

## Rainman in golf shoes

### TV set turns autistic 11-year-old into pro prodigy

By **BILL LANKHOF**, TORONTO SUN



Two years ago, Charles St. Germain was a kid in a one-parent family struggling with autism and trying to find his path in a world that seemed foreign and inaccessible.

Then the 11-year-old from St. Hyacinth, Que., saw Tiger Woods on television. Now he's swinging like him.

"When he started golf, I never expected him to be so good. He's a natural, he's learned just by watching," says his father, Paul.

It's Rainman in golf shoes.

"I don't want him to feel superior to other people but I do want him to recognize he has a talent in golf."

He's never had a coach -- except for his father who admits he can't play very well and couldn't beat his son on a bet. He'd never, until yesterday, been on a plane. But he's currently second in his age group in Quebec, shoots between 80 to 85 and hits his drives 200 yards with accuracy. No sponsors, no fancy equipment, no expensive tutors -- all of it just the result of a TV set and a fixation on Tiger Woods.

"He just watches Tiger and does what he does," says his father, who brought Charles to the Unity For Autism tournament in Kleinburg yesterday as the guest "pro." Normally that job was taken by luminaries such as the late Moe Norman or any number of NHL stars. Instead, when corporate duffers showed up at the sixth tee they were greeted by a sign reading: Are You A Better Golfer Than A Fifth Grader?

Few were.

When he isn't in school, Charles is emulating Tiger at La Providence Golf Club, about 10 minutes from his home. "He has breakfast, then he's gone till supper. The guys at the club have kind of adopted him," says Paul. His son speaks only French but he can talk golf. "In the hole!" he yells as a ball skips past the pin. Finally, a shot kicks dirt into a bunker and he drops his putter.

He even does exasperation like Tiger because, after all, the road to celebrity is not without its potholes.

"There are probably other kids in the U.S. who score like he does but I don't think they've done it in two years without coaching except from a father who doesn't really play," says Paul, who gave up his computer job with ING Canada to drive a handicap bus and spend more time with Charles. More time to help his son navigate life's path -- something not easily accomplished by those who must deal with autism.

"To have a goal to be great at what you do is not always reflective of autism," said Kathy Deschenes, founder of the event that yesterday raised \$300,000. "(Charles) shows there's ability within everyone despite challenges."

#### 'VERY IMPULSIVE'

That's the curious thing about autism. It can stay hidden. Charles looks like any other 11-year-old. "But it's difficult for kids like Charles to make friends. The autism makes him very impulsive," says his father.

"He'll say the first thing that crosses his lips ... other kids don't understand. For Charles everything in the world is black or white. He says what he thinks. He's not a politician." Just a born golfer. "This is the first time he's gotten approval from other people, recognition from other kids his age that he can do something," says his father. The CBC even showed up this summer to shoot a video.

He hits another shot that cuts the centre of the green, walks towards his father and exchanges a high-five. The two talk quietly. They giggle and father squeezes his son's head playfully.

"(Charles) said there are women around today," says the paid interpreter, "and maybe his dad could meet someone."

Now, autistic or not, there's talk anyone can understand.