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Friday, November 4, 2005

## Going for Golden Tee gold

North Liberty virtual golfer going to world championship

By [Adam Pracht](#)  
Iowa City Press-Citizen

Late into the night, a lone champion can be seen practicing his golf swing, honing his skill to world championship level.

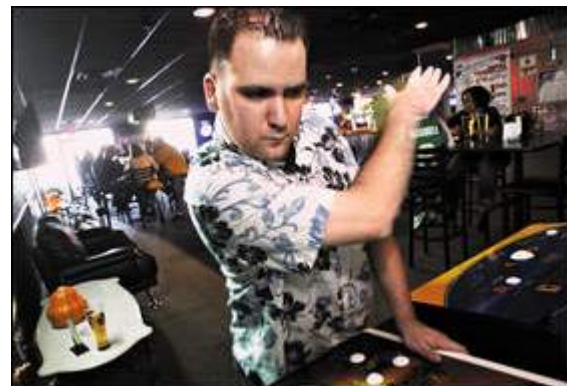
North Liberty resident Brian Bernhardt's form of golf, however, involves more beer and video screens than exercise and fresh air.

"Between my third and seventh beer, you better watch out," said Bernhardt, 25.

Bernhardt is one of the world's top athletes, so to speak, in Golden Tee, a popular barroom video game played by an estimated 20 million people worldwide.

"The day that Golden Tee becomes part of the Olympics, that will be the day," Bernhardt said.

For now, Bernhardt will compete among the



Brian Bernhardt, 25, plays Golden Tee, a simulated golf game, at Drinks Neighborhood Pub in North Liberty. Bernhardt will compete for \$15,000 at the game's world championships from Nov. 13 to 15. **Press-Citizen / Matthew Holst**



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world's top 32 players for a shot at a \$15,000 prize. He qualified in October as one of 16 members of the United States team that will play at the fourth annual Golden Tee World Championship in Orlando, Fla., from Nov. 13 to 15.

Players pay \$5 per game to compete against other players around the world in the video game. The player controls a virtual golfer with an oversized trackball, and the swing can be adjusted by either pulling back or pushing forward on it at an angle. Placing third place or higher can earn a player back the \$5 in addition to prize money.

The video game is connected to the Internet, so people can directly compete against other players on simulated golf courses, which replicate real courses. Conditions change regularly, so players have to adapt their strategy.

To qualify for a shot at the championships, Bernhardt had to beat about 1,000 competitors who participated. He had to get a high enough average score with 10 games on each course to place in the top 72. Then, at an Atlanta tournament, he had to place in the top 14, with "player of the year" and last year's champion getting automatic places on the team. He just made the cut, placing 14th.

"I placed below average, but I placed good enough to make the team this year," he said.

At the championships, Bernhardt will play against the world team, including players from England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Just getting to the championship guaranteed him \$1,000 and the all-expense-paid trip to Florida.

Bernhardt estimated that he has made about \$40,000 since he started playing, with \$25,000 of that being made last year.

"If they had benefits, I would quit my day job," said Bernhardt, who works for an insurance company.

Bernhardt said the competition could be intense at the championship; he made it there in 2003 as



well.

"One mistake can cost you a few hundred bucks," he said.

But he tries to pretend he is back at an Iowa bar and having a good time, he said.

"I think I have a pretty good chance as long as I don't beat myself," he said.

Bernhardt cautioned those who might aspire to Golden Tee glory, however. Getting to this point required a substantial devotion of time and money, he said.

He began playing in 2002 and before long was practicing for 15 to 20 hours each week. He even bought a Golden Tee arcade game so he could play at home.

Before he got good enough to win money, 700 to 800 games a month really added up. Before long, he was getting bills of \$600 every month and maxing out credit cards. He estimated that the \$40,000 he has won now just about makes up for the money he initially spent.

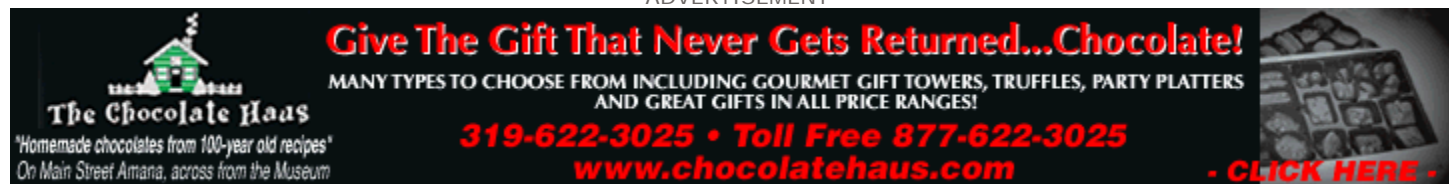
As for how he is at real golf:

"I really stink at it, honestly," he said.

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