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Adventures of a High Handicapper

Part I: The Head Case

By Patti Putnicki

Golf and I, we had a history. I was the Pee Wee Girls' champion – two years running – and a promising father-daughter player who could often outdrive the adults. But at the age of 15, I laid down my clubs because golf, at the time, was “uncool.” Now, 30 years later, I'm ready to go home again.

Last year I joined the same country club I played back in the day. After all, it was my lucky spot – the place where I legitimately beat the pro's daughter in the final round of my last tournament. I knew I'd be a little rusty, so I picked out Joey-the-pro to get my swing back into tip-top shape. It's *golf*, for goodness sake. I used to own this game. How long could it possibly take? Five or six lessons, a new set of clubs, and I'd easily have my old game back. Or not.

Oh, I definitely *looked* like a player on the driving range. Joey-the-pro is a great teacher. He's the sort who always makes sure you end the lesson with some kind of victory. Joey's like a golf masseur. He adjusts this, moves that, and all of a sudden you're hitting them straighter, longer or more consistently. You leave the range feeling pretty darn good about the whole thing. Or, if you're like me, you never really *do* leave the range.

For about six months, I practiced and practiced. Week after week. Bucket after bucket. I'm pretty certain that I hit

more balls than most touring pros. “So, did you play?” Joey would ask me.

“No, still practicing. I want to get better before I get out on the course.”

“You've gotta play...on the course.”

“I want to get better first.”

“You're not going to get better unless you go out there and really *play*.”

In reality, I was getting to be quite the driving range queen. My form was great. I was hitting the ball well. I claimed that I was simply perfecting my swing and working on my mental game. But the truth was, I was terrified of the first tee box. What if I hit a bad shot and everyone else on the course stopped what they were doing and watched? What if they all pointed and stared, and said things like, “I thought you had to be a golfer to belong to this club. Who let *her* on?” And, horror of horrors, *what if I don't break 100?*

Thankfully, Joey-the-pro one day decided to take matters into his own hands. When I arrived at the club, he loaded my bag into a cart, and we headed toward what I thought was the teaching range. But where we ended up was the first tee of the golf course.

“What's going on?” I asked. And what I heard was the reply I'd been dreading all along:

“We are going to play some golf. Now, get up there and tee off.”


Joey let me spend about four and a half minutes trying to talk my way out

of it, listing excuses that ranged from a sore right pinky to having worn my unlucky golf skort. After patiently listening to my pleas, he said the words that would forever change my life.

“You're a head case. Now get up there and hit the ball.”

I did hit the ball. I did finish 18. And I did not break 100. No one pointed and laughed, no one pulled me off the golf course, and one guy even gave me a compliment on my shoes. I had pars, I had “snowmen,” and I hit my ball to parts of the course where no human had ventured before. Thanks to Joey, I had not only taken the first swing at conquering my fear, but I had re-discovered something that was even more significant: the fact that I really love this game.

Now I've played enough rounds to have an official USGA handicap, and at the age of 45, I'm a “twenty-something.” The high handicapper. The girl who can wow you with her 200-yard drives and then tear your heart out with her three-putts and far-from-perfect pitch. I am, for now, the Jerry Mathers of the sand trap. But I feel a comeback coming on.

Maybe on the next 18. 

Patti Putnicki is a freelance writer with two published humor books. Visit her online at www.pattiwrites.com.