ball, so it can be my son's special golf ball too – I do need to buy one of those racks. There is no pity, he is one of them, they all share a handicap.

Victor J. Bishop is founder of the Riverbend Down Syndrome Support Group and presented at the 9th World Down Syndrome Congress on Early Literacy and Down Syndrome. Emmanuel J. Bishop is homeschooled, studies Suzuki violin, is tutored in French and Latin, and plays golf, swims and bikes. He is a self-advocate speaker, starting at age six by reading a welcoming statement in three languages at the NDSS Annual Congress Plenary Session in front of 650 people.

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