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STUDENT CLOSE-UP

The Comeback Kid

By Vicki Hodder

For three or four hours every day in December 2003, Michael Unger, a 20-year-old member of the University of Missouri-Columbia golf team, practiced his swing at a driving range in Florida. Standing 6'1, Unger had gone from 205 pounds to 160 pounds during a debilitating illness, and subsequently lost the tempo of his swing. So hour after hour, Unger strove to learn anew the coordination of arm, back, leg and torso muscles that had made him the target of several Big 12 college recruiters.

Later this month, Unger, now 21, will seek to qualify for the U.S. Amateur Championship. He also will compete in the Aug. 1 Colorado Golf Association Stroke Play Championship qualifying round.

Missouri Tiger Michael Unger is used to excelling.

At Edmond North High School in Oklahoma, Unger won the 2000 Class 5A State Championship and the 2001 American Junior Golf Association's Kansas City Marsh Junior Championship. He was dubbed "Player of the Year" by The Daily Oklahoman and The Edmond Sun for the 1999-2000 season.

Unger's academic success was no less impressive. He graduated high school with a 3.93 GPA, having earned a berth in the National Honor Society.

Still, Unger's amateur victory in last year's Francis Hagan Match Play Championship signaled a comeback that during the next few weeks will propel him into major competitions. It marked his victory over a year and a half fraught with illness culminating in emergency surgery, and the weakness and lassitude that followed.



Engineering student and varsity golfer Michael Unger sinks a putt after two major illnesses tried (unsuccessfully) to sink him. *Rob Hill photo*

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"I think if there were any lingering doubt in his mind...it was finally removed because of that victory," said Unger's father, Robert "Bob" Unger, of Littleton, Colo.

All seemed well at the outset of Unger's freshman year at MU, where the 205-pound youth had been recruited to play for the Tigers golf team. But shortly before the 2002 school year began he fell prey to mononucleosis, losing 30 pounds and much of his energy. Barely able to get through three or four holes of golf at the season's start, Unger wound up "redshirting"—or bowing out of competitive play—his first year on the team.

Signs of Unger's grit came to the fore during that year. While unbeknownst to him his illness festered, Unger maintained a 4.0 GPA as an MU industrial engineering major and worked on his golf game from the sidelines. Unger kept pushing to improve his golfing even while the effects of mononucleosis lingered, said former MU golf coach Tim Robyn, who recruited Unger.

"Michael went out (to practice) every day as if he were going to play a tournament the next day," remembers his mother, Martha "Muffy" Unger.

By August 2003, Unger was ready to compete collegiately. But two days before school began, Unger began suffering excruciating pain in his stomach—what he described as the "worst feeling I've ever had."

Rushed to a hospital by his visiting mother, Unger soon underwent emergency surgery to patch a fist-sized hole and another slightly smaller breach in his enormously distended stomach. Unger said doctors told him that his rapid weight loss during his bout with mononucleosis had caused arteries passing near his stomach to act as clamps, preventing digestion and causing the holes.

Unger returned home from the hospital at the start of September. But his recuperation had just begun, with an open dressing and weeks of physical therapy ahead. Unger was down to about 160 pounds and unable to walk without assistance.

Despite his initial determination to shoulder a full class load, Unger was forced to drop his fall semester classes. Any serious golf time was out of the question.

Sidelined once again, Unger chafed. He set his sights on "getting out" sooner than the six to eight weeks doctor said it would take for him to start resuming his regular activities. The prospect of six weeks of inactivity was simply unacceptable, Unger said.

Unger regained his strength enough to walk on his own in late September. He started practicing golf in November—focusing on putts and chip shots to avoid reopening his incision—and went to Florida late that month to work on regaining the golf swing his severe weight loss and three inches of recent growth had eroded.

That meant daily practice sessions at the driving range, learning to play at a competitive

level with new body dimensions and proportions, said Unger's father, Bob Unger. Unger said he worked on the small things—hitting a lot of range balls, putting, chipping and taking his first golf lesson. And it meant rebuilding his stamina: working up from playing a few holes while riding in a cart to playing a few holes and walking, as well as weight training.

"When we weren't on the golf course, we were in the gym," Bob Unger said.

By January Unger was back in Columbia practicing with the Tigers. And by June, Unger, back up to 170 pounds, had won Missouri's Francis Hagan Match Play Championship and earned "A" grades in each of his classes. He had also signed up for MU summer classes to help make up for those he missed during the fall.

Now Unger is on track to graduate in 2007, as he had originally planned. He has caught up with his coursework while sustaining his 4.0 GPA, shooting for the perfect academic record that barely eluded him in high school.

Those close to Unger credit his successful comeback to his drive and fortitude. Unger is characterized by how hard he works, said Robyn, Unger's former coach—pointing to an inner drive noted by both Unger's parents. Muffy Unger sees her son's "wonderful positive attitude" and mental strength at the heart of his achievements.

"He just is not a quitter," Unger's mother said.

Unger believes the key to his successful recovery lies in his focus on the future, his refusal to dwell on the illness and surgery that sapped his strength and skills. Unger told himself his medical difficulties were meant to be and worked at getting on with his life.

"I knew that would be one of the hardest things to do, is deal with it emotionally," Unger said.

Chief among Unger's emotions was frustration. Not being able to play golf as well as in the past and his lack of strength and energy all rankled, he said. Little things, too, made it difficult. Unger said with a laugh that "it would actually drive me nuts" to hear someone opening a soda can, knowing he could not drink any while recuperating.

Frustrating to overcome, but not impossible for the upbeat MU senior. Unger is again earning spots in high-level competitions, having won the right to compete in the U.S. Amateur Championship qualifying tournament that begins July 25 as well as in next month's Colorado Golf Association Stroke Play Championship qualifier.

In each tournament, Unger hopes only to improve. Regardless of how he places, Unger plans to continue as a member of the Tigers golf team as he works toward his industrial engineering degree.

He sees the engineering degree as a doorway to any number of careers, ranging from business manager to restaurateur. Unger also is eyeing a career as a professional golfer, though he peppers the latter aspiration with a dash of realism.

"I don't have my heart set on it, but it would definitely be something I'd love to do," Unger said. "But it's just so hard to make it on tour, let alone make enough to live on."

Still, one thing seems clear: Whatever Unger's choice of career, he'll excel at it.

Note: This is an updated version of a story that was originally published in the August 2004 issue of *MU Engineering News and Notes*, the College of Engineering's monthly on-line newsletter.

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