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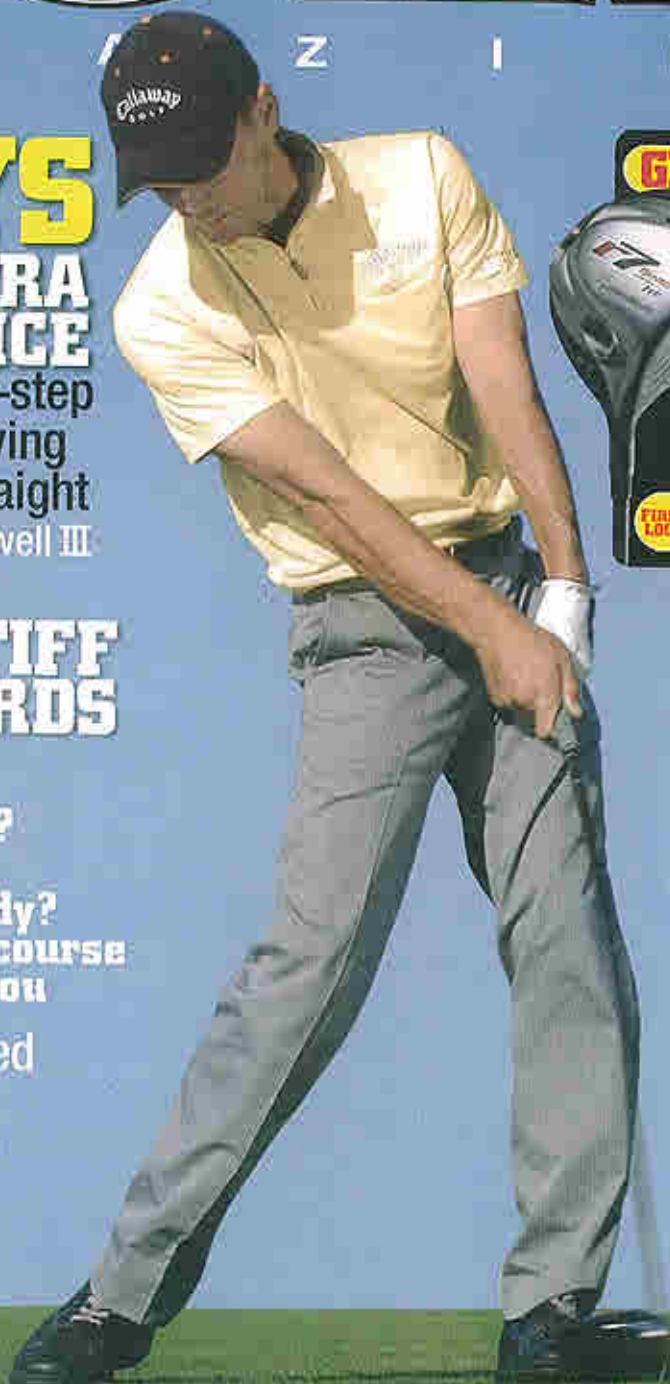
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MEET THE MOST AMAZING GOLFER IN THE WORLD



MARCH 2005



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**TALE
OF THE
TAPE**

NAME Bob
MacDermott
AGE 49
TITLES
U.S. National
Amputee

Ernf Association
Championships, 2000-04

SCRATCH AND CLAW
MacDermott was a
0 handicap in '03 —
seven shots better
after his accident

**No hallucinated
but felt no pain.
His nerve
endings had been
charred away.**



BY CURTIS GILLESPIE

PHOTOGRAPHS
BY GREGORY CROW

MEET THE WORLD'S MOST AMAZING GOLFER

The day Bob MacDermott didn't play golf changed his life

BELVEDERE GOLF CLUB IS A TIGHT, HILLY 6,400-YARD COURSE tucked in the rolling aspen parkland outside Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. In 2003, scratch player Bob MacDermott shot a course-record 65 to win the club championship, a title he defended last summer. These were striking wins for a 49-year-old who only started playing as he neared 30, never mind that MacDermott also works full-time running programs for the developmentally disabled. But none of this adequately explains why he's perhaps the world's most remarkable golfer. • August 23, 1987, was a perfect summer day in Saskatchewan. The flat, epic landscapes of the Canadian prairie evoke the vast American plains where Clark Kent became Superman. Bob MacDermott grew up here, on a farm near Coleville. With his wife, Janie, and their two young children, Dylan and Shannon, he had returned to Canada in 1985, trading work on the oil rigs of Indonesia and Malaysia for a job as a drilling consultant. He took up golf and in two years had whittled his handicap to 7. • A local tournament was starting that Sunday, but MacDermott decided not to enter: He thought it more important to help his father, Don, a wheat farmer, harvest his crop. At about 2 p.m., MacDermott took a tractor and cultivator out to the far end of the farm. Working a section, he drew the cultivator too close around a power pole and brought it down. • "I know I should have gone back to the house and called the power company," he says. "But I was mad at myself, and that anger got me into trouble." • MacDermott hopped off the tractor and dragged the heavy pole from atop the cultivator. Inexplicably, he began to think it was a phone line, not a power line. The pole remained in the tractor's path, and it would have been a hassle to divert around it. He recalls re-approaching the pole, and then...darkness. ▶

