

IMPACT STORY

THERE'S NO SHAME



CAROLINAS

in Veteran Colton Hensley's Golf Game

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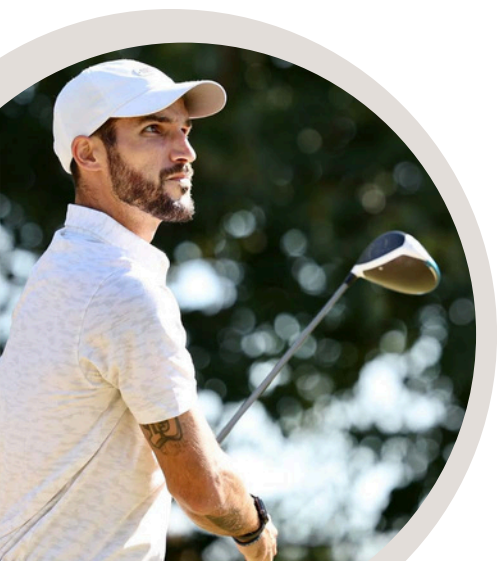
Colton Hensley is comfortable going anywhere the conversation leads during this nearly 50-minute interview. "I feel like I have a valuable story to tell people," he said. Hensley's story is one with many emotional layers. It begins with military service and evolves into deployment, tragedy, difficulty adapting to civilian life, drug addiction, jail time and an incredible rebirth thanks to family, sheer determination and a desire to get fellow veterans involved in golf. The 34-year-old Asheville, North Carolina native is an open book. He no longer feels any shame from his past. He will answer any question with pure honesty, and with the help of his longtime girlfriend, Katrina, he will even fill in gaps and elaborate when certain questions become difficult to ask.

Hensley served as a Cavalry Scout in the Army for the 101st Airborne Division from 2009-13. While deployed in Afghanistan, he lost two of his closest friends from IED attacks – Sgt. Justin Officer on Sept. 29, 2010 and Cpl. Loren Miles Buffalo on March 9, 2011. The survivor's guilt was too much to handle. Hensley could not stop thinking about carrying the coffins for both Officer and Buffalo. He remembers every painful detail of having to load them onto an airplane to be flown back home to the U.S. He was honorably discharged from the Army in 2013 and returned home to Asheville. He had ACL and MCL replacement surgery on his left knee, and that was his entry into drug addiction. Hensley did anything he could to get his hands on painkillers. He knew how to get as much as he could legally, while also buying drugs off the street from money he collected by selling stolen items.

"I started hanging with the wrong people and before you know it, I was literally crawling through people's windows to steal things to support my habit," he said. He once was accused of stealing \$12,000 worth of items from a house that included a laptop, camera, camcorder, luggage, and snowboarding gear. Hensley was in and out of a jail, but in 2014 he relapsed, violated the terms of his probation, and was sent to federal prison for two years after being charged with felony breaking and entering, felony larceny and felony obtaining property by false pretenses. Life behind bars was just as awful as it was on the streets. The worst of his stay came after Hensley got into a fight and was sent to solitary confinement for a 45-day stint.

"I can't say I was ever suicidal, but that was probably my lowest point ever," he said. "You have nothing to your name, no contact with the outside world and nothing but crazy thoughts going through your head the entire time."

Although Hensley has no shame and guilt now regarding his past, he experienced plenty of it during his darkest days. Hensley finally got out of prison in early 2016 and, although he had lost everything, burned bridges and ruined relationships with his family, he vowed to do better. But several months later, he had another relapse. After getting pulled over, the officer noticed Hensley had prescription drugs in his possession. Back to jail he went – only this time, it truly was the best thing that ever happened to him. Kevin Rumley is the program director for the local Veterans Treatment Court (VTC), which uses a team approach to help support veterans facing non-violent felony charges. Rumley worked with Brooks Kamszik, a court-appointed attorney, and together they got Hensley out of jail and into an inpatient rehabilitation center at the VA Medical Center.



There's no shame in my game.



After a month there, Hensley entered the two-year rehabilitation program that, he says, was “probation amplified to 100.” He had to wear an ankle monitor for 24 straight months, with regular drug testing. During that program, Hensley heard about PGA HOPE. Hensley had played golf in high school and was a good player, so when an opportunity came to play golf, get outside and have it be a part of his rehabilitation process, he was all - in.

Hensley didn’t have clubs – he had sold them years earlier for drugs. But that soon got sorted out, thanks to Brian Oliver, a PGA Life Member who is Asheville’s lead PGA HOPE instructor and a national instructor for the program. “When you’re around veterans, their eyes tell the story and you could see in his eyes that he was in a dark spot,” Oliver recalls of his first meeting with Hensley nearly five years ago. “He needed some help.” Oliver remembers Hensley saying he hadn’t played much golf in the past, but Oliver could tell that wasn’t true. Hensley’s contact was pure. Hensley told Oliver that he had to attend because of his current predicament, but that he was committed to continuing with the lessons.

“When the six-week program was over, he said, ‘I want to do something in the golf business,’” Oliver said. “He was wearing a nice golf shirt, nice shorts and shoes, and he was hitting shots and focused on why the ball was going where it was going. He was a completely different person. I knew we had tapped into something.” But even Oliver couldn’t have predicted it would end up as well as it has.

Now a 4 handicap, Hensley has continued to be a part of the program, assists Oliver in recruiting other veterans – and then helps them once they are there. It’s one of the many reasons why Oliver nominated Hensley to represent the Carolinas PGA Section as one of 20 Ambassadors to participate in PGA HOPE National Golf and Wellness Week last month in Washington, D.C., hosted by Congressional Country Club.

He’s taking more ownership, more leadership in the group,” Oliver said. “He and I became really close friends. It was the bond of golf that did it. He found golf in the right phase of his life. It’s been an amazing journey for him.”

Now, Hensley is a certified golf nut. He’s a supply technician at the VA Medical Center, and that line of work gives him direct access to speak to veterans about the PGA HOPE program. He chips and putts almost every day during his hourlong lunch break. He’s teaching his 3-year-old son Noah the game. He caddies a couple times a week at either Biltmore Forest Country Club or the Country Club of Asheville, and he plays about four rounds of golf a week but admits, sheepishly, “it’s probably even more than that.” Hensley plans to take the 36-hole Player Ability Test at some point soon, with hopes of working full-time for the PGA HOPE program. He says he’d be crazy to leave the golf circle that has been so kind and helped get his life back on the proper path. He wants to stay in the game, he wants to continue to share his story – and he wants to give back.

All is not perfect, however. Hensley knows that it never will be. There are still things that need to be rectified. He just recently received a paper from the Buncombe County Courthouse saying that all five of his felony charges had been expunged, a reward for staying clean well after finishing the VTC program. But that doesn’t erase all the damage.

“Some relationships have been mended and some, I don’t know if they ever will,” Hensley says. “But that won’t keep me from trying. I got a lot more to lose now and a lot more to live for. I keep that in the forefront of my mind and keep trying to drive forward.”



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