Hadley Presents

Golfing After Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

Ricky Enger: Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we discuss enjoying the game of golf with little or no vision. And joining us are Hadley's Director of Community Marc Arneson interviewing champion blind golfer, Chad NeSmith. Welcome to the show, both of you.

Marc Arneson: Thank you very much.

Chad NeSmith: Thanks, Ricky.

Ricky Enger: So great to have you both. Now, Marc, we'll start with you because people already know you, but for those who don't, just give a brief intro and talk about who you are and what you do at Hadley.

Marc Arneson: So, as you mentioned, my title is Director of Community, but really what I get to do is just meet amazing and fascinating people, hear their stories, hear some of their challenges kind of bring that back to Hadley and find out if there's ways that we can help. And once we figure out something that we think is helpful, part of my other job is to go tell the whole world about it.

Ricky Enger: And Chad, how about you? I'm so looking forward to hearing more about your story. And before we jump into that, how about just a brief intro? I introduced you as a blind champion golfer, which is really, really cool. So, tell us a bit about yourself.

Chad NeSmith: Well, my name again is Chad NeSmith. I'm 53 years old. I was raised in a small rural part of Alabama**,** Cullman, Alabama. Graduated 1986 from high school and I earned two master's and a doctorate by the time I was 26 from the University of Alabama in psychology and counselor educationand worked with my wife who also has her doctorate. We've been married 27 years.And so, we ran a center for 20 years for children with special needs. After that we moved to Nashville to work with a healthcare company now, and that's what we're doing.

Ricky Enger: Fantastic. I'm looking forward to learning a bit more about golf, and I know that there are other people who are wanting to get back into the swing of things when it comes to golf. And that's the last word play I'm going to do. So, no worries that I'm going to come up with more puns and to keep that from happening, I think I'm going to just turn it over to Marc who has a really great list of questions for Chad.

Marc Arneson: Chad, I've been so excited just about this time that we get to spend together and just hearing your story. I'd love to just hear a little bit about your journey, your journey with vision loss and what that's been like for you.

Chad NeSmith: Looking back on it, I was pretty much considered to be by the time I hit 11 or 12, one of the star athletes in Alabama, major sports- football, basketball, baseball. Everything seemed to be clicking for me athletically and that's saw myself doing is playing college football was what I was hoping to do as quarterback. I wanted it to be in the NFL and play NFL football. If not, I wanted to coach college or NFL football.

That was going great until about age 12 or 13, I took a hit during a football game. That pretty much knocked me unconscious. Everybody was like, "How did you not see him? He was right in front of you. I mean, you're running right at him full speed, how did you not see him?" And of course, I thought, "Well, that's not true. I got blindsided or something." Well, back then, I don't know if some of our listeners may remember the eight millimeter that's what we had back then to review stuff. And they showed it to me, and I couldn't believe it. I mean, the guy was just sitting there squatting, waiting to make a tackle. And I mean, he made a legal hit, but he was squatted down. And what I didn't know at the time, I already lost a lot of my peripheral vision. So, when I'm looking straight ahead thinking I've got a touchdown 30 yards away, he was just under the bottom of my peripheral vision and just unloaded a great hit that I was not prepared for. And I mean, it just snapped my head back and I was out.

At that time, nobody had a clue. Just, "Okay, maybe he needs contacts, maybe he needs ..." that was just starting contacts back then. They didn't even have soft contacts. They had the hard. We didn't have any specialist where I was growing up, so I was sent to Birmingham, Alabama. They didn't know what was going on, so they sent me ... ended up going to Houston, Texas. And that's where they had at that time in the '80s a retinal specialist. And I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, and they just flat out told me that I was going to be going blind and it was going to be a slow process. I wouldn't wake up one morning and be blind, but every year it would get worse and worse. And it would always close in. So, I'd have central vision and the outside would just keep coming in like you're looking down the tube of a cardboard paper towel holder. That tunnel would get more and more narrow and eventually it would just completely close all together.

