

Acton gets back into action

Golfer credits comeback to neuromuscular specialist

By Debera Carlton
P-I Reporter

Injured golfer Rick Acton is lying on a low, cushioned table. Jeff Haller, one of the owners of Inside Moves, tells him to relax.

Haller gently places his hands on Acton's back, using his fingers as sensing devices, calmly but firmly seeking out clues and sorting out pieces of the neuromuscular jigsaw called the human body.

"I'm not putting very well," says Acton, breaking the silence.

"Are you not putting well — or are you preparing to putt well?" counters Haller.

Acton pauses, then laughs.

"I have problems with this synthesizing process."

Five knee operations

Actually, Acton has been quite successful with the particular synthesis of mind and body that Haller has been teaching him since March, 1984. It is Haller, an all-state basketball player from Port Townsend (1967), whom Acton credits with getting his golf game back on course.

Haller, a black belt in aikido and a certified teacher in the Feldendrais method, studied under the late Moshe Feldenkrais, the Israeli physicist who pioneered "functional integration," the

study of movement awareness and bodily change.

A car accident in 1976 badly injured Acton's knees and ended his promising PGA tour career. He had five knee operations, which he considered successful, but knee problems continued to plague him.

Acton went to see Haller, one of several practitioners, including former University of Washington cross country coach Alan Bonney, who teach or consult on various methods of movement awareness and performance enhancement at Inside Moves, which moved last November to Fremont. Acton says "absolutely" that the increased strength of his game is due to Haller.

"It sounds like hocus-pocus or magic when you try to explain it to somebody, and I'm not one that gets into fads," Acton said. "But something happens when Jeff does whatever it is he does to my muscles, and it works. Absolutely, I'm convinced. It's real. Things are getting better with me, that's all I know."

"I had to re-learn how to use my left leg, basically. I'd lost touch with my legs. I used to have an occasional sore back. I'd become upper-body oriented, maybe subconsciously, just protecting my knee. I couldn't make a complete finish on my swing."

Acton won his share of tournaments before seeing Haller.

But he says, "Now I swing my club better, my posture's better, I hit the ball a lot harder and I don't seem to have as many bad rounds anymore."

"In pro-ams, I haven't had a round over par since 1983," said Acton, who this year has won the Sunriver Oregon Open, the Washington State PGA Championship, three pro-ams and taken second in three others. "Other players are scared of me now. Winning breeds that."

Haller half-jokingly calls himself "the best sports psychologist on the planet."

Benefits cited

"I'm actually hooking up neurons in his brain," said Haller, who knows Feldenkrais dismissed psychology and psychiatry as ways to revise human behavior. "Moshe said no human brain can improve another human brain; you have to provide an environment for another brain to improve itself. So when I'm working with Rick, I'm giving him non-verbal, very fine messages to try to break through the neuromuscular pattern of protection people have if they're injured."

"If one part of your body is injured, it affects everything else. So I try to bring everything into a state where everything in his body is free to move. If the pelvis isn't free, for example, how can

the knee be? The goal is to find the right action so he can work with himself instead of against himself."

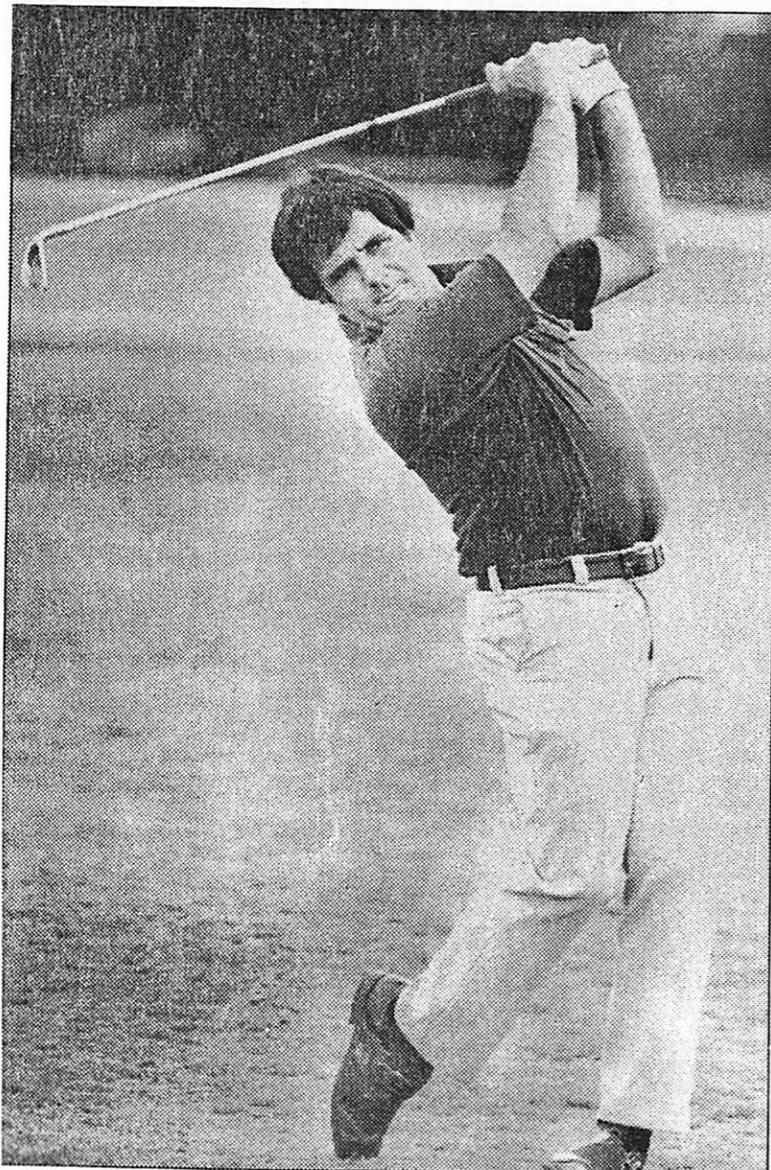
Haller, who has given and received positive feedback from other athletes, among them pro football player Ray Pinney and runner Regina Joyce, is particularly fond of golf.

Sahalee golfer Sue Ursino, who was brutally assaulted several years ago, said Haller has "helped tremendously." But she felt people less traumatized than she was could benefit.

Elwin Fanning, golf pro at Kayak Point, said he hurt his back in April while practicing for the Washington State Match Play Pro-Am. He quit 11 rounds into a game; he couldn't reach down to pull the ball out of the cup. Two days later, after seeing Haller, he completed, but lost, the first round.

"There's no way I would have been able to play without his assistance," Fanning said. "Jeff deals with balance, the way we carry ourselves. I can't explain what he does, but it certainly works. He understands how the body moves."

Haller, who does not have a medical degree, acknowledges skeptics but says, "We're an addendum to the medical profession. We can teach exquisite neuromuscular patterns of behavior they don't know yet."



AP PHOTO

Rick Acton, whose golf career was nearly wiped out by an accident, has revived his game with the help of a specialist.