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Lindeblad happy just to be here

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SAMMAMISH, Wash. – As Gary Lindeblad surveyed an almost impossible shot from the rough Thursday morning, a marshal asked him if he wanted a stake that was holding a gallery rope pulled out of the ground.

“Not unless I can stab myself with it,” Lindeblad joked, on his way to double-bogeying the hole.

Lindeblad shouldn't be here at the U.S. Senior Open. I don't mean he doesn't belong in the field.

No, I mean Gary Lindeblad shouldn't be anywhere. He shouldn't be alive.

More than a decade ago, about 20 minutes before he was about to tee off at a tournament in Olympia, Lindeblad got a call from his doctor in Spokane.

The test results were back.

Lindeblad has Waldenstrom's macroglobulinemia, a rare and often fatal form of lymphoma. At the time, his son Matthew, who caddied for him in Thursday's first round, figured his dad had two years to live.

“I've been at his bedside three or four times when he's been dying,” Matthew said Thursday, standing outside the locker room. “He's beaten death at least three times and each time I thought he was gone, he just kicked ass and took names. I wish he could have played better today, but I'm still so proud of him.”

Paired with former Ryder Cuppers Tom Lehman and Hal Sutton, who have a combined 19 PGA Tour wins, Lindeblad, whose biggest win was the Rosauers Open, wobbled around mighty Sahalee.

He was Everyman playing against Legends.

Lindeblad hit a wedge into the pond in front of the second green. On the 17th his drive found another pond and he threw his arms into the air in disappointment.

“That was what you call a lamentation,” he said.

He drove into the towering pine trees repeatedly. Still hobbled by last January's knee replacement surgery, this man who is beating cancer couldn't conquer Sahalee.

Lindeblad shot an 89. It was as difficult a day as a golfer could have, and still he was all smiles after the round.

"I just struggled all day," he said. "I couldn't get loose. One bad shot would create another bad shot and that created a bad decision and then another bad shot. I just couldn't find my swing. But I'm just happy to be here."

And by here, he not only means this Open. Lindeblad, 59, also means this life. His kind of cancer doesn't go into remission, but his oncologists have told him his cancer is in "a cautious remission."

"They can't find it, and that's pretty cool," he said. "My oncologist tells me I'm a full-blown miracle."

When he got the diagnosis, Lindeblad said it took him almost a month to believe he had cancer and he might die.

"You don't really hear it until it's a month after you first hear it," he said. "You're kind of in a state of disbelief. I was in denial. I really didn't believe them. It took a while for the magnitude of it to soak in. You really think you're immortal. You truly do, until something like that happens."

Lindeblad, who had been an alternate, got a call Monday as he was about to give a golf lesson at Indian Canyon Golf Course, telling him Paul Azinger was pulling out and he was in the Open.

"I was more nervous when I got that call than I was today," he said.

Considering his troubles, Lindeblad played with an amazing dignity. He applauded his playing partners' shots as he walked down the fairway. He made self-deprecating jokes to the gallery. He laughed through his obvious disappointment.

He said he learned a long time ago that a double bogey can't compete with cancer.

"That (demeanor) is largely due to my medical history," Lindeblad said. "It puts everything in perspective. Like today, I'm not happy with what I shot. I'm embarrassed. But I can't really complain about this round. I'm just thrilled to be here."

There was honor in the way he battled.

“I have so many emotions right now,” Matthew, a 2-handicap, said. “I’m so proud of him. He really kept his cool today under probably the worst round I’ve ever seen him shoot. I’ve never seen him this nervous in my life. But he kept fighting.

“The biggest thing I’ve taken away from my dad over the last few years is toughness. He’s not a physically, super strong guy, but he’s the toughest guy I’ve ever met.”

Before he stood over his 12-foot putt on 18, Gary Lindeblad said to his son: “I’ve got to make this. I can’t shoot 90.”

Cool as Fred Couples during a pro-am, Lindeblad rolled in the bogey putt, took off his hat, raised his arms to the sky and drank in the loud cheers from a gallery that understood how hard he’d fought.

“I’m playing in the Senior Open and I have a pulse,” Lindeblad said. “Life’s pretty good.”
