



RECREATION

E. Iowan lets his fingers do the golfing

North Liberty video golfer ready to test his swing at world championship

By Nicole Riehl The Gazette

NORTH LIBERTY — Brian Bernhardt went on eBay and used credit cards to buy a \$4,200 Golden Tee video golf machine for his apartment. From fall 2002 to spring 2003, his evening routine was to leave work, buy a six-pack, head home, play Golden Tee for five hours and go to bed.

Bernhardt, 25, of North Liberty, endured ribbing for his obsession — until he won big.

In 2004, he won \$3,500 by placing first among 123 contestants at the Player's Charity Championship in Palatine, Ill. This month, he stands to win \$15,000 at the fourth annual Golden Tee World Championship in Orlando, Fla. Even if he places last, he gets \$1,000 and the trip.

Bernhardt has played real golf only once. He got the Golden Tee bug five years ago while working at a bowling alley.

"It's my way of getting away," said Bernhardt, now an account coordinator for an insurance company in Iowa City. "I could be doing a lot of things that are worse." With an 18-hole average of 25-under-par, Bernhardt is considered one of the world's greatest Golden Tee players.

"He's certainly top 10, maybe top 5," said Gary Colabuono, marketing director at Incredible Technologies, Golden Tee's creator, in Arlington Heights, Ill.

To make the world championship, Bernhardt logged 600 games in two months.

Bernhardt's 10 best scores on five courses landed him at the qualifier in Atlanta last month. Only 32 of 2,500 players made the cut. At the tournament, players compete individually for cash, and on teams — USA vs. the world — for bragging rights.

Bernhardt, who also made the 2003 championship, is known as the fastest of the elite players. He gauges wind, slope and elevation, selects a club and hits shots quicker than anyone, Colabuono said.

A game typically takes him about nine minutes. Last week, he played for 11 hours straight.

Bernhardt plays at loud bars to practice tuning out distractions. Standing makes his back stiff, and, after a while, his palm gets sore from hitting the track ball.

He's hoping new sneakers will help his back, and he adjusted his swing to let his hand heal.

Since meeting his fiance, Allison Higgins, 27, of North Liberty, Bernhardt has cut back his hobby to 15 or 20 hours per week. He even sold his machine.

"Video golf or potential wife?" he said. "Bye-bye, machine."

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David Lienemann/The Gazette Brian Bernhardt of North Liberty plays Golden Tee video golf at Drinks bar and grill in North Liberty last week. Bernhardt, 25, will be taking part in the annual Golden Tee World Championship in Orlando, Fla., this month.