

Deafness no handicap for Jeff golfer

Written by Sher Jasperse

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Jefferson golf coach Steve Koepke has a ready illustration of Eric Lehmkuhl's knack for rallying his team in challenging situations.

Recalling a brutal 18-hole tournament at Finkbine last season, he says, "It was so windy not even Mary Poppins would have wanted to be on the course. Only a handful of golfers even broke 80. Eric shot a 74. It was phenomenal."

What made it even more remarkable was that the cochlear implant Lehmkuhl has worn since he was a toddler to counter his congenital deafness magnifies the sound of the wind, creating a distraction that would annoy the most focused of golfers.

It wasn't the only time Lehmkuhl has stepped up to lead his team, Koepke says.

"He won my Clutch Award last year, because he really did come up clutch a number of times. How an athlete behaves under pressure at a big-time meet tells you what kind of a player he is. He's not just someone who plays golf. He's a golfer, and he could be a really good one."

Currently pacing his team with a 39.6 scoring average, the senior says he never expected to lead Jeff's golf squad. After all, baseball was always his sport. He has played it competitively since grade school.

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He has also played golf from a young age – but just for fun with his dad, who got him some small clubs when he was two or three years old.

“Our house backs up to the Jefferson softball diamond, and I used to take golf balls and go hit from one tree to the next tree to the next tree, all around the field. I know I left some balls for Mr. Niemeyer (Jefferson’s long-time softball coach),” he laughs.

As a freshman at Jeff, Lehmkuhl didn’t even call Koepke until a couple of weeks after the golf season started, doubting he was good enough to be on the team. When he told the coach that he shot in the low 80s, Koepke assured him he would be playing on the varsity in short order.

Playing through obstacles

“In the last couple of years I started focusing more on golf, and it showed on the golf course,” Lehmkuhl says. “Now golf is my favorite. It’s a way of relaxing, and it’s more of an individual sport.”

Indeed, his relaxed and upbeat demeanor has served him and his team well, reflecting a maturity that he says he owes in part to the near total deafness that some might consider a disabling handicap.

“I was born deaf,” he says, “but they didn’t have the technology to test it in babies yet. My parents figured it out when I was two, and they got me implants right away.”

Lehmkuhl attended the deaf education program at Arthur School from kindergarten through fourth grade, then was mainstreamed at Cleveland, his neighborhood school.

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Leading a young team

At a recent team putting competition, Jourdan says, Coach Koepke told the boys they could create all the ruckus they wanted during the final round to try distracting each other. When they started pestering Lehmkuhl, he says, "Eric just turned off his hearing aid. It was the funniest thing."

But there's no doubt Lehmkuhl is a serious competitor on the golf course, leading his team to a surprising third-place finish behind powerhouse Kennedy and Xavier at the recent CRANDIC meet. Lehmkuhl shot a 79 to tie for third overall.

The J-Hawks won a triangular meet Sept. 9 to run their MVC record to 5-0, led by medalist Zach Denny with a 37. Lehmkuhl and Jourdan both shot 39.



Lehmkuhl says his biggest motivation is providing leadership for the less-seasoned players on his team.

"We have a young team, and being able to help out the younger guys is huge. I don't care how the season turns out. I just want everyone to do the best that they can possibly do. I would love to make first-team All-Conference or All-Metro," he adds, "but that's not the biggest picture for me."

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He hopes to play collegiately and perhaps pursue a career in golf, and Koepke says there's no question he has the skills to play at the next level. "He has the best hands – the most consistently solid grip – I've ever coached."

Whatever happens, Lehmkuhl will deal with his challenges one step at a time and stay focused on the positive.

"I once told him, 'It's not what we achieve but what we overcome that makes us men,'" Koepke says. "I've never heard him complain about being hearing impaired – ever."