



# Life

## DesMoinesRegister.com

The Des Moines Register [News](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [Opinion](#) [Life](#) [Entertainment](#) [Classifieds](#) [Cars](#) [Homes](#) [Jobs](#)

Search:

 

[Search tips](#)

[Make us your h](#)  
[Subscribe to th](#)  
[Careers at the](#)  
[Advertise with u](#)  
[Contact us](#)

■ [Home](#) : [Life](#)

### ■ [Recreation](#)

## Virtual golf fits to a tee

By [BOB MODERSOHN](#)  
 Register Staff Writer

01/27/2004

Brian Bernhardt isn't much of a golfer, but he regularly shoots 24-25 strokes under par.

True story.

His normal par 4 drive is 330 yards. Longest drive is a Happy Gilmore-esque 450 yards.

Bernhardt has played more than 11,000 games and shot 30-under-par six or seven times. He drives and putts righty, always shoots with an open hand and never uses his thumbs.

He's a *very good* Golden Tee player.

Golden Tee is a video golf game that closely simulates the golfing experience. The screen tracks the ball sailing through the air like a helicopter-mounted TV camera tracks PGA tournament fairways.

Club selection, backspin ('spinach,' as some regulars call it), slice and hook control, winds as high as 17 mph from any direction, rain, sand traps, water hazards, as much as a 12-degree slope of greens, and remarks from mouthy commentators all are features and obstacles built into the game. You can even take a mulligan.

"The wind, topography, the weather - you have to think about everything," said Rob Majors, 36, who has been playing for about eight months at Legends in West Des Moines.

Golden Tee requires no walking (except to get another beer), no lost balls, no huge time commitments or expensive clubs.

It can even be played online, where \$2,500 (gold level), \$400 (silver) and \$100

▶ [E-1](#)

▶ [Ser](#)  
[the](#)

▶ [Sul](#)

(bronze) prize money may be won each month.

Bernhardt is one of 16 Golden Tee Team U.S.A. members who competed in a world meet last fall in Orlando, Fla. He gave 57 handicap strokes to two players a couple of weeks ago, during the first night of local league play at the Double Inn in Cedar Rapids.

"It's a disadvantage for me," Bernhardt said. Regular golf? He has played once, and that was after he began playing Golden Tee nearly three years ago at Colonial Lanes, a bowling alley in Iowa City where he still bowls.

"It kind of grabbed me in," Bernhardt, 23, said of the popular bar video game. About 600 of the golf video games are located in bars and clubs across Iowa, more than 25,000 in the United States.

In the coin-operated amusement industry, Golden Tee has turned its parent company, Incredible Technologies of Arlington Heights, Ill., from a dinky \$150,000 start-up to a \$60 million monstrosity with more than 100,000 machines, reported Gambling Magazine last spring.

Looking more like a compact soccer player in a Sammy Sosa Chicago Cubs jersey, Bernhardt runs the palm of his right hand over the stationary shooting ball as if he's been there before.

He has. He's played that same hole, same shot three or four times that night, plus four other courses.

A Chicago-area native now living in North Liberty and working for an insurance company, Bernhardt admits he took a wrong turn in high school, getting into drugs. That's behind him now.

"I stopped smoking dope and spent more money on Golden Tee," he quipped, seriously.

"Some nights I'd spend \$60-\$100 playing by myself, 15-25 games," he said. "I would stop when they closed."

Until last week, a local vendor was letting him use a Golden Tee machine valued at \$5,000 at home.

Bernhardt's girlfriend, Allison Higgins, 25, said at first having the machine at home wasn't a problem. It was helping Brian make Team U.S.A. She was supporting him 100 percent.

She didn't realize how much money it was costing for games and how much time he'd spend playing even after the World Championship.

"It got to the point where I felt he cared more about Golden Tee, even though deep down I knew he didn't," Higgins said.

"We decided that financially, and to keep our great relationship going, the machine had to go."

Once anchored in their apartment living room, the machine was hauled away last week.

Bernhardt is hitting a nearby bar for his Golden Tee fix.

Last year, Bernhardt's winnings totaled \$11,000, but not all of it was cream. He obviously had hefty expenses.

Playing is costly. He was running through \$600-\$700 in monthly game-playing last year.

"I won't be playing as much now, maybe go to the bar two or three times during the week, spend no more than \$20 each time," Bernhardt said. "It could be a little more . . . but it shouldn't exceed what I was paying."

Bernhardt's favorite match ever came during the Golden Tee World Championship last fall.

He was matched against Canadian J.D. Keele, one-on-one, over 18 holes. It lasted just 17 or 18 minutes, ending in a one-stroke win for Bernhardt, 26-25.

"I put it two inches from the cup on 18," the winner said. "All those eagles add up quick."

Typically, 18 holes only take about 15 minutes per person to play. So a foursome can play a round in an hour.

The game teaches "mental fundamentals, like in life," Majors said.

Lori Mullen, 41, another of the video golfing regulars at Legends, prefers Golden Tee to the real golf game.

"It's more time efficient. It doesn't require six hours," she said.

Mullen is competitive about "half the time," she admitted.

"They are consistently excellent," she said of Rob Majors, Brian Lentz, 27, and her husband, Bryan, 43. "They get 20-under lots of times.

"On 18 holes, that's a decent score."

### **Golden Tee grows in popularity**

Tucked in a corner of many bars across the land, one or more console video games subsist on a diet on three \$1 bills per game.

Over the history of here-today/gone-tomorrow computerized monitor games, Golden Tee "is one of those games that came and stuck," said Larry Elbert, president of Camden Amusement, supplier of 84 of the popular video games, mostly in the Cedar Rapids area.

He could see it coming.

At the end of 1999, when Golden Tee changed from its "3D" game to its "Fore" game, Iowa passed a law allowing online play nationwide, Elbert said.

An online tournament in 2000 was the first where Iowans could legally participate.

"At that time there were zero of these machines," Elbert said. "Now there are 600."

Before going online with Golden Tee, Iowans' only competition was the leaderboard on the machine they were playing. Now it can be statewide or national.

New Golden Tee courses are due to come out next month.

\*

- *Bob Modersohn*

---

▶ [Make us](#)  
▶ [Advertis](#)  
▶ [Subscri](#)