



# HOOKED »ON« (VIDEO) GOLF

Every golfer knows what it's like to be bitten by the bug, but a student in Iowa caught the fever without ever picking up a club

BY ANDREW LAWRENCE

Photographs by John Gress

**A**T EXACTLY 5 p.m., 24-year-old Brian Bernhardt turns off his calculator, taps the stack of invoices he's been working on into a neat pile and pushes back from the colorless cubicle he inhabits at Marsh Advantage America, a third-party insurance company in Iowa City. Jumping into his black 2000 Nissan Altima, he drives the 10 miles to the two-bedroom apartment he shares with his girlfriend, Allison. He throws on a sweatshirt and jeans and runs his fingers through his wiry brown hair. Back in the Altima, he reaches the Double Inn bar within minutes. As he makes his way across the room he nods at the familiar faces, says "Hi" to the bartender and scoops up the Coors Light that's waiting for him on the bar. In the back corner of the room, past the pool table and near the ATM, Bernhardt finds what he's come for—Golden Tee, the 15-year-old golf arcade game that has become as

## MONEY PLAYERS

Golden Tee glory seekers were out in full force at Splinters Sports Club in Palatine, Ill., during the Players Charity Championship.

ubiquitous a part of barroom culture as big-screen TVs and bathroom graffiti.

For the next three hours Bernhardt will do nothing but spin the machine's trackball, press its buttons and feed it quarters, his only company a steady stream of Coors and Marlboro Lights. It's an indulgence he affords himself three times a week, but that's it. Bernhardt is all right now, but for more than three years Golden Tee dominated his life, dragged him deep into debt, ruined his relationships and occupied nearly all his time. "Some people like to sit down and have a beer and talk about politics," Bernhardt says. "I like to stand in front of a video game and focus on the screen. It's almost like my drug."

Bernhardt got his first taste in 2000, while working at a summer job with Cole-Parmer, an industrial-research outfit in his hometown of Vernon Hills, Ill. One day there was a company softball game, and afterward Bernhardt joined some coworkers for a few drinks. While there he spotted the machine and started to play. It was fun, it seemed harmless, and he was almost instantly good at it. Simply roll the trackball and watch the digital orb fly. Before long he was locked in a heated battle with a complete stranger, and the next thing he knew it was 4 a.m. and the bartender was making last call. Bernhardt was hooked.

That September he set off for his first

semester at Iowa, to which he had transferred after two years at a community college. To make ends meet he worked two part-time jobs: at Marsh and at an Iowa City bowling alley, doing everything from disinfecting shoes to greasing the pin-spotter. The bowling alley had a Golden

chines that are linked online. At association tournaments you still have to pay \$4, but you play only nine holes.

More games required more quarters, and Bernhardt was quickly running out of cash. Over the next year he barely ate, diverting his money to the game. He stopped paying his bills. In January 2002 he dropped out of school. "I was using money my roommates gave me for rent to play golf," he says. "I kept telling myself, 'I'm going to do good. I'm going to be like those guys out there who are making all this money.' I was like the Little Engine That Could."

All Bernhardt did was work and play the game. His biggest worry, as he saw it, was not money or his health or his future but that he couldn't find enough time to play. Finally, in September 2002, he clicked onto

eBay and scrolled through the listings. He entered the bidding for a used Golden Tee machine and got it for \$4,200, which he paid for by using two credit cards.

The hulking machine dominated his living room, and a phone line snaked across the ceiling to a jack in the kitchen, so Bernhardt and his credit card could stay plugged into the Golden Tee network. He was in his glory. Unhindered by game access and closing times, he was free to play in his pj's until 6 a.m.—and he often did. With extra time to experiment, his game improved as he learned new shots.



**GAME BOYS** Fist pumps? Chest bumps were a more popular way of celebrating a good shot during the Players Championship.

Tee, and Bernhardt started playing as soon as his shift ended at 5 p.m.

Over time the sessions grew longer, until the only thing that stopped him was the bowling alley's closing for the night, which meant he was on the machine about six hours a day. By this point Bernhardt had tapped into the Golden Tee Golf Association, a netherworld of 300,000 devotees who compete for cash prizes, sometimes as high as \$2,500, on ma-

TIMELINE FROM LEFT: WALLACE KIRKLAND/TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF BROOKHAVEN NATIONAL LABORATORY; COURTESY OF ATARI (2); AP; WWW.KLOV.COM; DAVID ALEXANDER/GETTY IMAGES

