

Thayer Triumphs Over Adversity

Pain is described as the physical suffering or discomfort caused by illness or injury. For the lucky few, this word doesn't apply often, but for a select few, this is the reality of everyday life and the reality of KU's own Mackenzie Thayer.

Thayer was born with an incredibly rare disorder in her left leg called Klippel Trenaunay Syndrome, a congenital condition that doesn't allow the blood vessels to form correctly. Her parents knew she had some type of vascular issue, but weren't able to specifically diagnose her until age six.

"My parents took me to different doctors in Denver and Wichita—trying to figure out what was wrong," said Thayer. "No doctors could give them an answer."

Thayer's father, Sean, came across a story waiting at the dentist office about PGA professional, Casey Martin and his issues with Klippel Trenaunay Weber Syndrome. He believed Martin's condition sounded a lot like what his daughter had.

"He brought the story back to my mom and my mom called Casey's mom in Eugene, Oregon," said Thayer. "She suggested to have my parents take me to the Mayo Clinic and when they finally did, that's when I got diagnosed."

Not only did Thayer's father help diagnose her condition, but his experience as a golfer at the University of Kansas and as a pro didn't go to waste. His knowledge for the game got passed on to Thayer at a very young age.

"My dad started me on golf at five years old," said Thayer. "He told me that the reason that he started me on golf, wasn't just because it was his passion, but he knew that I probably wouldn't be able to play any other sport. He thought golf was something that I could have so I wouldn't be different from everyone else."

It wasn't until age 10 that Thayer decided she was going to take her game to the next level, playing in competitive tournaments. From that point on she never questioned that she would follow in her dad's footsteps.

"My goals were always to make it to the D1 level," said Thayer. "I've always wanted to play golf at KU like me dad."

The support of Thayer's mom and dad undoubtedly helped her get to the next level, but the journey was never easy, suffering from such a painful disorder—she had to sacrifice a great deal just to manage being different.

"It was really hard growing up being different from everyone else," said Thayer. "I had to make the decision to quit a lot of things when I was younger—I used to be a dancer. I've always been a confident person, but it was definitely tough—you don't want to be different."

Coming from a small town, like Garden City, allowed Thayer to connect with others, too. She has a great support in family friend and Sports Editor of the *Garden City Telegram*, Bret Marshall.

“I tried to encourage her even when she wasn’t at her best,” said Marshall. “I tried to explain to her that golf is like a roller coaster—you’ll have your good days and your bad days.”

Marshall is one of the few people who truly understands the obstacles Thayer fights everyday in her condition and in life, however, he believes she is more than capable of handling those obstacles.

“She has an element of inspiration, that someone who deals with a day-to day- physical condition can do the things she can do,” said Marshall. “In spite of the physical obstacles, she’s been able to overcome those things.”

Little did Thayer know, at age five, that the professional golfer, Martin would have an impact on her life beyond her diagnosis.

Martin’s journey with Klippel Trenaunay Weber Syndrome not only helped diagnose Thayer, but helped ease the process of playing golf, too. In 2001, Martin effectively sued the PGA Tour for the right to use a golf cart during tours, which in turn helped Thayer better preserve her leg by riding in a cart at her tournaments.

“Casey paved the way for me because I’m able to ride in golf carts—without him it would be hard to do, “ said Thayer. “Without that Supreme Court ruling, playing would be much more difficult.

People can see the visible distinction of Thayer’s leg and the fact that she drives a golf cart during tournaments, but what many fail to realize is the physical adversity she must overcome everyday.

“It’s tough, I live with excruciating pain a lot of the time in my foot and in my knee,” said Thayer. “I wear two different size shoes and a compression sock 24/7 to keep my circulation going. A lot of times I go through phases where I’ll wake up and have to crawl to the shower because my leg hurts so bad and sometimes I can’t even stand up because the blood rushes to my foot and its incredibly painful—that’s at the worst.”

Despite the odds, Thayer has managed to stay positive throughout it all. She credits most of her positive outlook and drive to her family, and most importantly, to God.

“He gave me this leg because he knew I was strong enough to handle it,” said Thayer. “It’s a very large burden, but it’s a great gift. I really don’t know if I’d be here at KU playing golf if it wasn’t for this to motivate me.”

Thayer found her place through God with the gift of her leg and is adamant about others finding their place in life, too.

“You can’t give up on yourself—you can’t give up on God,” said Thayer. “You just have to find your place and use that to motivate you. You might find you can push yourself a lot farther than you thought you could.”

Thayer has found her place at KU as a freshman on the Jayhawk’s women’s golf team, which opens the season September 17 in Tulsa, Okla., for the McNamara Invitational. Thayer plans to take in every college experience as best she can as she prepares for her college debut.

“This is college, I am an athlete and have high aspirations, but I still want to have a balanced life,” said Thayer. “I don’t have any tangible goals, but to get better. That’s all I can ask of myself.”