

*Donna Howard's life has been turned around with the help of service dog Ebony.*



# Donna's Dogged Fightback

**Almost 20 years in the Australian Defence Force left Donna Howard suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But golf and a black Labrador called Ebony have helped her fight back. She spoke to JANELLE WARD.**

Golf can exhilarate, frustrate and ... heal.

But for Donna Howard, the 'healing' required one vital addition – a dog trained to walk every step of the way with her on course.

That Labrador, Ebony, is essentially giving Donna her life back, her family the wife and mother they once knew and Koorungal Golf Club in Altona a very handy pennant player and loved member.

A black dog was the key to fighting *the* black dog.

Donna was an aviation technician in the navy for 19 and a half years, serving on HMAS Nirimba and HMAS Sydney in Nowra and Canberra and at RAAF Williams in Point Cook. She injured her neck in an accident she still prefers not to talk about and her navy career was over.

She pushed on, however, working with the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) for close to six years until she was medically retired as Totally and Permanently Incapacitated and with her mental health spiralling downwards.

"The accident left me with chronic neck pain," she explains as we play nine holes at Koorungal – with Ebony, of course. "With that came lots of drinking, lots of depression, lots of anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was in total denial. Then one Christmas (2009) everything pretty much fell apart. I just couldn't do it anymore."

Fortunately for Donna, husband Glenn and sons Lachlan and Jakob, that low point was also the start of a huge turnaround.

"I spoke to my GP, ended up in a psychiatric hospital, started to take medication and eased off the alcohol. They found me a really good musculoskeletal doctor, Steve Jensen, who turns out to be a member here. He got me on the fentanyl patches, which helped with the neck pain, and I have been working with psychiatrists on and off since then, trying to manage my depression and anxiety and the PTSD – the bad flashbacks and nightmares."

**Enter golf and Koorungal.**

Donna was only an occasional golfer in her youth but she'd enjoyed the game and hoped it could help her push through the anxiety and get her out of the house – something she still found difficult to do.

She started with the then Golf Victoria Women's Golf Network in June 2012, which led her to Koorungal. Erica Kreymborg, co-ordinator of that program, believes the Women's Golf Network was the ideal program for Donna. "It gave her the opportunity to experience competition-like events as well as meet other women with whom to play golf," she says.

Koorungal vice-president Lyn Foote received a call from Donna in late 2012, detailing her challenges and why she believed a regular hit could be hugely beneficial.

"I played with Donna," says Lyn, "and then found a female member who is the same age (Tracee Grant) and asked her to make sure Donna was on the timesheet and playing with people who were 'user friendly'. Now these two are mates. So I 'picked good!'"

## “STRAIGHT AWAY, EBONY WOULD WAKE ME UP FROM NIGHTMARES WITH A BIG LICK ON THE FACE.”

Donna's handicap quickly came down – from 43 to 12 – with help from then Altona Lakes Golf Course professional and now Koorungal assistant pro Jody Hawkins, who adjusted her swing fractionally to ease some of the neck pain.

She was soon playing pennant, but the PTSD was about to rage out of control again.

"Things got worse last year when I tried a treatment called EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation Reprocessing, a form of psychotherapy)," says Donna.

"It triggered something and I was having flashbacks and nightmares all the time. On the days I still came to golf, I didn't stay. I didn't come in for lunch because that was just too much for me."

**Enter Ebony.**

One of the health professionals Donna was seeing suggested she consider an assistance dog. Dogs for the vision-impaired are common, but an assistance dog for someone with PTSD, for a golfer with PTSD?

Consider this: 3000-4000 Australian Defence Force personnel are diagnosed with PTSD each year, according to statistics, and the condition is responsible for more deaths by suicide than fatalities in the line of duty. But research has shown a service dog can make a massive difference.

Donna contacted Integra Service Dogs Australia, which provides dogs for defence force veterans and first responders, such as police, ambulance and fire officers, through partnerships with the likes of Guide Dogs Victoria, the Australian Border Force Detection Dog Program and private registered breeders. A dog is partnered with a handler and learns how to read and respond to that person's emotional state – how and when to offer support.

