Pheasant Run pro and burn victim continues to prove doctor wrong

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Jamie Nieto's master plan to make golf an integral part of his life originated when he was a teenager, and actually was more practical than you might think.

A budding golfer at East Leyden High in Franklin Park, Nieto entertained no delusions of grandeur about earning a PGA Tour card to accompany his student ID. Instead, he'd be a high school teacher and golf coach who'd play during summers and maybe work at a nearby club part-time.

Nieto had one year of college behind him when that plan and his life drastically reversed course. A November 2003 yard work accident left more than half his body burned, and a medically induced coma and severe muscular atrophy preceded his eventual recovery.

As the second-year club professional at Pheasant Run in St. Charles chatted with members and players who strolled by the pro shop this week, Nieto once more felt affirmation.

"I had enough of sitting in a lecture hall, classrooms. I kind of said let's do something you're really going to enjoy," Nieto said. "Not that I wouldn't have enjoyed teaching, but I just felt like this is where I wanted to be."

Nieto, 30, is hovering around a zero handicap both on the course and as a burn survivor. He tries to tear away from administrative work when he can to fit in range time and is a regular in Illinois PGA section events.

He shot 81 in his first recreational round after his accident – in the spring of 2005 – and boasts a career-best of 65 at Pheasant Run.

And to think, in his first days at Loyola University's burn center Nieto heard he'd likely never play golf again.

"Every time I've been faced with something I want to do, I go after it," Nieto said. "If you tell me you can't do it, I'm going to do it just to prove you wrong. And that's the big thing about a doctor saying you'll probably never play golf again. I was set out to prove him wrong. That's pretty much my drive, is if you tell me something's impossible or 'No, you can't do it,' I'm going to do it just to show you I can."

A 2002 East Leyden graduate living in Franklin Park, Nieto transferred from Northern Illinois, where he was a men's golf alternate, after his freshman year and settled at Triton College in
River Grove.

He planned to transfer again in 2004 to golf at Monmouth College, but was burned while setting fire to some warming logs on the morning of Nov. 8, 2003.

With the support of friends and family – including fellow burn victim Tony Gonzalez of Naperville, with whom he connected at Loyola – Nieto pressed through his hardships. He worked with a physical therapist to get on the range as soon as possible.

At the time, he still had not undergone reconstructive surgery on his right thumb, so he worked with the therapist to create a method to help extend the thumb and allow him to hold a club. Simultaneously, Nieto finished and furthered his studies. With two associates degrees – one each from Triton and the Golf Academy of America in Myrtle Beach, S.C. – and a bachelor's and master's from Virginia College online, he jokes his sheepskins add up to a PhD.

"A lot of PhD people get mad when I say that," Nieto grinned.

Through everything, Nieto clings to his sense of humor, sharing in laughs with his family, friends and girlfriend of three years.

"I've never seen him actually get down or anything like that," Pheasant Run assistant pro David Span said. "He's always upbeat."

Meeting people for the first time has grown progressively less stressful. Nieto realizes they notice his hands and facial scarring, but finds most people are merely curious and remain polite after Nieto answers questions about the accident.

Of course, he has encountered the opposite through the years, with some competitors at Illinois PGA events avoiding eye contact or even mocking him.

"There are some negative people out there," Nieto said. "And what I've always said to myself is they must have something worse going on than I have to be the way they are."

Pheasant Run, where Nieto was an assistant before becoming interim pro in August 2012 – five months before officially taking the reins – offers an enjoyable atmosphere, too.

Members often ask Nieto if he can sneak out with their groups for a few holes. Span, Nieto's friend before they became colleagues, always is there to offer feedback or provide a sounding board.

The days are long more often than not, sometimes approaching or exceeding 12 hours, but Nieto tends to forget since he's at a golf course. And, in a flashback to his '90s dream come true, he's teaching and coaching.

The golf gig is only full-time in this version, not part-time.

"That's kind of what I was aiming for when I started my career in the golf business, was to be that professional at a course," Nieto said. "I mean, sure, there's days it will wear on you. But –
and I know it sounds cliche – I enjoy coming to work every day.

"If we have 150 rounds, that's 150 new people. And I get to show off my operation and our golf course to a bunch of new people every day."