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## No Handicapping This Field

Posted: Tuesday September 16, 2003 11:20AM; Updated: Tuesday September 16, 2003 11:20AM

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Some years ago, while waiting on the 1st tee of a Minneapolis golf course, my threesome was joined by a man with one arm, which he used as the front arm of his practice swing, sweeping the club forward in a graceful parabola, in the manner of Steffi Graf hitting a backhand, or a matador throwing open his cape. When the amputee spanked his first drive 225 yards down the fairway, my brother turned to me and whispered, with a deep sense of foreboding, "We're about to get our asses kicked by a guy with one arm." And so we did.

I thought of that man last week, at the National Amputee Golf Championship, at which I met the one-armed, one-legged, four-fingered Bob MacDermott, who was shocked by high-tension wires on his Edmonton farm 16 years ago. "The worst part wasn't taking 15,000 volts," he said. "On the way to the hospital the ambulance blew two tires and threw me out the back. *That's* when I thought, Game over. I'm playing that big golf course in the sky."

Yet there he was last week -- drinking a Harp, not playing one -- at Hazeltine National Golf Club near Minneapolis. A seven-handicapper before his accident, MacDermott, who plays with a prosthetic arm and leg, is now a one. This summer, he shot a six-under 65 to win the championship at his club, Belvedere. He even qualified for the Alberta Open. The 47-year-old really *has* become a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest. "Hands," he told me, after a windswept round of 74, "get in the way of a golf swing."

"I used to spray the ball all over the place," said 49-year-old Dan Caputo, a railroad switchman, of the years *before* he lost his right arm between two boxcars in 1984. "Now I'm right down the middle." Indeed, in the first round last week, Caputo, playing with a prosthesis, aced the par-3 17th at Hazeltine and high-tailed it off the course immediately after putting out on 18. "We were worried we'd have to buy a round for everyone," said his wife, Kim. "Have you seen the price of drinks at this place?"

All manner of athletic marvels were gathered at Hazeltine. "What this thing does to a football is *awesome*," said spectator Dave Reinhart, thumping his prosthetic leg on a folding chair. "I get hang time in the three digits."

To Reinhart, I was a TAB, a Temporarily Able-Bodied person. To Patrice Cooper, the left-arm amputee and seven-time Hazeltine club champion (six with one arm) who lured the tournament to her home club, I was a "normie," ironic shorthand for normal person. And single-leg amputees, who generally shoot the lowest scores at this tournament? "We call them normies-with-a-limp," said Cooper. "They don't get *any* sympathy on the golf course."

The 55th National Amputee Golf Championship was contested among 165 men and women from every limb of life. "This tournament is usually played in a warm-weather spot," said Cooper, 50, who lost her arm to cancer 16 years ago. "And at the hotel, around the pool, all you see are these prosthetic legs, leaning against deck chairs."

Though the golfers came from 32 states and nine nations, they shared a sense of humor that was -- there is no other word for it -- disarming. The one-legged Reinhart said he *literally* has one foot in the grave. But he's also missing two fingers, and so, when I asked him his age, he paused for a very long time before saying 53. "I'm not good at counting," he explained. "I can only count to 13. [Smile.] Fourteen on a good day."

Moe Clayton of Richmond lost his golf scholarship at Vanderbilt ("bad grades") and then both legs in Vietnam (in 1970) and now buys a new pair of prosthetic gams every year. "And every year," said his buddy George Willoughby, a leg amputee from North Carolina, "Moe gets an inch taller. He was 5'8" when the military took him. Now he's 6'4"."

When the PGA Championship was played at Hazeltine last year, Tour players were tended to by on-site equipment-repair specialists. So too, last week, were the amputees, who availed themselves of a prosthesis-repair tent at the turn. "People are coming in for lube jobs," said Cara Koski, tournament publicist, escorting me into the tent. "They'll ask, 'Can you duct tape this for me?'"

The men's and women's winners of the three-day, 54-hole tournament were two normies-with-a-limp. Twenty-one-year-old Kenny Green of Clarksville, Tenn. (73-76-74), had his left foot amputated below the ankle at birth and said of the field, "I am just in shock at the skills of some of these players." Twenty-two-year-old Kim Moore of Fort Wayne, Ind. (76-89-77), who lost her right foot at birth, said, "Doctors thought I wouldn't walk, until I started walking on my stump, pushing a Fisher-Price shopping cart." She was two at the time. Last month the aspiring pro missed the cut at Q school by five strokes.

"All golfers are after the same thing," said the unsinkable MacDermott, who finished third (74-75-77) among the men. And we all find that Eden equally -- eternally -- elusive. "People ask me if I throw my clubs," said Patrice Cooper, after removing her golf-specific prosthetic arm, which locks onto her club shaft. "I always tell them no. By the time I get it out of the clamp, I've calmed down."

Issue date: September 22, 2003



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