

USGA U.S. Women's Open
SAUCON VALLEY C.C. BETHLEHEM, Pa. JULY 9 - 12, 2009

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Scoliosis Bonds Lewis, Fan On Site

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By David Shefter, USGA

Bethlehem, Pa. – It started with a letter.

Jay Desjardins had read the inspirational story of Stacy Lewis following her 2007 triumph at the NCAA Division I Women's Championship for the University of Arkansas, and his thoughts immediately turned to his 13-year-old daughter, Grace. Desjardins showed the magazine article to his wife, but hesitated to let Grace see it because it mentioned the number of years Lewis wore a brace.

Diagnosed with scoliosis as a child Lewis, now a 24-year-old LPGA Tour rookie, wore that brace for 7½ years to battle the ailment before finally having surgery in 2003, when doctors inserted a rod and five screws into her back. Following the operation, Lewis enjoyed a stellar amateur and college career, then nearly won the 2008 U.S. Women's Open in her first professional start.

Grace Desjardins was diagnosed with scoliosis, a medical condition in which a person's spine is curved from side to side and shaped like an "s," nearly three years ago and has been wearing a brace ever since. She also has been an avid golfer since she could walk, so Lewis' story naturally hit home with her father.

On a whim, Jay decided to write a letter to Arkansas coach Shauna Estes, hoping she would pass the correspondence along to Lewis. And last March, a package arrived at their Malvern, Pa., residence from the school. Inside was a signed University of Arkansas visor, an autographed team poster and a heartwarming handwritten letter from Lewis.

Young Grace Desjardins suddenly had a new hero. And at last month's McDonald's LPGA Championship in Maryland, she met Lewis for the first time. The chat only lasted a few minutes, but a friendship was kindled.

With the 2009 U.S. Women's Open being held at Saucon Valley Country Club, 90 minutes from the Desjardins' home in suburban Philadelphia, arrangements were made by Lewis' agent, J.S. Kang, and USGA officials to set up another meeting for Grace Desjardins and her idol. And not just a brief chat: On Wednesday morning, Grace served as the standard bearer for a practice round. Lewis was joined by 2008 USA Curtis Cup teammate Alison Walshe, 2007 U.S. Women's Amateur champion Maria Jose Uribe and Isabelle Beisiegel.

"She was unbelievably excited," said Jay Desjardins, who also brought his 15-year-old daughter, Brigh, to Saucon Valley.

Added Lewis: "Grace follows everything I do. She was one of the first e-mails I got

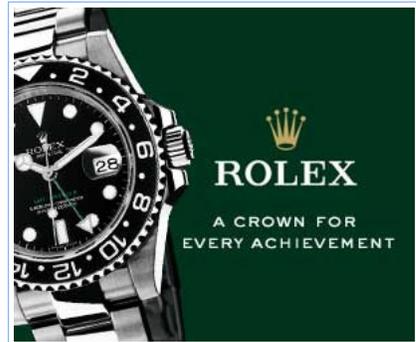


Grace Desjardins serves as the standard bearer Wednesday during Stacy Lewis' practice round. (John Mummert/USGA)

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[from last year's U.S. Women's Open] saying congratulations. She's definitely a fan, and I think it will be fun for her today."

After Lewis completed the first hole, she walked up to Grace and gave her a hug. "That sign is not too heavy for you is it?" Lewis asked.

Grace, who was wearing her brace and signed Arkansas visor, said she was fine. For two years, Grace was required to wear the brace for 20 hours each day. Recently, that has been reduced to 16 hours. She does remove the brace to play golf, which she did on Tuesday when she played a nine-hole match.

At the moment, Grace is unsure if she'll need to have surgery similar to what Lewis endured six years ago. But at least she knows competing at the highest level is possible.

"You don't hear a lot about scoliosis," said Lewis, "so I'm just trying to put a positive spin on it. Kids should know they can play through it and do whatever they want to do."

Said Grace: "I always check the [LPGA Tour] Web site to see who is in the lead and where she is. It's nice to have someone who just went through it and still is a really great golfer. That it didn't stop her."

Jay, who gave Grace a cut-down club at 18 months, said since Lewis' package arrived last spring, Grace's love for golf has intensified. When the golf publications arrive in the mailbox, Grace is the first one to grab them.

"She was always into golf, but now she's crazy about it," he said.

And who knows, someday Grace could be the one with the professional staff bag inspiring another scoliosis sufferer.

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