Within weeks, 18-month-old Ebony, who had not met guide dog pass standards because of "dog distraction" – she had a tendency to interact with other dogs – was at Donna's side.

For the first month after her arrival in August, it was all about bonding at home. "Straight away, Ebony would wake me up from nightmares with a big lick on the face," says Donna.

Then the training began, building obedience skills to the level where reactions to commands and situations were automatic – and working on that dog-distraction problem.

The pair are now inseparable, Ebony in her regulation aqua-coloured jacket, constantly at Donna's feet. Their movement around the golf course is practised and precise – the result of careful and ongoing training.

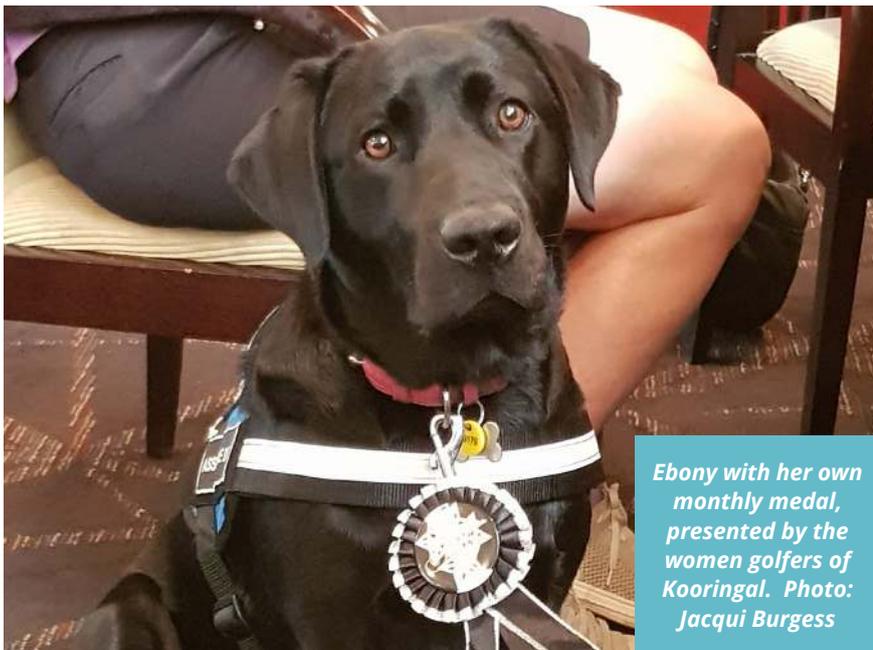
"We had to learn to trust each other," says Donna. "I had to learn that I could put my head down and she would stay."

"We walked the course, just the two of us. She was a bit keen initially to come into the bunkers, so I had to work on that. I also had to be careful on the sixth with all the ducks."

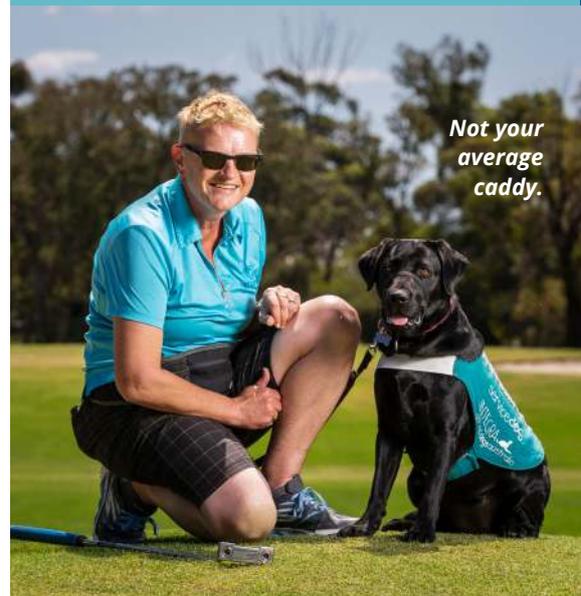
"Then we walked with a group playing to see her reactions and she went well. Then I started playing. All the girls were really helpful, especially Tracee and Kate Arnold, who had always been very supportive."