And of course, being 13, I was like, "Well, if I don't talk about it, if I don't acknowledge it, then it doesn't exist." So, they couldn't stop me from playing football at the time because my eyesight was still good enough. But the fear internally that I didn't acknowledge it, then, like I said, I'm 13, you'll live forever. But looking back on it, I was in fear every time I was on the football field. That I was going to take another hit like that. It became obvious that it was a part of me, but I still wouldn't talk about it.

A year later, they wouldn't sign for me to play. The docs wouldn't sign for me to medically play football or baseball anymore. Looking back on it internally, again, for me, it was a relief, but I didn't act like that. I mean, I was angry. I was depressed. A lot of crying spells at night. I didn't come to church every Sunday with my family. And at this point, I just told, "God, why did you do this?" But the thing I look back on though is that I always had so many great friends that didn't party because I was a prime candidate for drugs and alcohol. If somebody would've gotten me at 14, 15 and said, "Hey, let's go to the lake start sipping the beers around the campfire." I mean, I'm telling you, I would have tried anything to feel better and just to get away from the pain. But I had friends who wanted to ... When we got together on Friday Saturday nights, it was board games. It was watching movies. It was just hanging out. And I owe them so much. And they're still great friends of mine today. Sorry about that. So, I finally lost all my sight when I was about 27, but that time from 14 to 18, it was pretty devastating.

Marc Arneson: Thank you for sharing, Chad. I appreciate just your openness and your vulnerability. I can't imagine what a difficult time that was for you. So, when did you learn, pick up golf and when did that start and how did you get involved in that?

Chad NeSmith: The biggest thing was when I was 27, I met my wife, and we were married six months after we started dating. And we've been now together almost 27 years. She played tennis and was a great tennis player. And I could still see to go hit balls with her a little bit. I could put her at the net. I could get a basket of balls and just hit some lobs for her, that stuff. But I couldn't ... if she hit it back, I couldn't keep up with it enough to hit it back to her again. So, tried that. But then it got to where time I reached 30, 32, I mean, there just really wasn't anything I could do athletically. I was lifting weights. I wasn’t going to become a competitive bodybuilder or anything. So, it was like, “This is okay.”

When I would get to be about 36, my wife came in and she said, "Look, I love you, but I got things I want to do on the weekends. And I'm tired of being your entertainment coordinator. So, you got to find something to do and get out of the house." I said, "Well, what do you want me to do?" I say, "Look, a lot of my friends go hunting, but they've already told me they're not going to let me sit in a blind with a gun and shoot at movement that I hear. So, they're not going to allow that to happen at all. So, I don't want to go fishing because I don't want a Water Moccasin to jump in a boat." So, she said, "You’re going to learn to play golf." And I said, "I'm going to learn to do what?"

My wife said, "You're going to learn to play golf." And I said, "Okay, I'll tell you what, I'll give it one hour with somebody at the public golf course there in Tuscaloosa. And if they can teach me in one hour, one of the instructors, that I got a chance to hit this ball, then I'll do it." And about 30 minutes into it, I hit a little pitching wedge with a bump and run, that's all they wanted me to do was those chip shots and stuff. And I hit it where ... I mean, I didn't even feel the ball come off the club. And I was like, "Oh, that's what it feels like." He goes, "That's what it feels like." And from then on, I was hooked. I played and hit balls. My wife was the one that would take me to the driving range and then she started playing. In about three or four years into it, we found out that you could play blind golf tournaments. So, then I said, "Okay, the next two years, I'm going to work as hard as I can now."

I mean, I was working hard to play on the weekends with friends that could see. But now, I said, "I got a way to compete, and I want to see how good I can be." That's when we started really getting after it and really getting some great instruction, getting better players to help me go practice because my wife, again, she got to a point where she goes, "Look, when they're talking about how to hit a fade and set up to hit a draw" And she said, "I don't know what all this is." So, at that time, got volunteers and people to work with me. And that became something I wanted to do. I wanted to get to where ... see how good I could be.

