

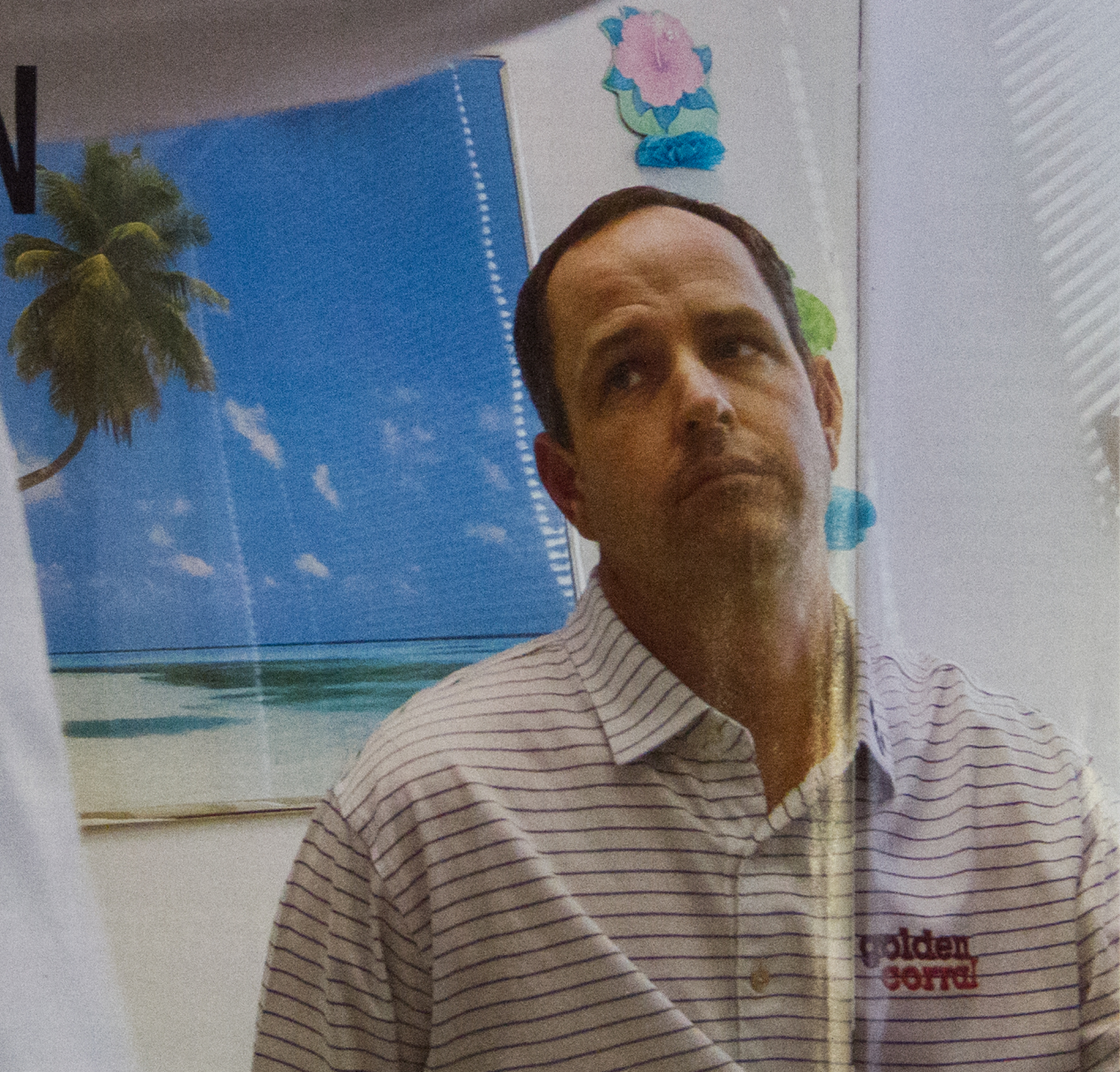
CONFIDENTIAL

# MY BRAIN ON GOLF

After a long climb, I finally realized my dream of making a living on the PGA Tour. Now seizures have threatened my career, but I'm hoping the neurosurgery I plan to have this spring will allow me to get back on the course

BY JEFF KLAUK

Photograph by GREG FOSTER



## THE WAY WE WERE

Drugs controlled my seizures in 2008, when I won for the second time on the Nationwide tour and celebrated with my son, Jackson.

