

Golfer's long drives lead to life skills

Game helps 12-year-old tame autism; 'I want other people to see me as a role model,' St. Hyacinthe ace Charles St-Germain says

BY ARPON BASU, FREELANCE JULY 27, 2010



Charles St-Germain, 12, started golfing last year and is now in the top tier of Quebec's youth golfers. His father says playing golf has helped Charles handle his autism.

Photograph by: DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE, Freelance

MONTREAL - Charles St-Germain was asked why a newspaper reporter would come to interview what seems like a perfectly typical 12-year-old boy, and he had a very quick answer.

"Well," he began, "because you want to tell people my story."

And what a story it is to tell.

The clinical term for the condition that afflicts Charles is "high-functioning autism."

But when the St. Hyacinthe native is on a golf course, "high functioning" is the ultimate understatement.

Try "tremendously functioning" or "prodigiously functioning" and you'd get a better idea of just what Charles can do with a golf club in his hands.

A fascination with watching Tiger Woods on television and playing mini-putt with his single father, Paul, led Charles to the game only two years ago, and already he shoots in the low 80s from the men's tees at his home club La Providence, driving the ball 240 yards with deadly accuracy.

If he were just an average 12-year-old, that in itself would be astonishing.

But Charles is far from average. And until he found golf, he was reminded of it every day.

"He's not the same little guy he was two years ago," his father says. "He had a lot of fears and I couldn't really do anything to help him. But he spends hours and hours on the golf course every day doing something he loves, and that has helped enormously."

If you take a look at Charles or talk to him, you would never guess he was autistic.

But the condition affects the way he interacts with others -often he says whatever pops into his head and he is prone to impulsive fits of emotion.

So while Charles is able to attend regular school, he always had trouble making friends and lacked a proper avenue through which to channel his boundless energy.

Until he found golf.

From the time Charles was 6, his father took him to a battery of doctors and child psychologists who couldn't diagnose what exactly was wrong with him.

It was only in March 2009, five years after the search began, that a proper diagnosis was made by the fourth child psychologist to see him. Charles was put on medication to try to control his anxiety, emotional impulsiveness and short attention span. But it has only been since last September that the proper dosage was found, and since then he's been much better.

But aside from being the moment that the proper diagnosis was made, last spring coincided with the beginning of Charles's competitive golf career.

And also the start of his new life.

Charles played 18 holes at La Providence for the first time last spring and shot 95. He played his first tournament shortly afterwards on the Matiss Tour, the elite provincial circuit for kids, and shot 100 to finish tied for fourth.

He went on to post four second-place finishes on the Matiss Tour and wound up third in the overall rankings by the end of the season, shaving seven strokes off his handicap to bring it down to 11.

At last year's provincial championships, Charles was tied for the lead after 18 holes and lost by one stroke in a playoff.

It was one heck of a competitive debut, autism or no autism.

"Yes," Charles said with a grave look on his face when asked if he is competitive on the golf course. "I try to put pressure on myself."

Indeed, Charles is all business as soon as he hits the first tee box.

The moments leading to his first shot are filled with anxiety, as he has to patiently wait for his tee-off time and watch as others get their golf days started.

His first tee shot of a casual round last Thursday afternoon was ripped 210 yards, landing right next to the 200-yard marker smack dab in the middle of the fairway.

Charles three-putted the first hole, and that's where that self-imposed pressure began to surface. After calmly stepping up to the second tee and nailing another driver 230 yards dead centre, Charles was pouting where most golfers would be radiantly beaming.

His father asked him what was wrong.

"I was on the green in three and I still made a double bogey," Charles said angrily.

It's exactly the kind of behaviour his father doesn't tolerate from his son. Controlling his anger has been a problem for Charles his whole life, but in golf his father found a perfect avenue for him to learn how to do just that.

As tremendous as it has been for Paul to watch his son's golf game improving, it's been the evolution of Charles's attitude that has been most gratifying.

"Golf has an etiquette that Charles has had to learn, but they are all things you need in life, they are human qualities," Paul said. "In life, you have to be patient, you have to respect others, you have to control your anger. So I find golf is perfect to teach him those life lessons."

Paul is grateful to have a club like La Providence only a 10-minute drive from his house, a place that

embraces young golfers and has adopted Charles as its most celebrated member.

"If I lived somewhere else, I don't know if any of this could have happened," Paul said

Charles's story did not remain a secret very long.

The local newspaper in St. Hyacinthe caught wind of him last July and wrote an article about Charles, setting off a chain reaction of events that has made him a veritable local celebrity and a national poster child for autism. He was featured in Sports Illustrated a few weeks ago, has been the guest of honour at the Unity for Autism golf tournament in Ontario, was featured in a TV report last summer and just returned from a two-week trip to Iceland where he was the subject of a documentary on autism.

"We've had so many wonderful things happen in the last year," Paul says, still marvelling at the whirlwind ride. "I really believe that in the long run, once he learns to manage it better, being autistic will help Charles more than it hurts him."

Which brings us back to the whole reason for this exercise, to tell Charles's story.

Though there are many chapters left to be written, at age 12 Charles has already grasped what the crux of that tale really is.

"I want other people to see me as a role model," he said. "I want people to learn from my story."

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