Marc Arneson: You’ve gotten very good. How good you can be is very good, apparently. Chad, I want to go back just a little bit. So, I think you mentioned your friends that go hunting and they've invited you along with, and some of the buddies that you're playing golf with now. Are those some of the same friends that you had in high school when you learned that you were no longer able to play football?

Chad NeSmith: Yes. Three of the four had started playing golf in their 20s had asked me, "You want to go out and you put on the greens and stuff or whatever and go out and ride with us?" And I was like, "No, I don't think so." But then when I did the chipping thing and I called and I said, "Hey, I'm starting to play golf." And they were like, "Oh man." And then when I played my first round with them six months later, where I felt like I could hit a few shots, pick up a ball after I'd hit five or six. I wouldn't hold up the whole course. And all of a sudden, it became a passion for me. I found joy in doing it and I couldn't wait to do it again. I wanted to learn about the game. I wanted to learn about club selection and why you wanted to learn about the physics of golf. But yes, three of the four people that were my best friends in high school, we still play golf today.

Marc Arneson: I've heard from people in similar situations who have said it is really kind of tough to talk to your friends, to talk to their friends about their vision loss. And even times when you felt like you weren't able to continue to do some of the things, same things that you would do with your friends, because they became more challenging. Was that ever something you experienced with those guys?

Chad NeSmith: Yeah. That's a great question. My four friends and me, so five of us and being 14, 15, 16 years old talking about feelings was really not anything you wanted to talk about. But we'd get together, and we'd play poker. We'd all put in $10 and play some kind of poker tournament. But they saw as I started getting to where I couldn't even read my cards that I had in my hand and we showed up one night to play poker, and Scott, who's still one of my best friends of all the group there. He had big print cards. Without even asking, we were playing that next night with those large print cards where I could see it better. Then as we continued to play and my wife, we were having everybody over to play cards when I was 27 or 28.

And I had braille cards, my wife had ordered them. They look like regular cards for everybody else, but the braille’s in the corners. And I was like, "Wow, okay. I can still play poker. And I don't need somebody sitting beside me to tell you what my cards are." So again, we didn't talk about it much, my friends and I, because again were teenage boys, but they knew and they still ... never said anything about coming to pick me up. They never said, "Hey, you owe us gas money." I had said, "Well, if y'all want me to go, y'all, you got to come ... " It was never had to be discussed, and that's again why I had some great friends and they were then, and they still are now.

Marc Arneson: I know that you spent some time helping people learn golf as well. And I think that you and your wife have an organization where you're helping those with the visual impairment learn golf. Is that right, Chad?

Chad NeSmith: What happened was I was very fortunate when I started, and I told you I found out about there were blind golf tournaments around the world. I qualified for the 2016 nationals. I had to shoot qualifying scores at other tournaments. In 2016, my first blind golf tournament, I won that one. And then I repeated it in 2017 and 2018 and also won the Irish Open. And I won the Guiding Eyes Classic in New York twice. The way we got into helping others is after 2016 and winning that, it was all about, "I did it, I did it, I did it. I did it. I knew I could do it with hard work. I did it. I did it. I did it." The feeling lasted a long time, lasted for months. I just felt like I was on cloud nine. Every time I went to the golf course, people say, "Way to go, doc. Way to go. You're national champ. Blah, blah." And it was just ... it was all about me.

I guess that was making up for what I thought I got cheated in my opinion from when I was a teenager not being able to reach that pinnacle in the sports I wanted to. And after winning it in 2017 though, that feeling lasted about a week. And I told my wife, I said, "I can't believe this is over. I don't feel happy anymore." And my wife's a very spiritual, always has been, and she said, "Because you didn't do it for the right reason." And I said, "What are you talking about?" Because when it comes to the two of us, I'm not the brightest one of the two. She's definitely smarter than I am. She said, "Last year you talked about winning it and every time it was I."