**O**n Dec. 24, 2010, I was driving to Saint Francis in the Field church in Ponte Vedra, Fla., with my wife, Shanna, and our two kids when I spaced out for about 30 seconds and gave a weird little chuckle. Most people wouldn't have even noticed this episode, but for me it was another step in a painful march that has led from the heights of pro golf to the brink of brain surgery.

Four years earlier Shanna had been next to me in bed when I had my first seizure—a grand mal. I was in my fifth year on the Nationwide tour and, after what seemed like ages, finally playing good golf. We were at the 2006 Knoxville Open and I went to bed on the leader board and woke up on a hospital bed, feeling as if I had barely survived a triathlon or a championship fight, maybe both.

In a grand mal the muscles suddenly tense—sometimes so forcefully that people moan or scream as the air is shot from their lungs—then contract and expand quickly and repeatedly, causing convulsions. These convulsions can be violent, and mine were. It was two weeks before I felt like myself again, with no memory loss, no sore jaw, no aching muscles.

Two months later I awoke in a hospital in Scranton, Pa., after another grand mal. Though my illness wasn't diagnosed as such at the time, I was one of the almost three million Americans with epilepsy—a neurological disorder resulting from surges of electrical signals inside the brain.

These episodes were shocking, both physically and emotionally. We had no family history of seizures and I had shown no previous

## TELEPHONE BOOTH

At my last appointment Dr. Faught explained that I am a candidate for surgery, although more painful tests are needed before he can be certain.

## KLAUK FILE

Age: 34

Residence: St. Augustine, Fla.

Claim to fame: He's one of only five players to earn more than \$1 million on the Nationwide tour. He's had three fourth-place finishes in two full seasons on the PGA Tour.

Did you know? His father, Fred, was the superintendent at TPC Sawgrass until retiring in 2008. His wife, Shanna, was a two-time Division II champion at Florida Southern, where the couple met. His brother John played golf at Texas, and his other brother, Jason, ran track at Florida.

The latest: He has not played on Tour since last June's FedEx St. Jude Classic.

signs of a problem. My doctors put me on Trileptal, which kept the seizures at bay for four years. During that time I continued to play well, finishing third on the Nationwide money list in 2008 to earn my PGA Tour card and turning in a rookie season that included three top 10 finishes and more than \$1.2 million in earnings.

At the start of my second season I was returning home on a red-eye from the 2010 AT&T Pebble Beach National Pro-Am. I forgot to take my medicine and was struck by another grand mal. I wound up back in the hospital, where doctors diagnosed nocturnal seizures because all of my grand mals happened while I was sleeping. (I've since learned that fatigue is the catalyst for my seizures. For others, they can be triggered by stress, anxiety or other factors.) I haven't had a grand mal since.

That's not unusual. Grand mal seizures are much easier to control than complex partial seizures, which is what I had that day on my way to church. That was my first, but far from my last. I don't even feel these smaller seizures coming or going. One can last between 30 seconds and two minutes, and I'm fine right after it's over. I usually don't even know that it has happened.

About a month after that first complex partial seizure, I went to my doctor, who set up an EMU (Epilepsy Monitoring Unit) test at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville. In the fall I had another EMU at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. I wouldn't wish an EMU on my worst enemy. To try to pinpoint the exact location in the brain where the problem lies, 26 electrodes were attached to the top of my head, and then I was deprived of sleep to try to induce seizures. I could only sleep from 2 a.m. to 6 a.m., and if I dozed off at any other time someone immediately



awakened me. I watched movies, had a few friends come by, and climbed the walls. I spent three days like that in Jacksonville and seven days at Emory, where I had one complex partial and three grand mal seizures.