Ebony walks along quietly as we play, stands and sits where directed and enjoys the odd slice of apple, banana and her favourites – milk bottles and strawberry creams. Water is always handy. There's not a peep out of her, not even a sideways look at a duck.

And a brief demonstration of Ebony's skills back in the clubhouse is astonishing. Donna pretends to be upset and Ebony bounds up



*Ebony with her own monthly medal, presented by the women golfers of Kooringal. Photo: Jacqui Burgess*



*Not your average caddy.*

to lick her face; Donna appears agitated and Ebony paws her knees; Donna stands and signals for Ebony to protect her back and then her front and Ebony intuitively lies accordingly. Four key tasks successfully completed. And while Donna talks, Ebony tucks herself under Donna's chair.

But a dog on a golf course, in club rooms? An assistance/service dog is legally allowed to go anywhere its handler can go but how did Kooringal handle Ebony's imminent arrival?

Lyn says there was a board discussion and members were advised. They were then educated about Ebony's role and a dos-and-don'ts article was published in the club newsletter.

"One of the concerns was that some people are afraid of dogs," says Lyn, "but our view was if that was an issue, those people wouldn't put their name down to play with Donna. It was a non-issue."

Kooringal was already conscious of the special needs of some members, with a ramp installed near the steps on the 13th for an amputee.

When Donna won the club's Ida Oatway Trophy (the best three of four stroke rounds over the year) in 2018, she used her acceptance speech to thank the members for their support and to explain more about PTSD.

"I've never hidden any of my struggles," she says. "I've always been open and honest with people and tried to get other people to talk. Two people came up to me later to say they've struggled with mental health issues for years but never told anyone. I say, 'Why are you hiding it?'"

"The more you talk about it, the greater the relief and the more people become aware of it, the less stigma is attached to it. Some of the ladies here didn't know what PTSD was."

"Donna has been open about her struggles," Lyn adds. "In her speech she made the comment that she doesn't expect us to fix anything but if we just listen and hear her, that's all she needs. We were all very moved. It was the best part of the night."

The next step is to alert other clubs that Ebony is part of the team when Kooringal visits for pennant matches.

And pennant with Ebony has required some creative thinking from Donna.

"Johanne Ford will caddy for me and I will have her in a cart. Because pennant is usually played during the warm weather, if it's hot Ebony will go in the cart and I will walk alongside. And sometimes I might need someone to stand with Ebony, like if I'm in a bunker. I can't ask an opponent to do that."

Donna and Ebony have formed a formidable partnership. In January the pair won the monthly medal. Such is the affection in which both are held that when Donna was presented with her medal, the ladies made sure that Ebony had her own medal too.

Now that Ebony has passed the Public Access Test and is no longer in training, Donna plans for them to travel further afield. But the biggest aim is that one day the PTSD nightmares will be consigned to the past.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SERVICE DOGS.

### **DON'T PAT A SERVICE DOG**

A service dog is a working dog. You should not pat, feed or distract the dog unless invited. But don't ask.

### **DON'T IGNORE THE HANDLER**

If he/she asks you to step away, or give a similar request, be assured that person knows best and it will be for a good reason.

### **DON'T ASK WHY SOMEONE HAS A SERVICE DOG**

It's just not appropriate.

### **KEEP YOUR DOG AWAY**

Your dog may be keen to socialise with any dog it sees but a working dog must stay focussed.

### **RIGHT-OF-WAY**

A service dog and handler should always have right-of-way. And don't walk alongside the pair unless invited. If you are walking with a service dog and handler, walk on the handler's free side.

### **IT'S THE LAW**

A service dog can go anywhere its handler can go – on public transport, in shops, restaurants and golf courses.