She said, "You had a coach that was with you all year helping you. They went to it voluntarily. You didn't say we won it, you said I won it. Without your coach setting you up behind the ball like all other blind golfers." I said, "You couldn't hit a shot. And you just kept saying I won it. I won it." And she goes, "Also, you didn't do anything with it afterwards. You didn't help anybody else. You didn't improve anybody else's life." She goes, "Now, after you won it in 2017, you don't have anything else to hang your hat on." And she said, "We need to do something to make a change." And so, she and I sat down along with my parents and my mom and stepdad, and we said, "What would that be?"

And they said, "Well, wouldn't you love to have had a golf club in your hand at age 14 when you couldn't play the other sports?" And I said, "Oh god, yes, I'd love to have had one." And they said, "Well, why don't we do that for kids now?" We sat down and set up a 501(c)(3). It's called AVID, A Vision in Darkness. Every state has a blind school state funded and I called here one ... For Tennessee is in Nashville. I called the Tennessee School for the Blind. I said, "I'd like to help your golf team." And they said, "We don't have a golf team." And I said, "You got to be kidding me." Because to me, it's like the most obvious sport for visually impaired and blind people to play because the ball doesn't move. The target doesn't move. You don't have to run or jump. I mean, it just seems so obvious that they would have had golf. I mean, this is how naive I was, even though I was blind.

We started the first golf team in the United States. No other state school has golf as a golf team and a golf practice. So, we started the first golf team, blind golf team. And we got up to 14 kids right before AVID. They were between the ages of eight and 16. These kids were hitting the ball. It's not just a clinic we would do. We got them clubs. We got golf shirts that matched. We made it a practice on Monday, Wednesday afternoons after school.

And our goal is to add one a year starting this year, as we want to add a different blind school, a golf team, and teach them how to get it started. I'd like to see in five years, I'd like to see Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, all the kids get together in a central location and play against each other in a golf tournament for the first one that's ever been done. It's now not me winning, it's about me doing well to have a platform, but it's like now, then if I don't win, it's okay because these kids don't care, but it give me a purpose of I want to keep trying to be better, but it's more like life lessons now for the kids. Golf is important, but the lessons you've learned from any sport, but especially golf. That's what we're trying to accomplish. Give confidence. You don't have to compete in tournaments. That's not what it is, but it's about patience. It's about respect and respecting the game. It's a tough sport, but we were trying to teach all the right aspects and life skills that go along with golf to the kids as well.

Marc Arneson: So, Chad, so have you spent time with ... I mean, I know that there's a lot of folks out there who are new to vision loss and maybe similar to you when you were in high school, felt like there were things that they can no longer do. They kind of had to give up some different things. And I imagine golf might be that for many people. Have you spent any time with those who later in life enjoyed golf, but now with their vision loss have had a challenge being able to do that?

Chad NeSmith: That's what we actually are changing this year. We're adding veterans and any other adults to the list who have lost their vision, are losing their vision and have not played golf. They're invited and we're going to get ... And again, when I say this, we do it at no expense to them. It's not because my wife and I are wealthy, but we've had great donations from people locally. And so, we get them the clubs, we get them everything that they need. But yes, we're also trying to reach out to the optometrist and ophthalmologist and stuff in the area. And what we want to do is get people that used to play 10 years ago but then they had something, cataract surgery that went bad and they couldn't follow their own golf ball anymore, so they quit. They can maybe still even say the ball sitting on the ground but as soon as they hit it, they can't follow it, so they just quit. And there's just no reason for that.

I mean, there are coaches out there, people that want to do this, there's even times that I've actually hired a college student who plays on the college golf team here locally and say, "Hey, I'll pay you 10 bucks an hour. I want to go out and hit balls for five hours." And they're like, "You're going to pay me to go hit ball?" So, I'll hit 10 balls, they'll hit 10. I'll hit 20, they hit 20 and they get paid 10 bucks an hour when I want to have a real heavy practice day. So, there's a way to do it depending on what you want. If you want to just get practice and hit some balls, you want to compete in tournaments. Do you just want to play on the Saturdays with your buddies? There's ways to get people to coach. And that's what we call them our coaches not caddies, because caddies on television, they just get the player the yardage and stuff like that. Keep the clubs clean, carry the bag.

