

Golf makes her life worth living

by *Tod Leonard*

Figuratively, golf saved Alice Harcourt's life the first time nearly 20 years ago.

She was a workaholic mother in a blended family of nine until she picked up the game at age 44. She was so competitive, so driven, so impassioned by the game, golf became her life.

There wasn't much time for work after that, and Harcourt became one of the most decorated female amateurs in San Diego County history. The Fallbrook, Calif., resident has won a combined 22 club championships at four courses, including 13 on her home track, Pala Mesa.

Now, Harcourt's life literally hangs in the balance, and golf is making all the difference for her.

Diagnosed with terminal cancer in November 2004, Harcourt, 63, was told she could expect to live another 18 months. It's been 16 months, and the tanned, fit-looking and smiling woman who strided off the green with a 73 March 16 at Rancho Bernardo Inn in the San Diego County Women's Senior Amateur didn't look ill enough to have a cold.

LIFESAVER - Debilitating courses of chemotherapy haven't caused leading amateur Alice Harcourt to lose focus on the golf course. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras.

"I shot my (tail) off today!" a jubilant Harcourt exclaimed after hugging her 80-year-old husband, LaRue.

The 73 was Harcourt's best score since her cancer diagnosis, and it gave her a 15-shot lead for the championship, which she wrapped up by shooting 75 at Shadowridge Country Club. It was Harcourt's fifth county title, her third as a senior.

LaRue Harcourt shook his head in wonderment.

"I'm sort of flabbergasted by it all, and her doctors are too," he said. "I don't think she could have possibly coped with the cancer without golf. Her surgeon has told her, 'You know, Alice, you look too good to be as sick as you are, and I think you've discovered the cure for cancer. Play golf all the time!'"

Alice Harcourt should have been recovering from the baseball-bat wallop that comes with each round of chemotherapy. She was supposed to receive her 14th treatment overall, but convinced her oncologist to put it off until she could finish the county tournament.

"I don't want my health to be a problem because of playing golf," Harcourt explained, "but on the other hand, I want to have a life in between that."

It was a bad round of golf that led to Harcourt's diagnosis in '04.

"I was playing with some friends and I shot an 87," she recalls cheerfully. "I said, 'My golf game sucks so bad, there must be something wrong with me!' True story!"

A few days later, the news was awful. Harcourt was told she had inoperable, stage-four ovarian cancer. Her only hope was chemotherapy, which might shrink the tumors enough to allow doctors to operate.

The chemo was successful, and in January 2006 her surgeon, Dr. Steve Plaxe, removed 14 pounds of tumor from her abdomen, the largest chunk the size of a newborn baby's head.

Harcourt's golfing friends rallied to support her, including Pat Gallagher, who donated blood.

"When Alice woke up from surgery, I told her Pat had donated," LaRue Harcourt recalled. "Alice said, 'Aw, thanks Pat, but God, I hope I don't get your putting stroke!'"

Alice wanted to know how long it could be before she could play golf. Considering she had 52 staples running the length of her torso, Plaxe told her she'd have to wait six weeks. At six weeks, one day, she hit balls and soon after won the county senior championship.

Chemo produces an array of side effects, and Harcourt has overcome them all. It caused her to have double vision for three months late last summer, so she learned to play with one eye patched. Last November she had so many blisters in her mouth she could eat only mashed potatoes and milk shakes, and yet she traveled to Maui and won the National Club Champions Championship.

The latest drug causes her hands and feet to peel and blister, so LaRue tapes her up like a football player before each round.

"She's got a marvelous spirit," said LaRue, who overcame a heart attack and quadruple-bypass surgery seven years ago. "I am absolutely amazed, living with her, how she tolerates and absorbs the pain."

Alice Harcourt admits she was previously driven by winning. She was a fierce, unyielding competitor. But she said the cancer has changed her perspective.

"It's really helped me, believe it or not," she said. "I hated coming in second or not playing well. Now, if somebody beats me, I say, 'Way to go.' It does not bother me like it normally would.

"It's about the game, of course, and the beautiful surroundings, but it's mostly about the friends you've made through golf. Those give you a warm-and-fuzzy feeling, no matter what. When you've played your most horrible game, the only thing to look forward to is lunch with the girls.

"At least," she added with a grin, "I can do scratch lunching."

Harcourt's long-term prospects are dire. The chemo knocks down the "tumor markers" in her blood, but it doesn't cure her. So she bides her time, hoping a better medicine comes along, while wishing for a long future. A big goal: to volunteer for the 2008 U.S. Open at Torrey Pines.

Harcourt's message to her friends: Live life fully and don't put off anything.

One friend so took the thoughts to heart that she traveled to New York's Rockefeller Center to ice skate. It had been her lifelong dream. Alice was thrilled for her.

"I could have been working all this time and had a lot of money," Harcourt said. "But then I'd have a lot of money, and I'd still be sick. I'm so happy I started playing golf."

She then laughed raucously.

"I don't propose that anybody quit work to play golf, but ..."

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