

THE NEWS, Lynchburg, Va., Sun., June 1, 1973

Hylton: Courageous Young Man

Editor's note: Gary Hylton, young golf pro at Boonsboro Country Club, has been the subject of many featured articles over the past decade. The following is one written by Bill Smith, sports editor of the Charleston, W. Va., Mail in his column: "All Bases."

PIPESTEM RESORT STATE PARK — A tale of one man's courage.

It was a golf outing here at this mountaintop woodland paradise overlooking the Bluestone River Gorge. Just a gathering of a few pros and writers. Fun.

To be honest, I have an inferiority complex when it comes to playing golf. To be more specific, I'm lousy, but I enjoy the fresh air, companionship and occasional good shots.

I WAS PREPARED FOR FUN: I wasn't prepared for the courageous young man I was going to meet.

Courage? It has nothing to do with bravery. The brave seem to do their thing with noise and bravado. The courageous? They do theirs with everyday living.

That's how I met Gary Hylton, 29-year old professional from Boonsboro Country Club in Lynchburg, Va. He was one of the pros in the little fun golf tournament. . . and he happened to wind up in my foursome.

NOW MOST DUFFERS who hack around the course as I do always hope they're going to hit their first shot right in the screws. The seldom do, I never do.

Anyhow, I had that on my mind as tee-off time approached. Keep head down. Relax. Swin slow. Swing through the ball. . . after all, it weighs only a few ounces.

I was interrupted. I was introduced to Gary. There he stood, left hand stuck out to shake mine. His right was useless. It hung at his side, about one foot shorter than his left.

HE WALKED WITH A LIMP that I learned was caused by the fact that he had an artificial left leg.

He Loves Life

REASON? CANCER. Bone cancer. Fifty-one operations. Removal of his left leg. Removal of the upper part of his right arm. Stiffness in his right leg from many cobalt treatments. Part of his right jaw removed by surgery to halt cancer there. Cancer in his left lung. . . in his rib cage. . . in his chest.

Radiology treatments. . . chemotherapy. . . experimental drugs. . . drugs for pain. . . drugs that made him an addict. . . periods of withdrawal. . . cold turkey. . . more pain. . . periods of heart-ripping sorrow and self-pity. . . more pain.

THIS YOUNG MAN stepped up to the first tee and smacked the ball with a one-armed drive. Right down the middle. He smacked shots out of deep rough. He made pars. He drove the green on the 180-yard par-three number 17 hole over the gorge and two-putted for par.

He laughed and joked all 18 holes. He had a ball. He hobbled on one good leg. . . hit one-armed shots. . . and sank those little eight-foot putts they call testers.

No thought of the medicine he had to take in a few hours. No mention of the journey he had to make the next day to Charlottesville for more chemotherapy (when you read this he will be receiving another treatment).

AND, YOU KNOW WHAT? Gary beat me. I didn't care. I thanked God he did.

I talked with him about his lonely battle against this dreaded disease. He said, "I'm nobody special. I'm just a guy with cancer who is living each day one at a time.

"And, every day is beautiful. There was a time when I couldn't say that. Doctors tell me that I have only so long to go. . . but, they don't know. I feel like I'm 29 going on 28 with 76 more years to live. I'm going to live them."

Keeps Cheating Death

Gary was a top-notch athlete in high school. A super golfer, a cross-country runner and a six-foot guard in basketball that dunked the ball with either hand.

IT WAS 13 YEARS AGO — during a basketball game — that he first noticed anything wrong. His left ankle began to bother him. It swelled. Sprain was the first diagnosis. Gout was the second. Cancer was the final one. Part of his left leg was removed.

Gary said, "Don't get the idea that I'm full of courage. I went through periods of tremendous self pity. I got down on my hands and knees and sobbed like a baby. I asked God, 'Why me?'"

"Man, I was really down on living. I was in such pain that I wasn't worried about dying. I was afraid I was going to live.

"Doctors tell me that I came back from death three times. All I know is what they tell me. I don't think much about it."

I LEARNED THAT GARY grew up in the shadow of a golf course. His father was a golf pro in the summer and a railroad worker in the winter.

Gary grew up playing with amateur great Vinnie Giles and pro Lanny Wadkins. He could hold his own with both.

Gary said, "The best score I ever shot with two good arms and two good legs, was a 66 from the blue tees. The best with two good arms and one leg was a 69. And, the best with one arm and one leg was a 74. I ought to be better than that."

He wasn't bragging. He was living and giving it a full swing and a follow through.

"I'VE SORT OF DEVELOPED a different outlook on life," he said. "There is physical courage and mental courage. I've been both routes. The mental part is the toughest. I'd like to feel sorry for myself, but I can't.

"I've seen so many persons worse off than me. Hey, I've got 76 years to live. What do I have to complain about?"

How do you answer that one?

Me? I just concentrated on my golf game. I didn't hit it super, but I hit it better than I have in a long time. . . and lost. And, I never felt better.

Gary Hylton Is Special

WHEN IT WAS OVER, I shook Gary's left hand. It was a firm handshake. He looked right into my heart and said, "If you're ever over Lynchburg way, stop in at Boonsboro and see me. I'll be playing better than I am right now. I'm a little rusty."

I bid Gary good-by. He left for more treatment for his cancer. And, I felt good and alive just from having spent the day with him. He made me feel good. . . after all he has been through. That's something to think about.

I firmly believe that God gives special courage to special people. Gary Hylton is special.

I HOPE I see him again.