Well, we call them coaches, not because they're all PGA teaching professionals, but they got to get us to the cart safely. That's number one, get us to the car, get us to the ball, get us up to the tee box, get us around water hazards and bunkers and don't let us step on rakes and sprinkler heads. The number one thing in blind golf is that if you finish the round and you've not had any blood drawn, you've had a good day. Then the score is just ... that's just a second thing what your score was, but the coaches have so much on them that they have to do and that's why we call them coaches instead of caddies. On the blind golf tournament, it's all amateur. We don't make any money for winning. It's trophies and the thrill of competition. But some, it's their wives are coaches. Some, it's their sons. Some, it's their fathers. Some have PGA teaching professionals. Coaches can be anybody. And so, anybody that wants to play this game or has played this game, there's no reason why we can't help you get to where you need to go to play the game.

Marc Arneson: So, tell me about your golf game. What's the best score that you've ever ... what's the best round you've ever shot?

Chad NeSmith: My best tournament round is 81. When I say tournament round, the thing I like to tell folks, because when they hear about blind golf, they're thinking, "Okay, y'all play it differently than the guys we watch on television." And the answer is there's only two rule differences, that were two rules that are different. Number one, we can ground the club in the bunker. So, in other words, the PGA guys, and the college players, when you get into sand trap, you can't put your club behind the ball and touch the sand. You have to hover it. Well, if we don't know where the ground is, we don't stand a chance to returning the club because that's what we learn. We learn where the ball is in relation to our feet and where the ground is. And so, we get to ground the club in the bunker, no practice swings, but we get to at least set the club down behind the ball.

And the only other rule change that's different from everybody else that plays by the rules of golf is that when our coaches line the club up and hold the club behind the ball, they take two steps back. So, they're staying in the straight line with me, the line I want to hit it on and the target we're trying to hit to. In real golf, the coach can't be in that line. They have to get out from behind you, but they have to stay behind us because as I step back a couple of steps and say, "All right, go ahead and swing and hit it." The club could have moved a little bit to the heel, club could have moved to the toe. My feet could be aimed too far to the right. And that's where the ball's going to go. So, they can see that. But if they can't stay behind us, they won't be able to see that and stop us and reset it. So other than that, we play by the exact same rules, no mulligans. We have to put everything in the hole. There's no gimmes. The pros play anywhere from 6,800 to about 7,200 yards just to give you a reference. We play about 61 to 6,200 yards.

Marc Arneson: I got to ask, have you ever hit a hole in one?

Chad NeSmith: I have been so close, but no. I've had so many chances where we thought it was going in or we get up there and it's six inches or a foot, but not yet. But I sure am hoping.

Quick funny story. Coach Moody was the women's basketball coach at the University of Alabama back when I was playing early, but I hadn't started playing tournament golf yet. I was still just trying to learn to play. And we had a scramble for charity for the University of Alabama. And I had some of the coaches out there on the tees with us just saying, "Hi, Coach Moody. Thanks for coming out." That kind of thing. I was on a par three and they said, "Okay, Doc, if you make a hole in one here on this, 155 yards, you win this truck." And they said, "That's going to be funny watching you drive this out of here." And I said, "Yeah, that'd be hilarious. Blind guy driving a big old Ford F-150."

So anyway, I hit the shot, and everybody says, "Dear Lord, that may be going in." The flag was over a ridge on a back level and so we couldn't see the bottom foot of the flag and the ball never reappeared. And they had a spotter up at the green who was off to the side, and he went and motioned finger down like it went in. So, we started jumping around on the tee box and everything. Coach Moody had forgot that I couldn't see. He came running in to give me a high five and I was giving it though tiger fist pump and caught him right under the chin and knocked him unconscious. So, I mean, I hit him perfect right on the jaw with an upper cut. So, he was knocked out and then I found out the ball wasn't in the hole, it was on the other side. So, the spotter couldn't see it. It didn't go in; it was three inches. So, I didn't win the truck. Coach Moody had to go to the ER. I was the one that knocked him unconscious. So, it was eventful.

