

# Seventeen Million to One

by Steve Rushin

**W**HAT DO you say when your grown son tells you, "Nothing good has ever happened to me"? If you're Marty Bezbatchenko, your heart cleaves like a coconut and you repeat every motivational slogan you ever heard as a star quarterback. "If you get knocked out, you get back up," recites Marty, who led Akron to the NCAA Division II championship game in 1976. "I talk about PMA, for Positive Mental Attitude, that winners adjust. I believe all that."

His first two sons, Mike and Nick, were outstanding high school athletes in Tallmadge, Ohio. But his youngest, David, was found at age five to have neurofibromatosis, an often disfiguring disease that causes tumors to grow just beneath the skin.

David, fully grown at 5' 5", 135 pounds, dedicated himself to holding for the placekicker at Tallmadge High. "He was very good at it," says Marty, "and he enjoyed being part of a team." Just over a year ago, as a sophomore at Bowling Green, David was told he had a brain tumor. Surgeons could remove only 55% of it, and the remainder seemed impervious to chemotherapy. And yet David kept his PMA. He could hardly complain to his mother, Barb, who had breast cancer. But he did tell his dad, in a moment of despair, "Nothing good has ever happened to me."

It wasn't true. David cherished the trips he and Marty took to see Ohio State play Michigan in football. They'd go to Detroit to see the Pistons on Friday, the Buckeyes at the Big House on Saturday and the Red Wings on Saturday night. Somewhere along the line, Marty and David became each other's best friend. They so enjoyed spending Saturdays and Sundays together in the fall watching the Buckeyes and the Cleveland Browns on TV that they decided to also spend summer Tuesdays and Sundays playing golf together, when David's chemo regimen would allow.

Last spring David set three goals for himself: to make a birdie this summer, to break 100 next summer and to get a hole in one "sometime in my lifetime." His dad told him, "Keep playing, and you never know." Never mind that David is the equivalent of a 40 handicap. "Golf is a getaway," he says. "It takes my mind off everything else. On the golf course you have enough other things to think about."

Like the 110-yard par-3 5th hole at the Congress Lake Club in Hartville, Ohio. David got his first birdie there, in June, and topped that two Sundays ago. Playing with Marty and two other men, he punched an eight-iron low into the wind over the



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bunkers and onto the green. The foursome on the next tee box held their fingers just inches apart to indicate that David's Maxfli 2 was *this close* to the pin.

David bent to pick up his tee. When he looked up, that foursome was screaming, "It went in! It went in!" Bedlam broke out on the 5th and 6th tee boxes. "Everyone was hugging and high-fiving each other," says David. His father, goose-bumped and teary-eyed, could barely plant his own tee to hit next. Marty was so pumped he flew his ball 20 feet past the pin. Then it sucked back toward the cup and dived in. It was Marty's second hole in one. His first was 16 years ago, on David's seventh birthday.

In an instant the entire course was convulsed in celebration, and the 5th tee box resembled a ballfield following the final out of the World Series. "Unbelievable," says Marty. "That's all anyone could say." But then David, whose whole life is about surmounting long odds, said, "It's *not* unbelievable, because it just happened."

"So we all decided to call it amazing," says Marty, who apologized to David for following his hole in one with a hole in one of his own. "Dad," David replied, "this makes it *better*. This is perfect."

Father and son approached the flag together and found the two balls, practically conjoined. Three hours later David was carding his first two-digit score, a 98. When he and Marty floated into the locker room, they were greeted with a standing ovation.

In a study commissioned by *Golf Digest*, Francis Scheid, retired chairman of the Boston University math department, calculated the odds of two members of the same foursome acing the same hole at 17 million to 1. Now imagine that the two golfers are father and son. What are the odds of *that*? All David knows is that "it was probably the best day of my life."

"It was a little eerie, too," says Marty, his voice catching. "David said to me, 'Dad, I've accomplished everything that I wanted to do.'"

But in fact he has many milestones remaining. This weekend, for instance, is David's 21st birthday. He's celebrating it with his dad in Las Vegas, where they know something that the poker dealers don't: Nothing beats a pair of aces. □