



SEEING A DIFFERENT GAME: How Golf and Art Have Helped Lance Meyer through a Rare Health Condition

By Matt Tevsh

Looking back, one of the first signs Lance Meyer thought something might be seriously wrong came on a golf course.

A couple of years ago playing hole No. 4 at Silver Spring's Island Course in Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, Meyer set up to hit a golf ball. He took a swing like he had countless times before but this time was flummoxed when his shot went dead right just after contact. The dreaded shank can pop up for even the best of players, let alone an avid amateur like Meyer. This lateral block, however, felt a little different to Meyer who was an above average player (about a 10 handicap) at the time.

"You can't lie to that golf ball," he said. "We all hit bad shots but I was hitting some strange ones for someone who plays and practices a lot.

"Sometimes I'd bring the club back and my hand, I have sort of a little tic, or a little shake or whatever and it would re-route the club and make for some wild shots - almost dangerously wild," he further explained about his golf game the past couple of years after that startling

shot. "I also had these tics with my head which would change the plane of my swing."

Hashimoto Encephalopathy is a rare disorder (affecting only two people in 100,000 according to the National Organization for Rare Disorders) that can be tough to diagnose. Those who have it are affected differently. An internet search might yield some varying definitions but it can cause impaired brain function and major fatigue and occurs most often to people in their 40s. Meyer hits those check marks and has acute episodes that make doing anything "very difficult."

It was only after a troubling stretch of three comas and eight visits to the ER - which started in the midst of the pandemic in early January 2020 - that Meyer, an otherwise healthy, active person, could get a clearer diagnosis. During that time he talked to various doctors and met with specialists, went through a series of medical tests and learned more about his family history, which included cases of Hashimoto's.

Even over the phone, it is easy to classify Meyer as a Type A personality with a positive

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outlook on life. Living in the Milwaukee area, he has served over two decades in education ministry and as a coach. He has been a principal, athletic director, and a history, art and physical education instructor. As a coach's son, he grew up playing sports and played college basketball and tennis and later coached golf and basketball. And for much of his adult life he has served as a mentor to kids, especially in underserved communities, and chaplains as a man of faith. His energy is infectious.

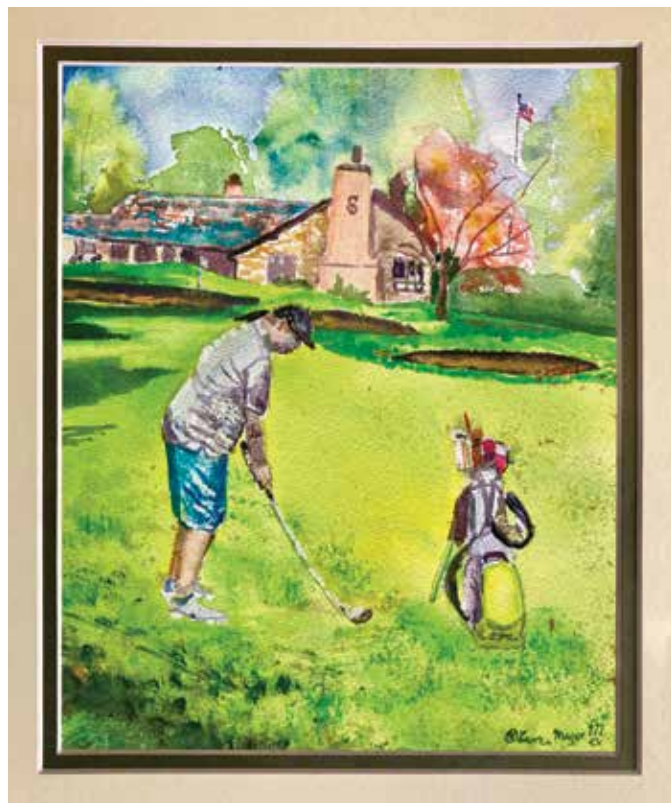
Even so, this disorder presents a challenge for Meyer on many different levels, let alone his golf game. Different situations stress his brain to the point that it takes him days to recover. He describes having "brain fog" at times and his mind bounces around so much that when he gets rolling he cannot finish a sentence without starting another one. When he was on steroids as part of the treatment process, it was even worse. "I had to put myself in a 10 x 10 room because I couldn't get from one side to the other of a big room without forgetting what I was doing," he described.

There is no known cause or cure really for Hashimoto Encephalopathy. But Meyer is navigating ways to cope with it while continuing to have an impact on young people's lives. One thing that has helped him

has been watercolor painting – and one of his favorite portraits to re-create or imagine are golf course scenes.