Driving past on the adjacent highway, Calvin Humphrey, a neighboring farmer, saw the downed power pole and stopped his pickup truck. A semiconscious MacDermott was sprawled on the open field, smoke twisting off his charred sweatpants. He'd been electrocuted. The scorching heat of the currents had fused the rubber soles of his running shoes to his feet. His baseball hat was still on, but the top was riddled with scorched pinholes as if by a shotgun blast. More than 14,000 volts had shot through his body.

Humphrey ran back to his property and found another farmer, Jeff Graham, to help carry MacDermott into Humphrey's truck. They raced to the tiny hospital in nearby Kindersley. Graham later told MacDermott that sitting beside him in the truck "you were so hot you were still sizzling, and I could hear you cooking from the inside out."

The hospital wasn't equipped to deal with MacDermott's massive injuries, which included third- and fourth-degree burns covering 40 percent of his body. While being prepped for the two-hour-long ambulance ride to the burn unit at Saskatoon University Hospital, MacDermott hallucinated but felt no pain—his nerve endings had been charred away. Once he was strapped into a stretcher, the ambulance sped off to Saskatoon. Janie and MacDermott's brother, Rick, had been notified of the accident and followed.

Then Bob MacDermott's luck really went south.

Shooting down the highway at 85 mph, the ambulance blew two tires, hit a ditch and rolled several times. The back door flew open and the naked MacDermott was thrown from both the ambulance and his stretcher and skidded into the adjoining field.

Janie and Rick slammed on the brakes and sprinted to where MacDermott lay on the prairie grass. Dirt and wheat stubble were salted into his bleeding wounds. Rick MacDermott stared down at his brother: He *must* be dead.

MacDermott opened an eye. "Rick," he whispered, "I'm having a bad day."

THE HIGH LEVEL BRIDGE STRETCHES 150 FEET ABOVE

Edmonton's North Saskatchewan River. Built in 1913, it has rail tracks on top and car traffic within the steel girders below. Exiting the mile-long crossing is like bottoming out on the Coney Island Cyclone, and driving with Bob MacDermott heightens the effect.

"Feel the road!" he says, shouting above the roar of his '79 Corvette coup. "I just got this—it's my midlife-crisis car!"

Our heads snap back as we fly through the last segment of the bridge onto the southern lip of the riverbank.

"Hard to find old ones in this good shape," he says, pulling into the parking lot of the High Level Diner. He shuts off the ignition, then goes through contortions to extricate himself from the low-slung cockpit, lifting his prosthetic left leg with both hands. A minivan would make life easier, but that wouldn't be Bob MacDermott.

ONE OF MY FIRST THOUGHTS IN THE BURN UNIT WAS,

How am I going to play golf again?" he recalls, chewing on a buffalo burger. The first few weeks after the accident drove home a much harsher reality as the extent of the physical damage became clear.

"That was the worst time," he says, idly waving his stiff plastic left hand. His fake arm is myoelectric—the hand can open and close when stimulated by electrodes attached to the muscles and tendons of his upper arm. It's not working today due to a dead battery. "The pain was so intense, so traumatic, and the painkillers were affecting my thinking... I thought about ending it, especially when I was on my own. I was pissed off at God."

The burns and bedsores were agonizing, but the skin grafting was the worst: the excruciating procedure had to be repeated nine times to get enough skin to cover

his burns. Doctors peeled skin from his legs, hips and chest three times before they were finished.

Gangrene set in. The doctors always thought amputation was likely, but MacDermott refused to consider it until one finally said, "Your limbs or your life." They removed his right thumb, his left arm below the elbow and his left leg below the knee.

CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S WERE A BATTLE.

It took MacDermott two hours a day to get dressed, and his wounds themselves required endless, often bloody dressing changes. The pain was constant.

"It's one thing to hear a woman scream in pain, but to hear a grown man doing it, I just couldn't take it," says Janie, a petite Malaysian whom MacDermott met overseas.

As MacDermott's stumps began to heal over enough to accommodate prosthetic limbs, golf crept back into his



PERFECT FORM The amputations forced MacDermott to learn proper technique.

**"Golf kept me motivated and sane," MacDermott says.
"And my wife figured it was better for me than sitting on the
couch, watching game shows and popping Tylenol 3s."**

thoughts. When he returned home, two months after the accident, he called his teacher, Peter Cushner, the longtime head pro at Lloydminster Golf & Country Club. In the dead of winter, Cushner and MacDermott sat next to a space heater in the club's shuttered pro shop, huddled around a bunch of tools and materials, brainstorming.