## Video Highlights Significant moments in the history of video gaming



**1931**

First coin-operated pinball machine is built by Raymond Maloney



**1958**

Nuclear physicist William A. Higinbotham invents first video game



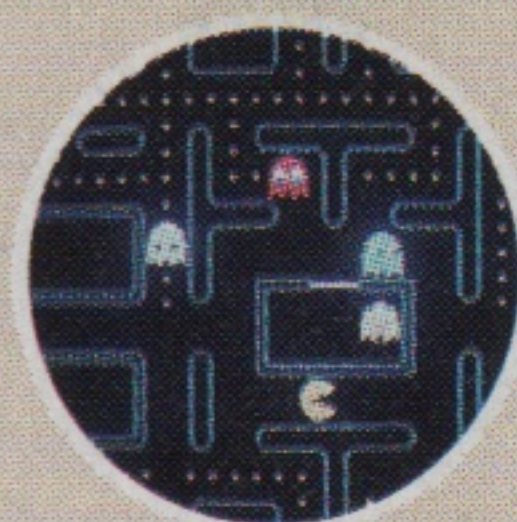
**1972**

Atari founded. Company's initial product—*Pong*—quickly gains icon status



**1978**

*Computer Golf* for Magnavox's Odyssey2 breaks home-video mold, adding trees and other hazards



**1980**

In Japan popularity of *Pac-Man* blamed for shortage of 100-yen coins



**1982**

By introducing the trackball, *Birdie King* brings a new experience to arcade golf



**1984**

Access Software's *Links* mimics real courses, such as Pinehurst and Pebble Beach

Making room for the machine forced him to rearrange his life. He moved the TV and the couch, and said goodbye to a live-in girlfriend who grew so frustrated that she bolted to Arizona. Not all of Bernhardt's distractions were so simply pushed out of the way. When his unpaid bills began showing up at his parents' house in Vernon Hills, his mom, Madi, and his dad, Bob, paid their son a visit. Walking into his bare, messy apartment, they were shocked. The game dominated the place, if for no other reason than there was little else in it. "The place looked like a bookie's joint," says Bob.

Eventually, Bob and Brian did the math. After two years on the circuit, Brian was about \$30,000 in debt, spread out over eight credit cards with interest rates as high as 25%. "As much as he played," Bob says, "the interest was still more than he was putting into the machine."

The parents had no way to see this coming. The boy had grown up innocently, an only child in the northern suburbs of Chicago—only 10 miles from Arlington-based Incredible Technologies, which makes Golden Tee. In school the outgoing Bernhardt was a bit of a class clown. Out of school he was a jock. He played baseball, basketball, soccer, bowled and ran track. He played his share of Space Invaders too, but not any more than other kids. He had experimented with pot and grown a little withdrawn, but that, Bob and Madi figured, was pretty typical too.

Now the boy had tied his future to the

game, and they felt they had no choice but to help him. Bob took out an equity loan to pay off the debt and worked out a plan in which Brian would make payments to him at 4% interest.

None of which meant that Brian's Golden Tee career was over. When he dropped

one too. By then he carried a 22-under-par average, consistently drove the ball more than 300 yards and hit 83% of the greens in regulation. He'd started to win some money and had worked his way toward the top of the Golden Tee Golf Association's Gold Division, which comprises the 80 or so best players in the country.

Bernhardt no longer needed the machine in-house because he no longer needed the constant practice. He was certain that a few nights a week at the Double Inn would keep his skills sharp and that he would finally start seeing some payback for the hours he'd poured into Golden Tee. And this time he was right.

Since evicting the machine, his life has improved measurably. He's paying his bills, and each month he sends a report

to his parents charting his progress. Now the game, for so long his downfall, is part of what's bringing his life back together.

In his last four live tournaments, Bernhardt has finished second, first, first and third. His crowning moment came in June, at the Players Charity Championship in Palatine, Ill., where, in front of his parents and a CBS television crew, he holed out from 59 yards on the first hole of sudden death to win for the first time. As he hoisted the \$3,000 check over his head and a barroom full of people chanted his name, Bernhardt looked out at his smiling parents. He didn't sense that they were proud of him exactly, but "I think they were glad to see I finally made some money off it," he says.



**PAYDAY** Bernhardt (right) is congratulated by David Dracker (left) and Skipper Horner after his first win, which was worth \$3,000.

out of school, he had decided to be a player, and he was sticking with it. Over the next year he continued to throw himself into the game, and even started to travel around the country to attend live tournaments, which can be more lucrative than the online competitions.

In March 2003 Bernhardt gave up his in-house machine because he realized his debt was getting out of hand, but he continued playing. Six months later a local Golden Tee distributor who wanted to help him qualify for Team USA gave him a new machine, but by last January he had given up that

TIMELINE FROM LEFT: SIMON BRUTY; INCREDIBLE TECHNOLOGIES; FRED VUICH; ROBERT BECK; SIMON BRUTY; COURTESY OF EA SPORTS; INCREDIBLE TECHNOLOGIES



**1986**  
Atari offers two-player *Golf* in its Atari 2600 home platform



**1989**  
*Golden Tee* debuts



**1990**  
Accolade's *Jack Nicklaus Unlimited Golf* is first game with a Tour player's name attached



**1991**  
Gallery reaction added to EA Sports four-player *PGA Tour Golf* for Sega Genesis



**1997**  
EA Sports debuts *Tiger Woods PGA Tour*



**2002**  
EA Sports's coin-operated *PGA Tour Golf* marketed to bars and restaurants



**2005**  
*Golden Tee Live*, 11th generation of Golden Tee, rolls out in bars and arcades across the country