Marc Arneson: Okay, Chad. So amazing things that you and your wife are doing in the world of golf. If somebody wanted to ... What advice would you give to somebody who again, maybe new to vision loss, is maybe thinking about the idea of getting back into this, never thought maybe it was possible. What kind of advice would you give them?

Chad NeSmith: I would tell you the first thing is that you just got to believe that you want to do it. I mean, because if you're not going to do it for the right reason, meaning that you want to have something that you can get outside, something you can do and have camaraderie with some folks, you don't even need to try. I mean, because ... and that's with anything, not just golf. But golf is the most difficult sport I've ever played. The room for error is so minute, a couple of millimeters makes a difference in a ball going straight or in the water.

And you have to have patience and you got to really have a passion and enjoy what you're doing. And so, if you're ready for that and you want to try something difficult, you understand it's going to be difficult and that's for a sighted person, it's going to be difficult. And for a blind person, it's going to be just as difficult. And there are some things that are hard because you got to have somebody with you. You can't go out and just hit a bucket of balls by yourself. But the thing I would tell people to do is check out the United States Blind Golf Association website, that's usbga.org. We have all kinds of clinics listed across the country. I'm the vice president of the USBGA. We've got all kind of stuff there on the website, clinics and videos and people you can contact in your area.

The other option is AVID. Go to avid.golf, A-V-I-D.golf. And that's the one that Pat and I, that's our website for kids. But like I said, we're expanding that now to adults. We still can get you in contact with people. We can get you golf clubs if you can't afford those. We can get you set up with a teacher who can help you as a beginner. If you were an advanced player, but you hadn't played in 10 years, then we'll get somebody to check you out, see where you're at in terms of your game and then how much instruction needed to get back to it. We'll set you up with coaches and you can interview the coaches. See if you like them. Just a lot of options we can give you. So, I would say the usbga.org is the national website. And then our website if you want to check it out is avid.golf. And either one of those websites would be a great starting point.

Ricky Enger: That's excellent. Yeah. We'll have both of those things in our show notes, for those of you who are listening and didn't manage to write it down. No worries. It's all on the website along with this episode. Any other final thoughts that you'd like to leave our listeners with before we wrap it up?

Chad NeSmith: The thing that turned my life around about golf and getting off the couch and beat the depression, because there's a lot of people that are losing their sight or have lost their sight and the number one thing, they're dealing with is depression. Because again, if you're born blind, you don't know anything else. But if you've been able to see and been able to drive and been able to snow ski and been able to go out and own your own go hunting or work your farm, and then you lose your eyesight where you can't do those things, I mean, it's devastating.

Make sure you keep searching for a way to come to peace with what's happening. It may be talking to somebody. It may be talking to your spouse. It might be talking to a parent. It may be talking to your pastor at church. It might be going to something, and somebody says something, and you hear something. So don't stay on the couch. Get out, do things, try different things. Find what gives you joy. And you can beat depression. You can beat this. So, would I take my eyesight back today? The answer's yes. I mean, everyone says, "Oh, you wouldn't take your sight back." Well, yeah, I would. It's just not going to keep me from living my life anymore as if I don't have it. So, I just thought I'd just tell everybody, encourage it, but you got to keep trying, you can't give up. Giving up is the easy thing to do.

Ricky Enger: Absolutely. I love that. Thank you so much for sharing your story and just sharing your journey with us.

Chad NeSmith: Thank you very much for having me.

Ricky Enger: Got something to say, share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu that's P-O-D-C-A-S-T@hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at 847-784-2870. Thanks for listening.