The complex partial seizures required a different anticonvulsion medication, Lamictal. I went back to the Tour and was playing O.K. for a while, then not so much. I struggled through eight starts in 2011, finishing in the money twice. Even worse, the complex partial seizures kept popping up. Then my shoulder started to hurt; I had a torn rotator cuff.

In a way I was lucky. I had played well enough in 2008 and '09 to put myself on solid financial ground for the first time in my career. That, plus the PGA Tour's disability policies, kept me out of the very difficult position so many other Americans find themselves in when major medical problems arise. The enforced, season-ending layoff from my second career shoulder surgery allowed me to focus on resolving the seizure issue once and for all.

My swing instructor, Cody Barden, used to work at The Country Club of Birmingham, and the wife of one of his former students also suffered from epilepsy. She had recently undergone epilepsy surgery, and her results—no more seizure activity and only low-dose medicines as a precaution—encouraged me to look seriously into that possibility. Cody reached out to her neurologist, Edward Faught, who had recently moved to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta, where Cody lives. I switched to a new medicine, Vimpat, which worked much better at controlling the complex partial seizures but could make me dizzy and cause little tremors in my hands—I can't imagine trying to hole a three-footer to make the cut that way.

There have been dark moments. I've broken down and cried in front of our small group from church. When you can't drive a car, never mind pursue your career, you feel as if your independence has been taken from you. Professional golf is all about independence, and suddenly I was reliant on everyone else. I haven't driven a car since January 2011. Mostly, I take my golf cart around Palencia, our country club community, shuttling between the house, the golf club and the gym. I've been so lucky to have friends and neighbors willing to drive me to rehab for my shoulder and to the nearby TPC Sawgrass to practice.

And it's hard not being out there with the

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#### MISSING IN ACTION

I can still practice and play, but being away from the Tour is difficult. I've told only one other player about what I've been dealing with, so none of my friends out there really know what's happening with me.

guys. As much as the competition, I miss the camaraderie. I've talked about my situation with Matt Kuchar, but in general it's hard to connect when you're not out there week in and week out. You don't even know about the new equipment. You feel out of touch with everything and everyone.

**O**verall, though, I feel as if I've handled the situation well. I've surprised myself in that way. Realizing that we all have our problems has helped keep things in perspective. I think the patience I've had to develop to become a successful golfer has helped me cope. Though I had a successful college career at Florida Southern, it took me eight years to reach the PGA Tour. Likewise, it takes time to figure out these seizures and get them under control.

Much as I'd like to control the seizures right now, it doesn't always work that way. You have to maintain faith that things happen for a reason and that, with work, the doctors will figure it out. I'm also lucky and grateful to have a strong support group, from my wife and our families to Cody, who has gone from swing coach to a one-man version of WebMD and proved to be the kind of tireless advocate everyone with epilepsy could use.

After a battery of tests this winter, I was deemed a candidate for epilepsy surgery.

Before I see the operating table later this spring, doctors will slide several plastic strips containing electrodes under my scalp and two to four platinum wires into my brain. Then I'll have another EMU. If the procedures pinpoint the problem area, we can proceed to surgery. If not, we'll have to go through the process again. The epilepsy surgery, which generally lasts between three and four hours and has been performed since the 1950s, entails removing the electrically abnormal brain tissue, a section on average of roughly two inches by one inch by one quarter of an inch deep. Dr. Faught feels the chance for complete control of my seizures is 60% to 70% now and, we hope, closer to 90% after the additional pre-op tests. About 3% to 5% of patients suffer significant side effects, but assuming all goes well, I could be playing competitive golf again a month or so after surgery.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about undergoing brain surgery. After all, what do people say when something isn't complicated—"It isn't brain surgery." But, honestly, it scares everyone in my family more than it scares me. I'm tired, and I want this resolved once and for all. I want to feel good about myself, feel good on the golf course, and not have to worry about whether I'm going to have a seizure. There's now an end in sight where I can get back out there and do what I love to do—play golf. □