The first hurdle was how to replicate the left wrist action in a golf swing: Flexible enough to supinate yet stiff at impact. They settled on six inches of high-pressure tubing jury-rigged to what Cushner calls a "spoonlike" implement in which to anchor the club. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

"The first time I tried to hit balls was into the net at the shop," MacDermott says. "It hurt so bad, and felt so bad as a golf swing, that I nearly cried."

MacDermott kept at it. He returned to the shop daily to hit balls, often for two or three hours. The torque from all these swings would often cause the skin on his leg stump to overstretch, rupture and bleed—at which point he'd clean the stump off, bandage it and keep going.

"Golf kept me motivated and sane," MacDermott says. "And Janie was into it for me, which helped. I'm sure she figured it was better for me than sitting on the couch, watching game shows and popping Tylenol 3s."

Cushner never once heard MacDermott bemoan his fate during those winter months. "And Bob didn't just want to play golf again," he says. "He wanted to be a *great* player."

AS THE DAYS GREW LONGER IN THE SPRING OF 1988, MacDermott found the good days starting to come more often. He was hitting balls, had his family. He was facing down his new reality.

Which was about to change. Again.

Janie hadn't been feeling well all winter and went to the doctor in March. Their 4-year-old daughter, Shannon, also hadn't been her peppy self, so Janie brought her along. Days later, the doctor called Janie with the test results: She was pregnant, and Shannon had leukemia.

"We had almost no money," says MacDermott, "a 6-year-old boy, a 4-year-old girl with leukemia. It had been a selfish time—all I'd been thinking about was myself—but that ended right there."

SHANNON, NOW 21, ENDURED THREE YEARS OF chemotherapy before improving. Today, with her leukemia in remission, she's studying youth and family counseling at a local college. That November, Janie gave birth to Carrie Ann, now 16. Just as MacDermott and I finished lunch, his son, Dayton, 23, a 2 handicap who works at an auto-body repair shop, called seeking a small loan toward a motorcycle.

"I'm not crazy about it," says MacDermott, after hanging up his cell phone, "but with my Vette it's hard to criticize."

PLAY GOLF WITH BOB MACDERMOTT AND THE FIRST thing you notice is a device that looks like a cross between a garden tool and a stirring spoon where his left hand should be. Then you notice that it takes him less than a second to drop the club in and out of its graduated claw-hold, and that his grip looks more secure than your own. I ask how it works as we walk down Belvedere's second fairway.

He yanks on his specialized prosthesis, an effort that produced a loud sucking noise. It comes off the stump with the cheery pop of a champagne cork. "It's all adapted for golf," he says, holding up what he calls a terminal device. "The tube leaving the prosthesis is like my wrist, and the spoon, where you dock the club handle, is like my hand. Easy."

MacDermott's swing is a beauty. Though he's plenty long, averaging about 280 off the tee, and crisp with his irons, most striking is the eerie straightness of his ball flight. He simply doesn't impart sidespin. "Bob thinks every course is just made of fairways and greens," says Don Smith, a friend and frequent playing partner. "It can really piss you off."

His path to this point was also remarkably straight. MacDermott shot 89 for nine holes his first round back, in May 1988; since then, he's simply never stopped improving.

"The key was to get this big, strong guy who'd played by pounding it to learn proper technique," says Peter Cushner. "We spent hour after hour just trying to get him to rotate the club around his trunk. It was pretty humble, pretty basic."

In 1990, MacDermott won the Alberta Amputee Championships. He has since captured many national amputee events, including five straight (and counting) in the multiple-amputee division of the U.S. Nationals.

Jared Engel, a Belvedere pro, has seen MacDermott's progress up close. "He's developed amazing touch," Engel says, "which blows you away—he's only got four fingers!"

"My short game isn't about feel anymore," MacDermott says. "I know my exact yardages with, say, my L-wedge for a 25-percent swing, a 50-percent swing and a full swing. For putting, I know just how far a six-inch backswing will go."

MacDermott's competitiveness has led him to many non-amputee tournaments. In 2000, he finished 18th in the Alberta Mid-Amateur, open to anyone over 40, and last year qualified for the Alberta Open, a pro event featuring former Canadian Tour players. He also finished 45th in the 113-man field at the Canadian Club Champions Championship.

MacDermott never rides a cart, despite being eligible for that accommodation. "I prefer to walk because I *can* walk," he says. "Besides, cart noise makes me feel like I'm in a hurry."

AFTER OUR ROUND AT BELVEDERE, MACDERMOTT AND I go up to the club lounge for a beer. When we leave the bar, I stop MacDermott in front of the plaque that frames the scorecard of his course-record 65, and remark that it must be nice to have that hanging on your clubhouse wall.

"I guess," he says. "Still, it should've been a 63." ○