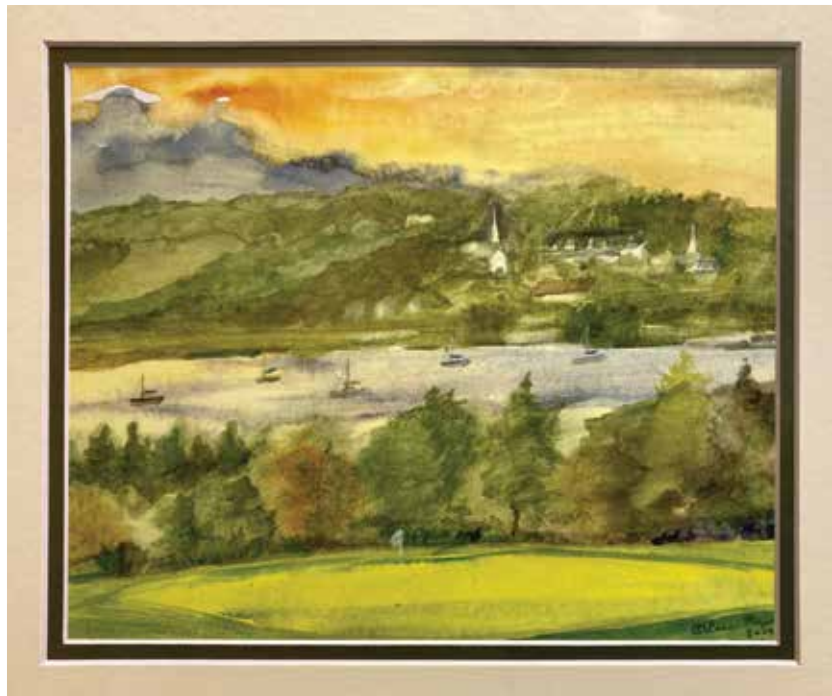
"Especially over the winter here, with the green grass gone, there's especially that innocent stuff (that I enjoy)," said Meyer. "When I travel, I think courses to an artist - it surprises me that more people don't paint golf. I mean, there are some out there but I would say it's not something tons of people do. But you naturally have the lights and darks and there's usually a par-3 that kind of sets up nicely on a lot of courses for a painting. You can do a lot of sunset stuff and a lot of different things you can do with sand traps... I love the colors and the setup stuff. It was probably about the time of the first PGA (at Whistling Straits in 2004) that I started to do Whistling Straits. At that time I was using stock photography. Now I do all my own photography. And depending on the course – if it's Augusta you're always going to put the tree in the right spot – but a lot of times I'll move stuff around a little bit or change backgrounds. Things like that."

Meyer has painted for over 20 years – from biblical art to portraits to golf course scenes - the most intimate perhaps of the aforementioned Silver



Spring Golf Club, where he has worked for the past 20 years during the golf season. He said his skills have improved over the years and more recently has been able to use his art for fundraising – to help support the chaplains – while also participating in local art shows and galleries. Most importantly, painting has taken on more of a therapeutic role in his life. His ability to concentrate has come back better and his neurologist has even taken an interest in studying his paintings to learn more about how his brain is functioning.

“Before this (health issue) my detailed stuff was pretty good but some of the other art skills weren’t necessarily there,” said Meyer, who does his work out of a studio called GRAS ministries. “But when I really realized what was going on with my Hashimoto’s, I really struggled getting some of the details in there. Some of the colors are very pretty and there were some other things in there that were pretty good but it just lacks some of the depth. Now what’s happening (over this past winter), I found that I’ve been able to concentrate and my mind has gotten a little more creative with details. It sounds crazy to say there is an element of being afraid to paint, but there is some with taking chances and with watercolors just kind of letting the water and paper and God kind of do his thing on the paper... You have to kind of be OK with all these sort of little mistakes with watercolors. It’s not perfect, but when you get that to come together and then kind of come



back with some of the details again, it really gives you a picture that pops.”

As for his golf game, Meyer is working to improve and adapt. When he first started playing, he was around a 30 handicap. After his debilitating stretch of hospital visits, he slowly got back into the game including a gig as the boys head golf coach at Kingdom Prep Lutheran High School. He has a different appreciation and understanding for playing golf now.

“You’re stimulating your brain without stressing your brain,” he said of being outside playing and engaging his senses. “It’s interesting, however, that the couple of times I’ve played in a scramble or tournaments, (Hashimoto’s) has been an issue. I have struggled. I guess I would call it pressure golf, not that a scramble necessarily is pressure, but it is anytime you’re adding that different element. It’s happened to me three times now that I had to stop playing or I’ve just played horrible and just can’t get my body or my mind to do the right things... but on the positive, it’s really good because you’re walking, you’re stimulating your brain, but not in stressful ways necessarily unless it’s under some kind of pressure a little bit.”

And on his bad days, when the golf course or being around big groups of kids might not be an option, sleeping and art take center stage.

“With art, I can always pull out a brush and do that a little bit,” he said. “That’s different than grinding in front of a class of 60 kids. It’s a little different game.”

